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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. ALSHAMARY: Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us today. My name is Marsin Alshamary, and today I will be discussing along with some dear friends and colleagues a very exciting paper that I wrote for Brookings during my post-doc year last year.

So it's on post-war development of civil society and Iraq's mid-Euphrates region. And the discussion today is really conceptualized to think about the findings and about the implications of this paper. But before we delve into the paper and the discussants that we have with us today, I just wanted to very quickly frame it around how this paper came about and what it really means for both the academic and policy discourse in Iraq.

So I identified years ago two gaps in the literature, both the academic literature and the think tank literature in discourse that I found to be gaps on Iraq. And the first one which was partly inspiring for this particular paper and report was that even 20 years after the invasion there is no good interrogative discourse about what democratization actually means in Iraq.

You know, the first 10 years after the invasion, anyone who wanted to actually delve deeply into what democracy means or can mean in Iraq was dismissed as an apologist for the invasion. And the next 10 years, they were dismissed as apologist for the government.

And so, we really missed out an opportunity to study how democratization can happen. What impedes that happening? How we can promote it? What factors diminish it? And Iraq is a great country to do this in because it has embarked on a democratization process that has been impeded in very unique ways, but ways that the rest of the work can learn from. And it's one of the few states left in the region that actually has competitive elections right now.

And the other reason that I wanted to work on this paper and that led to it is that I think there's very little work done on subnational variation in Iraq. Particularly in

studying governance. And a lot of the times when we talk about subnational governance in Iraq, we tend to think about the Kurdistan region of Iraq and tend to forget areas like southern Iraq or central Iraq.

And so, I wanted to focus on the mid-Euphrates which is an area that I'm familiar with through field work, but I also think is very understudied. And this paper, for those of you who read it, really unfolds the story of two cities, Karbala and Hillah and civil society in these two cities.

And I chose them because they're very similar cities in almost every front except that civil society developed a little bit differently in each one and the relationships of organizations to the government both local and central ended up being a bit different in each of them. And both cities now are cities of contestation and protest against the central government. So I think they have a lot to tell us about how democratization has unfolded in Iraq.

But joining me in this conversation, which I hope will be really, really good and enlightening on this conversation about Iraq and democratization are some of my friends. Shamiran Makoy, who is an assistant professor at the Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University, and a very dear friend from Boston. Her research examines legacies of born intervention and state building and divided societies which is a description of Iraq as well. So she is definitely an expert on 2003 state building. And I wanted to recommend her recently coauthored book entitled "After the Arab of Uprising: Progress and Stagnation and in the Middle East and North Africa." And I recommend this because it's a book that really takes us out of our Iraq bubble and lets us think of a region as a whole.

I'm also joined by another dear friend, Lahib Higel is the Iraq senior analyst at the International Crisis Group. She's done extensive field work in Iraq. I run into her often in Karrada, which is always lovely. And her report on the protest movement, I think is excellent and from the title you can tell how expansive it is, "Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box." And obviously, the ballot box makes it so important to discuss in

the conversation.

And I genuinely can't think of anyone who is better suited to moderate this discussion than my other friend, Simona who is a Baghdad-based journalist. Her reports are marked by such creativity and integrity. She has such a clear respect for the Iraqi people and it is evidenced by the kind of stories she produce. I highly recommend her documentary, "Iraq's Joker," for anyone who wants to understand the grittiness and difficulty of everyday lives of the youth who embarked on the protests movement.

And I wanted to turn this over to Simona in just a second, but I wanted to remind everyone first. Please send their questions to events@brookings.edu or you can tag us on Twitter with #PostWarIraq. That's a capital P and a capital I. And over to you, Simona.

MS. FOLTYN: Thanks so much, Marsin. It's a pleasure to moderate this panel of distinguished experts and scholars. So we're going to start with a round robin style set of questions for our panelist for around 40 minutes. And after that I'll open it up to questions from the audience.

So I'd like to start out by discussing the relationship between democracy and civil society. Many foreign governments and donors look at civil society as an enabler for democratization. So if we look at, for example, academic literature or the empirical evidence out there what does it actually tell us about the relationship between democracy and civil society? And this first question, I'll throw it over to you, Shamiran.

MS. MAKO: Thank you so much, Marsin, for that generous introduction. And thank you for the opportunities to be in conversation with you all. Thank you, Simona, for moderating. And importantly, thank you to the Middle East Policy Center for hosting us at Brookings.

Civil society in general refers to both the present strength and relative autonomy. And I think these three things are really important because they reinforced each other. Of organizations that relate to any type of association life. Such like human rights

groups, professional groups, syndicate groups, trade unions, religious bodies and women's organizations and feminist organizations.

There is a broad consensus and I think this is something that Marsin has really effectively noted in her report that there has to be an autonomist base by which civil society organizations as we kind of think of them in the formal, traditional sense can form, but also can flourish in terms of how they retain their platforms, their base of support. While also operating within an institutional and political space that fosters their existence.

Iraq demonstrates similar patterns as other democratization regions or post-conflict settings. Though, I use that term loosely. Such as you see this kind of mushrooming of initial civil society organizations after regime change as the political space opens and accommodates an otherwise previously closed window where CSOs were either cooped or were coerced into the larger state apparatus as Marsin has also noted under the Ba'athist era.

We also know that civil society organizations can produce social movements that challenge governmental authority and at the same time social movements challenging state authority, corruption, repression can lead to the formation of proliferation of civil society organizations. And so, they're kind of mutually reinforcing and inclusive.

A plethora of scholarship on CSOs and post-conflict settings really kind of illustrates this link between civil society organizations and democratization with works largely focusing on transitions that we saw in Latin America, Eastern Europe and East Asia from the 1970s onward. This sort of third wave democratization regions.

There also exists a broad consensus though that within the literature that the relative strength or weakness of civil society organizations in these democratizing context requires a case-by-case analysis of the domestic challenges, opportunities and factors that can strain or my limit the scope and relative strength of civil society organizations and social movements that are associated with them.

I think this is particularly important in countries like Iraq where regional and

federal structures in some ways inherently produce different outcomes. And so, this we see with respect to the autonomy and durability of civil society organizations after 2003 where you do have this kind of mushrooming that Marsin has noted in her report. And at the same time, you have this kind of phenomenon of ghost organizations in that these organizations are really kind of -- they're hallowed out in terms of their structure and in terms of their capacity and their mandate.

Interestingly, scholars of Iraq that looked at this kind of hallowing out of civil society organizations in the country in the 1990s and especially after the first Gulf War. We see the emergence of informal civil society networks and structures that kind of supplant what the state had attempted to coop. And successfully, actually, cooped.

And so, people of Al-Fallujah, I think really nicely looked at how tribal structures became these kind of space, informal spaces, that the regime couldn't necessarily fully penetrate where civil society organizations and association life could kind of exist. And I say this outside of the Kurdistan regional government.

And so, these informal structures, I think are quite important for understanding the nature of civil society in Iraq even after 2003. And at the same time, we see that a wealth of scholarship has actually illustrated how external state and peace building and democratization, external democratization since the 1990s even across different context has actually produced negligible results in terms of civil society capacity building. And in some context, as in the case of Iraq, has actually subverted the formation and evolution of more kind of localized, horizontal, cross-sectorial forms of association life. And so, the record is quite mixed.

MS. FOLTYN: Thank you so much, Shamiran. So let's look more at the kind of civil society that has emerged in Iraq post-2003. Ideally, we like to think of civil society as you mentioned, Shamiran, also like an amalgamation of different organizations that represent citizen's interests and demands. And that is independent from the state that can actually influence policymaking and represent their demands.

So, Lahib, from your experience if you look at the kind of civil society that has emerged post-2003. How would you characterize it? And is it a civil society that is adverse serial with regard to the state? Or is it very much linked to the existing power structures?

MS. HIGEL: Thank you, Simona. And thanks to Brookings for organizing this very important event. And of course, to Marsin's excellent report, which I think already outlines quite well what we've seen in terms of the evolution of the post-2003 civil society environment in Iraq.

I think overall we have more categories to what civil society is than what we think of maybe from a Western point of view, which would be, you know, categories of humanitarian organizations. Organizations that are linked to advocacy, angst of specific liberal values, women's rights, human rights, et cetera.

Or civil society organizations that focus on peace building efforts. But really, the environment is I think a lot bigger than that. And I think from, you know, relatedly to what Shamiran was saying. I think it's more than many of these other categories are quite hidden to the public's eye.

So if we have a broader look if what civil society is, you know, a lot of the communal support happens through religious institutions, tribal institutions that are much more informal. But I would also say another venue for that is also the universities. And so, kind of young people engaging in civil society work. Tapping into the international organizations and their experience responding to various crises, but not organizing themselves in terms of institutions or organizations. But a lot more voluntary work.

And then I think that there's another category which is more of a legacy from the pre-2003 period which Marsin has also mentioned in her report which is actually a different type of institute.

Clubs, for instance, that are literature related or that organize cultural events. Unions even and these different organizations for kind of layers of traditional civil

society as Iraq knew it before 2003. And that kind of the more modern additions, let's say, as in the three categories that I mean, more humanitarian aid related, advocacy and peace building activities.

MS. FOLTYN: Thanks so much, Lahib. So if we actually look at the type and number of CSOs that have emerged in Iraq, it is very exciting. Because, Marsin, in your paper, you actually analyze the data. It's always exciting when we have actual data to look at.

So you found in your analysis that there is actually a significant number of registered, formally registered CSOs. And one good thing that that creates an impression that Iraq has a vibrance civil society just like, for example, if you look at the number of TV channels in Iraq. You would think that Iraq has a vibrant and independent press, which may not actually be the case if you look at the affiliations of those institutions.

So when you broke down that data in your report, can you explain, Marsin, what you actually found with regard to the independence and quality of the CSOs? And what do you think are the factors that have potentially undermined the creation of a vibrant civil society in Iraq?

MS. ALSHAMARY: This is a great question, Simona, because I think it touches on one of the things that we have to be careful of when we look at data.

So one of the biggest obstacles I had when I collected this data is I basically got a list in two separate years, in 2015 and then in 2018. And all the organizations were interested in Iraq. At the time, these lists were public you could go in the NGO directorate website and you can download them. They were just, you know. And then after the 2019 protest movement, they started taking down the lists of the civil society organizations for security reasons.

And so, when I was looking at them. If, you know, if I were to count civil societies by sheer number of organizations. And I can tell you between any year that you pick between 2012 to present day, Iraq would have from anywhere from 3,000 to 4,000

registered organizations.

But in the years that I actually looked at the organizations and tried to understand what they were like, what these 3,000, 4,000 organizations actually did on a day-to-day basis. I discovered that a lot of them -- a lot of them are ghost organizations. More than half of them are easily nonexistent organizations.

And if you take the case of Karbala and Hillah as a microcosm of the rest of Iraq then I can give you the example that when I had about 80 organizations registered in Hillah, I could only find 20 or so that I could actually talk to.

And in Karbala which boast anywhere from 120 to 160 registered. Some of the activists told me you can find more than 50. Me, myself, I couldn't find more than 40 that were in some way or another operational in the sense that when I called them, they responded and said, yes, you have reached the civil society organization. And this is a completely different question then what do they do? Are they operating on a daily basis or on a monthly basis?

And at this point, it merits taking a step back just to reflect on what we mean by strong civil society and what that looks like in Iraq. What I did was I looked at the number of organizations functioning in a governing Iraq.

And by functioning, I had a very loose definition of functioning as, you know, they responded to me. They had somewhat of an office I could go to. And they can tell me what their mission was. But I could easily also look at the associational rate of each governor which is how many associations divided by the population.

So how vibrant a civil society in the population of that particular governor act. But that would only be looking at civil society from the perspective that civil society is the embodiment of an organization. But on the other hand, civil society is something like volunteering. And if you think about what is the voluntarism in the Iraqi society?

How many Iraqis regularly go out and give their time to charities? Give their time to picking up trash on the street? Which we see more and more now these days. Or

to, you know, tutoring children who are underprivileged or any of these things. That's a completely different measure of civil society and one that my report has tapped into, but I do think it's a very valuable thing that we should think about going forward.

But if we go to my own measurement which is CSOs per governorate, sometimes looking at the population and finding all of these ghosts. I dug deeply into why ghosts exist particularly in the case of Southern and South-Central Iraq. And I came up with a few hypotheses and a few findings that are worth noting I think for anyone working on civil society.

First, there is the terrible case of an enterprising individual who thinks they can make a profit off of ground so donations. And so, they create organizations, realize that the NGO directorate doesn't hand out money to organizations and then closes up shop or forgets to check in on their organization.

And then there are individuals who are activists and who are really well known to donors particularly international donors. And so, there is a grant or there's a particular opportunity. And so, they create an organization to be able to accommodate that opportunity, but it takes so long to register in Iraq. It takes anywhere between six months and, let's say, 14 months to register on average that they lose the grant before they are able to do anything with it. And so, you're left with a purposeless organization.

And then there are organizations who start off with a lot of support, but who along the way don't achieve self-sustaining means and then falling apart. And then there are obviously, the organizations that are fronts for various political organizations or even armed actors that once they accomplish whatever mission they had, they fall apart as well.

So what this tells us, you know, in the positive side is that the handful of truly functioning organizations in Iraq are so impressive because they've managed to acquire funds, keep membership alive and still in a spirit of voluntarism and remain relevant on the Iraq street while everyone else has, you know, become a ghost organization.

There aren't as many of them as we think of on first glance when we see

this amazing registry. But I think the small ones that are promising and have really goals that really resonate with the Iraqi streets are worth uncovering. And I also think the standards of the international community and how they look at Iraq have evolved over time.

You know, once upon a time Iraq was shelved under the countries of if there is a single functioning organization, no matter what it does this is a victory. But now, standards have become higher. Now, not every civil society organization is considered a success. And I think that's a necessary thing.

MS. FOLTYN: Marsin, just a very quick follow up question about the factors that undermine the development of civil society. You already mentioned the length of registration. I think in your paper, you also talked about the difficulty to raise funding for some of these organizations. Can you just quickly talk about that?

MS. ALSHAMARY: Yeah. So some of them aren't too unique to Iraq. Exactly, like you said. The grazing funding. Every organization needs to be able to raise basic funding to survive. But I think where some of them truly face challenges is that there is this thing in the Iraqi street that is that the Iraqi street wants to donate to a particular kind of organization.

And so, people want to be charitable to children and orphans. And they want to give to the poor. But they don't necessarily want to give to this graduate student union or they don't want to necessarily give to this -- get out the vote campaign organization. And that's within their rights because this is where Iraqi society is at the moment and things evolve according to what people need and what they value.

And a lot of Iraqis live their lives trying to make a living and trying to make ends meet. And so, to them they have priorities of what's important and what's not. And so, you see some of the organizations that are really successful are ones that are basically charitable organizations that are very well networked and can support like a few kids in this particular city because they know people in the city and they're very organic development.

For the ones that have different goals, and it's very important to have these

organizations in Iraq right now because they're the kind of organizations who do any kind of work to promote rights when the state seems to be transgressing on them to protect individuals. And they do a lot for freedom of speech. And they're very important for the development of any democracy.

For them it's harder because they were initiated with this idea that they are so loved by the West and so supported by the West, but the West also wants them, you know, to be fair to all sides, they also want them to learn to be self-sustaining which is hard for them at the moment.

And so, there's this tension between how to teach self-sustainability without taking away the identity of the organization and transforming it into something. And without giving false hope of, yes, go out and start these things and do these things and we're all behind you. And so, it's a tricky relationship.

MS. FOLTYN: And I think it's very interesting to talk about the public perception of civil society. You mentioned that people are more likely to give to organizations that have humanitarian causes as opposed to, for example, advocacy groups.

So, Shamiran, I'm turning it over to you. What do you think is in general the public perception in Iraq towards civil society and, you know, do you think that civil society is seen as a legitimate mechanism to represent people's interests and demands? Or is there a certain level of distrust and perhaps even disillusionment?

MS. MAKO: Yeah. I mean I'm happy. Thanks so much, Simona, for that question. I'm happy to defer to Marsin as well because of her intimate knowledge of this CSO data that she has highlighted in the report. But I'll speak to the few datapoints that we have and I think in some ways they reflect broadly an opinion of Iraqis across the country.

In terms of how they see association life in general, civil society organizations. And these are -- at least the data that I can find that speak to this question will be like the world value surveys, say, on Arab barometer data.

In the latest world value survey data, so the last wave that was done

between 2017, 2019. Interestingly, right at the nexus point of Tishreen. It shows that Iraqis are split almost evenly in their confidence in charitable and humanitarian organizations. So some see them as being useful as Marsin had noted because there's a bit more trust with charitable organizations especially associated with religious bodies.

And on the other hand, there's almost this split-even phenomenon where people, you know, Iraqis don't really have trust in these entities. They do, however, have very little confidence in organizations that espouse established CSOs that claim to represent, you know, labor unions, women's movements and women's groups, environmental groups and then things like that.

At the same time, we've seen them grow increasingly disinterested in participatory politics. So things like participating in provincial and federal elections as we saw the lowest voter turnout being the last election in October. And there's also a disinterest in joining political parties. You know, participating in civic engagement like signing petitions, joining campaigns, participating in organized boycotts and demonstrations.

When we look at our barometer data across various waves, Iraqis have similarly grown deeply disinterested of state institutions and distrustful of political parties and representative entities. They've also grown profoundly dissatisfied with government performance. And I think we've known this for some time. Specifically, in the government's ability to do things like tackle corruption. At the same time, its ability to provide public service provision like healthcare and education and ensure the right to peaceful protest. And so, there's a kind of continuous downward trend there.

These trends, though limited and all of these survey data have their own kind of issues that I won't go into. But they actually speak to and explain in some ways why Tishreen was a success as a decentralizing, leaderless movement that has drawn broad base support as a disorganized and initially kind of non-aligned bound hierarchical movement.

If Iraqis are distrusting established institutions including civil society

organizations and don't really have an interest in participating there then it makes sense why you see, you know, the attraction of this decentralized and nonhierarchical movement like Tishreen.

And so, protestors in Tishreen and some as we've seen recently in the Kurdistan region are really challenging the centers of power. And in doing so, they're also crafting strategies that bypass established CSOs and associations. And I think this is something that (inaudible) report on Tishreen has really, really nicely noted. Is that because they perceive these to be within the organ of those in power and those power structures that they're seeking to transform.

Here, I also want to highlight the role of diaspora organizations and civil society organizations and advocacy groups. We've seen in the case of, you know, minority communities or communities in kind of vulnerable parts of Iraq have relied extensively on diaspora organizations and advocacy groups.

We've seen this, you know, in the case of, for example, the Yazidis community, Yazda, the free Yazidis foundation have been doing some great work in advocating for their kin in the disputed territories. And also, organizations like the SRM policy institute that have also done the same for their kin in Iraq.

And all of this really speaks to this kind of new form of advocacy and new form of kind of informal mechanisms by which civil society organizations are emerging that kind of transcend both localized forms of advocacy but also that kind of speaks to this really broad trend that we're seeing in terms of how Iraqis are seeing established entities and institutions and relying more on those informal networks.

MS. FOLTYN: That's great. So let's talk more about the Tishreen protest, which I think is a great case study and a very recent event. Of course, it's one of the largest grassroots protests that we have seen in recent history.

And you know, many have described it as a leaderless movement as well as that was poorly organized. And, Lahib, I'd really like you to speak on this because you wrote

an excellent paper on the protest movement. And how it was organized. So can you explain what organization meant in the context of Tishreen? And whether we can regard it in a way as a manifestation of civil society?

MS. HIGEL: Well, that's a very good question. And Shamiran made some very good points as to the building of this.

So I think that organization was very high in comparison to what many observers say because it was leaderless. It's not organization of a traditional sense that we saw specific civil society organizations driving it, but it was specific grievances at the time that really made for the eruption, right?

So there were student protests in September that then because they were disbursed and quite harshly repelled, there was a wave of people coming in and then in October and then it kind of continued. And so, I think the activity especially at the Iraqi universities across the country, especially in the South, obviously, was really important to the mobilization.

And so, what the Tishreen protest told us is that actually when it comes to organizational power into mobilization, it's quite good. But when it comes to organizing and the next step, which is, you know, for please purposes, for main parties or having a unified vision of an agenda, et cetera. That was perhaps less successful.

But in terms of mobilization, there was a big power to do this. And in the early months of the protest, there were, you know, emerging coordination bodies across provinces. So as soon as something happened in one province, you saw very quickly that other provinces responded to that in one or another.

So, yes, it's an expression of civil society, but perhaps not the civil society that we think of. And I mean two other points that I think Shamiran made and that are really important I think in this context is, one, I mean the support of the diaspora and of course just the local communities surrounded really allowed for, you know, the sudden protest to continue for such a long time.

And I think that's not to be underestimated. But it has a limited organizational capacity because usually that type of support came in individually or on the level of a group of individuals in certain countries. Not so much in terms of larger organizations as the one that Shamiran mentioned that exist for specific purposes.

And so, I think that when, you know, when then the protest faltered, this also kind of fizzled away a little bit. But there is still that connection between the diaspora and these kind of -- the younger generation that is still there that could potentially be reactivated at another point.

And I think to make one other point about this when it comes to the organization of Tishreen. You know, when it comes closer to the funding question here and what we think about democracy is that a lot of money has also been channeled to social media campaigns and for that purpose only. And so, what we saw during the protests and also slightly before is that there has been a lot of campaigns with hashtags towards specific purposes, right?

And then they trend for a while and then they disappear. And so, this is also something that has been very difficult to then establish into something more sustainable. So they fill a very temporary purpose.

MS. FOLTYN: Yeah. And I think this reliance on the diaspora. I mean it's very interesting also. It had certain repercussions with a focus movement because it became stigmatized so to say with many people saying this is a foreign funded movement. And it was interesting actually how that was used against it and how that was manipulated so to say.

But I mean based on my observations of covering the protests. I mean I did notice that there were a lot of kind of seasoned activists who have been involved in various protest movements for decades, really, who were kind of leading the way. You know, mentoring the younger activists how to organize. How to raise funding.

And it made me wonder whether, you know, does that mean that civil

society in Iraq is more personalized rather than institutionalized?

And, Shamiran, I'd like to hear your thoughts on this. And if you could perhaps draw on your research on the Arab uprisings and experiences from other countries to contextualize Iraq's experience?

MS. MAKO: Thank you so much, Simona. And I think just building on what Lahib had mentioned. I think we ought to kind of distinguish between social movements and associations in civil society organizations.

And while they're mutually inclusive. You know, CSOs can drive social movements but social movements can also lead to the formation of new -- or build on established civil society organizations. Like those driven by Tishreen that are kind of more decentralized, horizontal and kind of crosscutting. In other words, they cut across ethnic and sectorial lines in the case of Iraq.

This makes them both powerful but also limited, right? In terms of their ability and their durability to kind of work within institutional and political structures that exist that kind of constrain their operation anyway.

And so, the Arab uprisings in some ways are different and they emerge within different -- you know, differently across different context. In places like Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt and to a lesser extent Bahrain, civil society organizations and associations things like syndicate groups, labor unions, women's groups and feminist organizations, teachers' unions were really crucial in creating and sustaining robust protest movements with national and subnational or regional mobilization capacity.

In other places like we see in Yemen, Syria and Libya where association like was quite limited quite limited. Protests were less organized, more decentralized and guided less by established civil society organizations and relied more on those kind of informal networks and organizational capabilities that Lahib had mentioned.

Iraq has its own idiosyncrasies. And I think that kind of distinguishes it from the protest movements that we saw in the Arab uprisings. These include, you know, kind of

different and competing centers of power both in terms of Iraq's federal structure and division over territorial control with respect to the Kurdistan region, the disputed territories that in and of itself kind of in some ways actually prohibits the formation and the continuity of these kind of cross national, crosscutting protest movements like Tishreen.

And also control over the course of apparatus, right? When we think about the role that's, you know, in some weakened as a result of the proliferation of armed, nonstate actors, which we've seen operate differently across different regions of Iraq, right? In the disputed territories in Central Iraq and Southern Iraq and in the Kurdistan region.

And so social movements in general then become kind of limited in their scope when they operate within these real kind of constraining structures. And also, I think Marsin does such a good job on highlighting this. I think we underestimate the legacy of the hallowing out of the associational life which Iraq had a pretty vibrant case of before the Ba'athist takeover in that kind of real decade, two decades of the 1980s and 1990s.

Where we saw that space completely shrink and become completely coopted by the state and kind of subsumed within Ba'athist governing structures. And what that meant is that at the nexus is kind of critical juncture in 2003. You know, you have a lot of aid and money being poured into form and establish civil society organizations. But at the same time, you know, these kind of top down and position of expectations of what civil society organizations kind of look like within the kind of donor multilateral and bilateral donor agencies.

Underestimated those informal structures that had existed in the 1990s that kind of tried to bypass the Ba'athist state. Things like tribal structures or religious organizations that had kind of filled in that space that had been cootped by the regime. And so, you have this kind of, you know, two things that are happening that aren't necessarily speaking to each other. And I think we're kind of seeing the outcome of that two decades on.

MS. FOLTYN: We have a few minutes left before we'll open it to questions

from the audience. And I mean I'd like to talk about a very, I think important topic and the point of view of all three of you. Which is the role of Western donors has played in the development of civil society for better or for worse.

Of course, you know, one of the challenges that Western donors face in particular is to really understand civil society as to grasp -- to choose the right partners. And I think if we look at, Marsin, what you have found in your paper. It's very interesting. And specifically, you mentioned that there is an aversion among Western governments to associate with, for example, religious institutions.

Can you explain why that is? And the implications of this select bias so to say?

MS. ALSHAMARY: When I was studying Karbala which is as everyone knows is one of the important religious centers in Iraq. I had a -- I was very curious to see if there were just going to be so many more religious organizations in Karbala than the rest of Iraq.

And so, I went and I actually coded every single organization on whether they were religious. But I used a very specific meaning of religious. As whether they had any activities that were religiously oriented. Not if their name contains Eman Hussein, you know, charitable organization or something like that.

And so, what happens in Karbala is that everyone names their organization after a religious figure, but very few of these religious named organizations actually have anything really to do with religion in terms of they're not centered around like the figure of a society or Imam who leads the organization. They're not, you know, organized in a mosque. They don't have islamist dreams and are aiding some of this political parties or anything. They just happen to use the name that's important to them because it's part of the identity of their city.

And so, when I wrote this report, I wrote that there seems to be an aversion to anything that has to do with Islamic organizations, which to me in Iraq's case, I think

comes from the fact that there's so many Islamic political parties that donors really don't want to be associated with. And that's understandable. I mean to support civil society you don't want to be supporting political parties inadvertently or directly.

But what it made me realize is that there should be more due diligence towards what these organizations actually do. Does their name actually reflect anything of their mission? And, you know, it took a bit of digging to actually discover this. So it's not an easy task to get it done, but I think it's an important one because often times these organizations are able to tap into the local community in a way that can't be imagined for someone who holds a very specific definition of a civil society.

So, you know, local organizations don't have to look like the American Civil Liberties Union. You know, they don't have to be like the golden civil society organization. They can be something as simple as a group of townspeople organizing during Pilgrimage to facilitate like a cultural production for themselves. It's still technically considered civil society.

It could be a group of retired teachers who provide extracurricular help to children who are underprivileged. That could also be civil society and it could have the name that has a religious connotation, but they can just derive the religious from charitable. And in that sense, they are very, very far from Islamist.

And so, my hope with this report is to just highlight this as possibly a way of thinking about these organizations going forward. And being like, oh, here is a gap in the way we think about them. Here is something that we might be misunderstanding because of a particular cultural or religious norm in that city that makes them name it this way.

But that doesn't really mean anything in substance. And so, I hope with that that I have uncovered something useful to donors. Because to me it was genuine question. Just because Iraq have a lot of religious organizations and it turns out no, it doesn't. It does not have any more than the rest of the provinces in South Central Iraq.

MS. FOLTYN: Lahib, based on your experience, what kind of selection bias

have you seen among Western donors with regard to, for example, a language, an understanding of the funding process? And what do you think kind of factors do donors need to take into account to make sure they don't undermine native forms of civil society?

MS. HIGEL: Well, okay. There's so many forms, I think of selection bias. But I'll try to mention a few that I've come across.

Especially since 2014, I think -- I mean one is related to what the understanding is of what the need is for the moment, right? So obviously, with the war on ISIS, it appears that there may be needs for -- I mean, obviously military in nature, but also targeting specific communities.

In terms of the perception of who was a victim, right? So whether those are displaced communities. Whether those are minorities, et cetera. And I think that in that sense, there is an automatic bias that happens where there is little understanding. Or I think where much of the donor community and organized, international organizations realize afterwards that they have had quite a slim understanding of what it is that they need to do.

So, for instance, one example would be supporting a displaced community in an area where the host community is also quite poor, for instance. And so, you create kind of conflict and tensions between the displaced and the host community. And there's almost a question of like, you know, who is the bigger victim at some point?

And these are things that I think are natural for many contexts, not only specific to Iraq. But there's always a learning curve with this.

Another one would be that, you know, in specific conflicts we've seen that some of the first responders that are on frontlines, for instance, are the locals, right? And what does this mean? Are they organizations? Is a tribal leader that, you know, has been phoned up by someone and say, oh, we need you to provide help over here? But with that there is also learning that is done on the part of those organizations or groups of individuals that voluntarily respond.

But those are not necessarily the people that are then connected to the

international organizations that come in and set up shop afterwards, right? Because they need another type of capacity. They need language skills, et cetera. And therefore, you take in, you know, people that might not have a background in this area, but that have a language skill. So there you lose kind of parts of the local understanding for a specific area.

Another one, and I think Marsin mentioned this very well in her report is of course the requirements when it comes to actual applications which is a huge barrier for many. And that the -- it's not only sufficient with training people into how to apply initially, but also there's a question of sustainability in how you can continue with an organization.

And I think that the biggest problem here is that things shift quite quickly. So over just, you know, the last 10 years, we've seen the needs go from humanitarian to so-called stabilization to so-called peace building to realizing that, oh, actually there are needs in other parts of Iraq not just in the Central and the North, which means that the funding flow shifts quite quickly.

That doesn't mean that the initial need vanished. But so, in that sense it's difficult to sustain some of these organizations. And I think that the latest iteration was also mentioned in the report. Is the, you know, the willingness of especially Western countries to kind of support this new energy that they see among youth. You know, let's see for how long that's going to continue. And I think that is something to be mindful of, but that it's also quite difficult with these kind of shifting priorities of the donor community.

MS. FOLTYN: All right. Thank you. So we're going to move to questions from the audience now. And maybe we can keep the answers relatively short so we can cover a few of them.

So I have here a question from Allah Alane (phonetic) who is a consultant for Monoson (phonetic). His question is given the political setup and domination of corrupt political leaders, do you think Iraq's civil society will ever have a role to play moving towards real democracy?

So I think it's a very interesting question because we all know how

entrenched political elites are. Many of them have armed groups that are backing them. Shamiran, would you maybe like to talk about this and comment to what extent CSOs actually have the ability to influence policymaking in Iraq?

MS. MAKO: Yeah, thank you so much. It is an important question. And I think it's the million-dollar question, right? What do we actually think -- what can we envision these movements doing? And how can they actually constrain the powers that be that actually constrain the formation of robust civil society organizations?

I think Tishreen has given us a glimpse of what these nonhierarchical kind of decentralized mass movements can do in terms of disrupting politics at the local level, but also disrupting politics at the national level. A prime minister stepped down, right? In light of Tishreen. And I think though that may have been symbolic, but I think it's not to be underestimated.

And so, in comparison to, you know, other context that we've seen across the region. These movements do have the potential to do that. I think the question then becomes is, you know, at the same time that we think about localized corruption and the drivers of corruption on a domestic level, we really underestimate the role that foreign donors, multilateral agencies, political donors, bilateral organizations that are committed to, you know, civil society organizations, democratization, et cetera.

The ways in which they too can constrain these movements that are otherwise nonaligned. Which means that there is a lot of, you know, thinking or rethinking of how aid is distributed to organizations that are either aligned with these different factions. But also, how, you know, these donors are actually undermining kind of more localized protest movements that emerge across the country.

And we've seen this happening in the Kurdistan region. We've seen it obviously happen in and around Bagdad. So that's, you know, the question is, I think more multifaceted than we think about these leaders are driving this level of repression. They are, but there's other things that are driving it as well that are kind of outside of that local context.

MS. FOLTYN: Thank you so much. I have another question from Yohana Adafolk (phonetic). I apologize if that's not the pronunciation. Specifically talking about the EU and its foreign policy and neighborhood policy.

We've been talking a lot about the absorption capacity of our partners. Do you think that initial progress in promoting civil society development went wrong by throwing too much money and possibly using ill-conceived conceptions at the problem of democratizing a foreign society? I think a foreign society in this case means Iraq.

So again, it brings us back to this question of, you know, given I think, Shamiran, also what you mentioned that there have been negligible results in civil society development. You know, should this whole idea of supporting democratization be, you know, perhaps even abandoned if not at least revised. Masin, maybe you want to offer your thoughts on that?

MS. ALSHAMARY: Yes. So just thinking about this took me straight back. If you can indulge me for a second to graduate school where we first learn about civil society and democratization. Which is one of those causal relationships that political scientists have looked at from every single angle.

But I think that the development community hasn't looked at from every single angle. And one of the first thing you read is you read Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work*. And then you learn, oh, if you have great social capital in civil societies, you get democracy like Northern Italy. And then you read Sherry Berman's book about the Weimar Republic and about how a lot of civil society organizations brought Nazism into Germany.

And then you have these two very contrasting experiences, which I think are put very elegantly later by Emanuel Jamal (phonetic) in her book about the Palestinian Territories where -- and Jordan -- where she talks about how really civil society organizations often times just empower the status quo. They don't necessarily lead to democratization.

When we talk about it, we can see this link of how they would in theory in the best ideal settings lead to democracy. They do that by, you know, having advocacy groups that actively check the state. They do it by having a citizenry that is well informed and that votes if they can vote to protect their own interests. And by, you know, having these forces that stand against the state. But often times that civil society can be driven by wanting to survive for other lesser reasons or other lesser goals. And they end up actually being the kind of forces that enable an authoritarian state or that draw back a democratizing state.

And I think one very interesting read from Brookings was Sharone Growals' (phonetic) work on Tunisia and how civil society in Tunisia was partly responsible for bringing about democratization to Tunisia. But then later on it really complicated democratic consolidation. And so, it's not a really easy recipe that, you know, you empower civil society and you get democracy.

So yes, absolutely. I think Iraq in 2003 was operating largely under the assumption of, we give money to these organizations. They'll create organizations. You know, there is so much energy in Iraq in 2003. Not just from people coming in but also people within the country who are like okay. Let's, you know, let's build an organization. And look, there's someone who wants to support us.

And I think this energy was not appropriately channeled in some ways, but it also was really fanned beyond its ability by the endless money that was sent into the country that seems, at least from the priorities and from the kind of organizations in the South and South Central. It seemed like there was a lot of support financially. And that support faded away in a few years. And then a lot of those organizations became ghosts.

So I do think it was badly done. But more importantly, which is a lesson learned is that never take the association between scenario and democracy as a given. Everything that political science has shown us is that, no, it's really not. It can but under certain variables as well.

MS. FOLTYN: Great. I think we have time for just one last question. It's from Lussia Acosh (phonetic) who is an analyst at the Embassy of Switzerland.

Do you think civil society in Iraq will be active in the political process and decision-making circles under the new electoral law? And I think, Lahib, you can talk about this because in your report you talked about how the protest movement went essentially from the barricades to the ballot box. So has the new electoral law made it easier for civil society to transit into the political mainstream and actually effect policymaking?

MS. HIGEL: Thank you. That's a very good question. And I think we are all looking with excitement to the next four years to see how to interpret this.

So I mean first of all is it -- now, that we have some of these -- let's say, the social movement rather of Tishreen represented to a certain degree and parliament. Is it civil society? Or is it on path to -- I mean organized politics already means something, right? I mean it's we're talking rather about certain values and how they might be represented and impacting policy.

I wouldn't be too hopeful. I think that and perhaps there is room for these MPs to at least raise, you know, suggest new legislation perhaps. Question established political parties. You know, they have numbers to do that in parliament, et cetera. But I think that there is one very important link that is missing in Iraq that we might have in other more democratized countries, let's say.

Which is the lobby, right? I mean we can call it (inaudible) or call it whatever. But where we have organized interest groups that for specific purposes lobby the politicians. And that I don't really think we have in Iraq. We have certain civil society organizations that are perhaps focused especially on women's rights or children's rights to a certain degree do this.

But beyond those topics, I don't see many. And actually, that goes for even companies as well, right? Because we have such a poor private sector. So the type of lobby that we have is very kind of personalized interest. And I think this is kind of the next

challenge for civil society organization is to translate, you know, what does it mean to impact policy?

It is not just about creating new parties that can enter political decision making because they will have naturally constraints and will adapt in that process. But what is a civil society that is still outside formal politics doing?

MS. FOLTYN: It's very interesting. Thank you so much. This has been such a pleasure to moderate. I'm going to hand it over to Masin for closing remarks.

MS. ALSHAMARY: Thank you, Simona. Thank you Shamiran and Lahib. This was a great conversation and I hope everyone who was listening enjoyed it. And I hoped we answered all the questions sufficiently.

Personally, you can always shoot me a question on Twitter or my email. I'm happy to answer on the report in particular or anything else. But I won't make the same offer on behalf of my colleagues as emails might be flooded so I'll leave that for them to decide later.

Anyway, thanks all for joining us today. And I wish you all a great rest of your day if you're in Washington. And a good night in Bagdad.

MS. FOLTYN: Thank you so much for having us.

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