

The Arab Partnership for Conflict Prevention & Human Security: Middle East Action Agenda

The Middle East is home to a number of local and international conflicts. In addition, there are numerous ethnic and religious differences that have been used to contribute to social tension and occasionally burst to the surface in acts of limited communal violence. While the Middle East is not the worst or only region suffering from violent conflict, its strategic location often gives local conflicts greater international impact.

A number of organizations in the Middle East work in fields related to conflict prevention and human security, but their skills are rarely recognized or effectively used. To assist in curtailing the potential for local communal or social violence, limiting the impact of isolated violent incidents, and mitigating the local impact of major conflicts in the rest of the region, there needs to be a more effective method of mobilizing and sharing conflict prevention skills and experience.

In response to this situation, the Arab Partnership for Conflict Prevention and Human Security was founded in February 2005 as part of the broader Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, a loose alliance between the United Nations, governments and civil society to develop a common platform for effective action on conflict prevention from the community to the global level. The current Middle East Action Agenda reflects the concerns and visions of committed CSOs from the Middle East to better define their role and to improve their capacities and skills to respond to their social responsibility of attaining decent peaceful life to people of the region.

Partnership Goals

The Middle East Action Agenda aims to empower and enable CSOs working in the fields of conflict prevention and human security to contain current conflicts and prevent potential conflicts through knowledge sharing, the development and implementation of innovative conflict prevention approaches, and the mobilization of civil society organizations and others to instill concepts of conflict prevention in their respective areas of work.

APCPHS provides a forum for CSOs to discuss ongoing conflict prevention efforts and advances in this field in order to tip the balance in favor of a broader implementation of existing non-violence and peaceful conflict resolution traditions.

In addition, APCPHS also seeks to establish constructive partnerships with major stakeholders, reinforcing the application of local and international conventions pertaining to human rights and spread of small arms.

Under the umbrella of GPPAC, the combined resources and expertise of organizations from other regions will not only improve the efficiency of individual organizations in the Middle East, but will also enrich global knowledge and initiatives in the field of conflict prevention.

APCPHS Middle East Action Agenda

1. Advancing the Right to Peace

Entrenching the notion that all individuals are entitled to live free from physical, psychological or structural violence requires a shift in perspective that takes peace into the rights-based approach. As an essential component for basic survival, violations to the right to peace should be dealt with in with the same severity as other human rights violations. At the core of APCPHS is the concept that peace is not a luxury, but a basic right.

Recommendations:

For CSOs:

Through its policy of observe-advocate-act, APCPHS contends that early detection and alert systems that identify right to peace violations, awareness programs that highlight violations and their repercussions, and action to discourage infringement of this right are imperative. This may take the form of an observatory, Ombudsman, or a research center, which plays the role of early detector of conflicts and guides early intervention and alert and thus emphasis will be placed on prevention.

For Governments:

The role of governments is key to jointly develop and implement early warning systems with CSOs, and most importantly, to demonstrate the repercussions of right to peace violations.

For Stakeholders at all Levels:

The Right to Peace understood and enforced at the individual, group and governmental levels, and through consultation and interaction with human rights experts.

2. Promoting Just Peace Through Peaceful Means

Lasting peace is achieved only when parties agree that it is a result of fair processes and principles and when it can be obtained through non-violent channels. In this, APCPHS denounces not only acts designed to induce terror but also the management of conflict, or maintenance of peace by violent means as a first resort of states or international players. This requires commitment and involvement between social, governmental and international actors, as well as an awareness of and concerted effort to promote and uphold international standards in human security and conflict prevention.

Recommendations:

For Governments:

A necessary first step is for governments to not only sign, but also ratify and implement international human rights charters and conventions.

For CSOs:

Through advocacy and CSO-government engagement, CSOs must encourage government involvement. A desktop review can determine all relevant ratified conventions and protocols and signed programs of action, in addition to signed bilateral and multilateral agreements and binding conferences and declarations, UN resolutions, and international laws, in order to determine the status.

In addition, APCPHS supports a CSO effort to develop a code of conduct based on the principle of just peace through peaceful means which will be circulated to other CSO networks as well as governments and regional organizations for signature and cooperation.

3. Institutionalizing Conflict Prevention & Human Security

Conflict prevention and human security efforts will not have sustainable impact if they are considered as specialized fields or as a series of isolated events. In order to ensure human security, including freedom from fear, is shared across the region and conflict prevention mechanisms are effectively implemented, individual security, democracy and sustainable human development concepts and practices must be integrated into governmental and social institutions across the region.

Recommendations:

For CSOs:

As a network of civil society organizations, APCPHS is determined to work in ongoing partnership with actors at the government and international levels to address the cause of conflict and protect human security throughout the region in the context of the Millennium Development Goals.

A key measure in institutionalizing a culture of peace and principles of human security is interacting with organizations, associations and networks to encourage them to integrate these principles into their mission statements and daily operations.

Key concepts also need to be institutionalized in schools at all levels and through institutions such as an Arab Institute of Conflict Prevention and Human Rights that would act as an academic or training center offering courses and research and other materials for this purpose.

In addition, an assessment the national legislations that institutionalize the violence needs to be completed with proposed amendments to laws and advocate for the allocation of government budgets for conflict prevention action.

For Governments:

In order for real institutionalization of conflict prevention and human security, governments must support the integration of conflict prevention concepts in all levels of education. Ministries of education and national youth councils should cooperate with CSOs in planning and designing informal and semi-formal school and university programs.

For the UN:

Institutionalization must also appear at the international level and requires that the UN facilitate the processes for CSOs to play a consultative role at global UN conferences.

For Government & International Organizations:

The willingness of governments and international actors to participate with CSOs to meet the Millennium Development goals and to institute principles of peace and human security into their working structures precludes any successful CSO work in this area.

4. Opening Channels of Cooperation Between CSOs & Other Stakeholders (including the UN, the Security Council, Governments, Regional Organizations & Local Actors)

Real change only comes through a combination of civic and governmental involvement. For example, both Track I dialogue at the governmental level and Track II dialogue at the civil society level is necessary to shift the mind share of involved parties with tangible results. As a result, APCPHS is committed to opening channels between CSOs and Arab governments for better communication and ongoing partnership.

Recommendations:

For CSOs

This requires the initiation of formal and informal contact between government stakeholders and policy makers through joint conferences, governmental participation in CSO field activities and cooperative preparation for international conferences in present a coordinated agenda.

Engagement at the regional level must involve the informal peace network that invites government participation.

CSOs are encouraged to adopt the World Summit declarations and action plans as guidelines in the interaction with governments and to engage the government to advocate for budget and resource allocation for conflict prevention action and to assess national legislation that affects conflict and propose amendments.

For Governments:

Governments must be considered potential partners in joint program for capacity building and conflict prevention and, in this role, they can provide official acknowledgement of CSO legitimacy in peace and security issues.

This includes elaborating institutional development and empowerment action plans which would facilitate standardization of work, issuance of laws governing the CSOs activities and internal reform.

For the United Nations:

At the international level, it is important that CSOs work with influential actors such as the UN Security Council who must in term encourage governments to interact and support civil society, emphasize the role of CSOs and reduce restrictions to CSOs entering the field in various countries in the region.

5. Promoting the Arab Culture of Peace

An essential step in building a culture of peace is to identify and promote existing, traditional or indigenous means of promoting peaceful social behavior and peaceful approaches to solving community conflicts. In the Arab world indigenous techniques are poorly documented and largely untested outside of local communities. Traditional modes of communication and entertainment in the Middle East such as ballads and poetry that often glorify violence are ideal and largely unexplored vehicles for messages of peace and coexistence.

Recommendations:

For CSOs:

In the Arab world, it is necessary to de-politicize the concept of peace to achieve consensus about the relevance of peace in our daily lives regardless of the political connotations of this concept in the region.

Using Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and traditional mechanisms is effective for introducing conflict prevention measures in contexts where traditional methods gain more momentum than introducing new, alien conflict prevention methodologies. This approach holds much potential for introducing conflict prevention in tribal and rural contexts that are more supportive of traditional cultural norms.

There is a huge gap in documented experiences of indigenous peace-building and/or promoting peace through indigenous channels and it is vital to promote and use these techniques through better documentation and translation both from Arabic to other languages and vice versa.

In addition, grants and bursaries for peace research encourage continued scholarship by graduate students and emerging CSOs with a focus on local research. With this education comes the development of a vocabulary that promotes and enables non-violent outcomes and an acknowledgement of and tribute to peaceful action.

CSOs should also be active in assisting governments to promote the Arab Culture of Peace in educational systems and governmental institutions.

For Governments:

Constructively addressing conflict requires an understanding of the roots and characteristics of conflict, and access to the tools and mechanisms to avoid violence and encourage win-win outcomes. This requires training and formal peace education at all levels.

Within the education system, physical and virtual exchanges between students introduce individuals to different concepts of peace and conflict resolution in the region and give face to “the other”.

6. Building Regional Capacities

In the Arab world, the ability for civil society organizations to take an active role in conflict prevention and human security critically depends on their ability to sustain their own organizational survival and capacity for reaching out and helping others.

CSO staff need training that qualifies them to apply the theoretical conflict prevention knowledge in field-oriented methodologies. Additionally, they require skills for working with governments, understanding and applying concepts of good governance, developing mission statements, creating credible action agendas and building realistic fundraising and budgeting strategies.

Recommendations:

For CSOs:

Through a regional Capacity Needs Assessment it will become clear who is working at local and regional levels and which skills are needed and/or available.

APCPHS is committed to capacity building both within our partnership and across the region through realistic and practicable basic skills training.

Capacity building cannot stop here, ongoing growth must occur through upgrading and continued communication with other regional actors through web portals, conferences and informal engagement.

7. Sharing Knowledge & Experience

One of the largest challenges in the region is overcoming the isolation of the various CSOs working in the field of conflict prevention and human security in order to benefit from collective experiences and knowledge. Building and sharing experiences through information centers, networks, and individuals is necessary to strengthen chances for sharing professional experiences in these fields. This sharing should begin within the region, cross internal and physical borders and then move outward to interregional sharing.

Recommendations:

For CSOs:

APCPHS recognizes the need for a virtual information center that stores databases of regional success stories, physical information centers, CSOs, spokespeople, trainers, donors and funding organizations and leaders in the field of conflict prevention and peace-building.

A survey of available publications and manuals on capacity building and sustainability theories, training, and skills is also necessary, ideally in local languages and including region-specific tools for addressing conflict.

In addition, there is no substitute for face-to-face meetings that allows regional players to hear other experiences. This is most effective when tied these interactions involve travel to other locations where conflict prevention work in being undertaken.

Virtual portal and email groups enable CSOs to share email, invitations, scholarship information, conference details and other informal communications.

For the UN:

Information should also be disseminated from the UN to CSOs and governments on relevant initiatives.

8. Promoting a Culture of Public Participation & Civic Engagement

It is a matter of concern that concepts of public participation and volunteerism are generally weak in the Middle East. Participation is a core value that reflects and affects social responsibility. Increasing levels of civic engagement and participation in the region can mobilize support for CSOs activities and engage members of society in designing and executing CSO activities to expose them to the objectives and rationale behind these activities. Acts of volunteerism, from the CSO perspective, can introduce moral support and sustainability of action without burdening the financial base of organizations.

Recommendations:

For CSOs:

APCPHS encourages member organizations to engage the volunteer community through schools, universities and other associations or community fora. These projects could target high school and university students with awareness efforts about the concept of volunteerism and small voluntary programs.

Training and education is required on both sides, first to ensure CSOs are prepared to provide meaningful experiences that motivate and engage individuals and volunteers and ensure their retention, and second to raise awareness of the benefits and rewards of participating in civil society.

For Governments:

Governments should understand the need to breed volunteerism and co-design -when necessary- these programs.

9. Working with the Media in Conflict Prevention

Conflict prevention and resolution is largely misunderstood in the Arab world. Travel, even within one's own country is often limited and the media and educational systems are generally subject to some type of censor. As a result, "the other" is frequently nameless and faceless; stereotypes flourish and positive stories of interaction and cohabitation are rarely publicized.

For Media:

Due to the popularity of satellite television, mobile phones and other forms of media in the Arab world, APCPHS sees a large opportunity to creatively develop awareness of the conflicts, "the other" and the methods available for peaceful solutions by leveraging these means. Creative television programs that seek the participation of various groups, the presence of minorities in the media, and initiatives that target widespread cellular phone clients are important mechanisms for building awareness in the region.

Responsible journalism by journalists trained on conflict reporting enables media to play a positive role in reducing conflict rather than one of perpetuating violence. Media outlets should cooperate with CSOs to train media professionals on themes of conflict prevention and the right to peace. Journalists should be introduced to themes

of peace-oriented objectivity to help in a smooth shift from a “culture of oppression” to a “culture of peace”.

For CSOs:

In addition, APCPHS sees the need to train media spokespeople from all groups, especially minorities, and to build virtual databases of these individuals and stories to facilitate the role of reporters and media professionals around the world in portraying accurate, balanced stories that promote peace rather than inciting violence in the Middle East.

Conferences on pertinent topics such as refugees, religion or coexistence attract young media professionals who are beginning to struggle with how to address these sensitive issues in their work.

Incentives such as journalism awards or grants for additional training and education opportunities encourage responsible, peace-building media initiatives and also help to highlight positive case studies from the region.

10. Providing an Alternative to all Forms of Violence, through Dialogue and Preemptive Diplomacy

Like the international community, APCPHS struggles with the definition of terrorism and the potentially harmful and alienating impact of misusing such a powerful term, however the partnership is clear in its aim to provide alternatives to all forms of violence without exception. CSOs must play a significant role in providing forums for dialogue and encouraging the use of preventive diplomacy

Recommendations:

For Governments:

Governments have a responsibility to encourage and engage in preventive diplomacy. Not only are there significant cost-saving benefits of investing in diplomacy before the outbreak of conflict, but evidence points to the real potential for such engagement to reduce the possibility of such outbreak and ensure continued communication between parties.

For CSOs:

In the absence of efficient state or judicial forums for voicing concerns and facilitating inter-group dialogue, CSOs must step in to fill this gap. Effective dialogue must take place at a range of levels and encourage interaction and reconciliation efforts particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels of society, the elites and the broader general public. Broad cross-regional dialogue allows an opportunity for humanizing, or sometimes re-humanizing, the other.

In communal societies, that are highly characteristic of those in Arab countries, forgiveness and tolerance often needs to be addressed at the community level. As well, the important role of community and religious leaders in influencing popular opinion and action in the region demonstrates that local leadership involvement in dialogue is often prerequisite for broader inter-community communication, and these actors can be engaged to collaboratively create a document of respect and openness.

Although diplomacy is generally considered part of the realm of governments and international organizations, consultation with civil society experts in conflict prevention and lobbying efforts by the CSO community can play a strengthening role in these initiatives.

11. Investing in our Partnership

In order to meet the pressing needs outlined in the preceding guiding principles, APCPHS realizes the necessity of sustaining and investing in our network. There have been past attempts at developing conflict resolution and civil society networks in the region which were unsuccessful for a variety of reasons, and therefore it is imperative that we invest the future of our partnership.

Recommendations:

For ACPCHS:

Clear, unified vision and mission statements, practical strategies and the division of roles, responsibilities and expectations of membership have been developed and must be maintained.

Mechanisms and efforts to enlarge the network in the future are in place and must be implemented.

Face-to-face meetings between regional CSOs on a regular basis help to address structural and operational challenges of local and regional concern.

Finally, ongoing outreach to the press will continue in order to publicize and promote our efforts and successes and help to meet future funding requirements.

In addition to maintaining ongoing communication and interaction with the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict through their respective secretariat namely with the European Center for Conflict Prevention, strategic, collaborative partnerships with other organizations, networks and individuals at the local, national and global levels are not only an asset but also imperative for the continued growth of APCPHS.