

# News Bulletin

May 2020

**COVID - 19 IMPACT ON THE ARAB REGION:  
PROTESTS AND POST-CRISIS CONCERNS**

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## Regional Updates

With the global spread of COVID-19, many repercussions swayed the Arab region, particularly the economic and social levels. Despite the growing fragility and vulnerability of many segments of the society, Arab governments' response remains weak and utterly unresponsive to the painful social and economic reality experienced by most of the populations of the region.

### Renewed Popular Protests

As living conditions deteriorate and despite preventive measures to limit the spread of the virus, some countries in the Arab Region are beginning to witness the renewal of popular movements that emerged in 2019. Lebanon and Iraq for example saw a decline in freedoms and several human rights violations.

In Iraq, human rights activists and defenders renewed their calls to investigate past violations against Iraqi protesters during an [online briefing session organized by Iraqi al-Amal Association](#). Speakers urged the new Iraqi Prime Minister to revive investigations into abuses against demonstrators since October of last year. These have included kidnappings, assassinations, arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment and torture in official and unofficial prisons at the hands of government forces and armed militias affiliated with political parties. They also demanded compensation for families of martyrs, injured, and victims of excessive use of force and violence during the suppression of the demonstrations.

Ever since Iraqis went to the streets in October 2019 to demand the fall of the sectarian and partisan quota system, they have been met with severe repression by militias affiliated or identified with the authorities that take up arms outside the framework of the state. During the protests, snipers were deployed atop tall buildings in Baghdad and the provinces and targeted the protesters directly. Investigation committees were established

following pressure from the international authorities. The committees found out that some militias were affiliated with previous government agencies, such as the office of former Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi. Heavy-caliber tear gas was used and directed at the heads of demonstrators who sometimes got killed, in addition to heavy animal hunting rifles that were randomly directed at the demonstrators. Security forces, under cover of a hail of bullets, stormed the protesters' campsites, leaving behind dozens of martyrs and hundreds of wounded in various regions of Iraq. They also arrested the injured from hospitals. Many satellite news channels were attacked, and some were closed by the government.

The session addressed the participation of Iraqi women in the demonstrations under the slogans: "Your Daughters, O Homeland" and "My Voice is Revolution and My Right is Homeland," among others. They broke the stereotype of women in Iraqi society. They stood up for their political and national demands, as well as feminist issues, such as organizing massive rallies challenging tribal traditions. The militias and security forces used numerous methods to keep women out of the arenas, including spreading rumors of harassment to intimidate them. The session also touched on the exemplary role of unions, lawyers in the courts, and professors in disseminating the ideas of the uprising, disrupting official working hours, allowing students to participate. Finally, it lauded the students for maintaining momentum in the squares and organizing bold rallies, chants, and slogans.

Although some squares are empty today due to commitment to the quarantine, some protesters remain and are taking preventive measures. Several activities moved out of the squares, primarily to support poor families and publish health advice. After the partial closure was lifted, the protesters returned, mainly to

demand a new election law, accountability, and elections, demands that were postponed by the new government.

Regardless of its international obligations to respect rights and freedoms, suppression, repression, violations, and even assassinations have become the new norm. And therefore, confidence in the government has been lost. The loss of confidence in the government and its procedures stems from a long history of failed and repressive experiences, whose burdens are carried out by the current government. However, no severe or active investigation into any of the violations mentioned above has been carried out. Violations against Iraqi protesters carrying slogans like "I Want My Rights" and "We Want a Homeland" have already left 5,000 people with some level of disability, in addition to 800 martyrs and 25,000 injured.

The group demanded the formation of a new investigation committee with the needed integrity and impartiality and called for the participation of civil society organizations in its work. The committee should look into all the mentioned violations, many of which continue until today. In particular, it should investigate crimes involving the murder or disappearance of publicly known protesters and activists. Furthermore, the group appealed to the UN Human Rights Council to vote on establishing an independent investigative commission during its next session to support accountability in Iraq.

In Lebanon, renewed protests denounced repressive government policies, and several journalists and activists were called in for interrogation about exercising their freedom of expression. Demonstrators returned to the streets, calling for effective and bold measures to combat the impact of Covid-19, especially on the more vulnerable groups, such as workers in the informal sector, the private sector, the free professions, and foreign workers. The



economic situation in the country, witnessing volatile price increases and inflation of up to 50%, was also the subject of several protests. In Algeria, where demonstrations were suspended in compliance with lockdown and social distancing measures, [ANND's Civic Space Watch](#) registered an increase in judicial prosecution and convictions in the past two months. It was an indication of the political authority's exploitation of the crisis to settle its accounts with activists and other actors in the protest movement and to tighten its repressive grip on society. The authorities also imposed blatant restrictions on the free press. They shut down two online newspapers without warning during the last month and prosecuted and imprisoned several journalists. The Algerian authorities also decided to adopt urgent legal amendments that are expected to restrict the freedom of expression even further. The changes included the criminalization of so-called "acts that disrupt state security and public security...and national unity," in addition to criminalizing "the publishing or dissemination of fake news to disrupt public order and security through the media or technology." Several groups active on liberties expressed their concerns about these measures, which they say will further reduce the already marginal freedoms in the country.

### **Unemployment on the Rise: Vulnerability of Association in Morocco**

COVID-19 has had disastrous social effects, in particular work reductions and loss of jobs for millions of workers. As movement and economic activities stall due to the complete or partial closures of countries and private establishments, the world is expected to witness the cancellation of 6.7% of total work hours in the second half of 2020, equivalent to 5 million full-time jobs in Arab countries, [according to the ILO](#). Workers in civil society organizations are also at risk of losing their jobs, and they are

rarely included in government programs and facilities in this regard. According to an open letter to the Prime Minister by several organizations in Morocco, government measures do not take into account, clearly or explicitly, the situation of workers in the associative sector. The number of workers in the sector is estimated at over 40,000 people, without calculating part-time and fixed-term contract workers, consultants, or even the volunteers who must be mobilized in this period of the crisis. To make matters worse, civil society associations are not expected to benefit from measures taken by the social security fund. They are excluded from risk compensation, although such associations have been paying their social security contributions and fees according to the law, much like profit-seeking businesses.

Numerous associations operate through national or international funding with contractual deadlines that cannot be fulfilled under the current circumstances. The suspension of "all legal and regulatory deadlines" under Article 6 of Legal Decree 2-20-292 regarding the state of health emergency in Morocco does not necessarily apply to association financing contracts. This situation leads us to the following questions: Should employees be kept during the quarantine? How will their salaries be paid after the quarantine to complete the contractual obligations?

Negotiations with donors are also underway to review budget items to avoid the threat of unemployment in associations and the loss of valuable experience and technical knowledge, especially as Morocco needs all its potential and expertise to recover after the quarantine.

In this context, and considering its field experiences and proximity-based work, the signatory associations consider it necessary that they get involved in activating the national strategy to combat the pandemic and support families in need.





# How is COVID- 19 affecting Civil Society Organisations?

Zahra Bazzi, Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND)

## A Challenging Context for Civil Society

A lot is to be said around the implications of the COVID-19 on human rights and civil society work, however this article will focus on the impact of this crisis on advocacy and human rights organizations. In fact, the current COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated existing inequalities which civil society has been fighting and considering as main impediment to human rights and development.

[UN reports](#) shows that the impact of the crisis are disproportionately affecting women, people living in poverty situations, older persons, persons with disabilities, youth, indigenous peoples migrants and so many more. The implications of the crisis on inequalities and human rights require more efforts and engagement of civil society organizations, and civil society organizations (CSOs) are expected to do more with less, while they face severe resource and financial constraints.

Moreover, moments of disruption like these enable the spread of harmful agendas. Indeed, the executive roles and powers are extended, and policies are made and implemented to deal with the situation, while accountability mechanisms are put on hold. This is the case for civil society's accountability role as social distancing measures make some of civil society working tools irrelevant. Many CSOs have been forced to put planned activities on hold while others are endeavoring to shift their work online. More dangerously, the crisis provides a convenient motivation for governments to further incline [the balance of power in their favor](#). With emergency legislation, social distancing and quarantine measures, civil society is warning of the potential [curbing civic engagement and restricting fundamental rights](#), while demonstrations or protests are suppressed by such measures.

Additional challenges facing the advocacy work of the civil society during COVID-19 crisis are related to the difficulties to gain momentum for a cause, as media and public orientation are focused on the emergency. New Opportunities for Civic Engagement The current situation, whilst challenging for civil society, may indeed stimulate creativity and offer new opportunities for civic engagement.

Civil society can play a key role in providing inputs to support and inform governments on how to prioritize the needs of those who are at the biggest risks of being disproportionately affected by the crisis. As the UN experts have identified in their statement, these include "People with disabilities, older persons, minority communities, indigenous peoples, internally displaced people, people affected by extreme poverty and living in overcrowded settings, people who live in residential institutions, people in detention, homeless people, migrants and refugees, people who use drugs, LGBT and gender diverse persons – these and other groups need to receive support from governments." In addition, women are affected even more severely by the crisis, "who are already at a disadvantaged socio-economic position, bear an even heavier care burden, and live with a heightened risk of gender-based violence.

The current crisis may offer opportunities for CSOs to respond to some of the criticisms they have been receiving, through building broader participation with strong links to the communities in which they live and operate. This may also counter the tendency of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to be driven by donor demands and the need to secure funding.

Moreover, the current situation provides opportunities to engage with other types

of CSOs beyond NGOs, such as trade unions, social movements and professional associations (such as nurses unions). These different forms of CSOs often have good communication structures and can successfully engage different people in the monitoring and oversight of COVID-19 responses. Perhaps in the new post-COVID-19 order CSOs will have the chance to reaffirm their added value, and draw on their achievements, resources and expertise. Civil society should reassert its agenda of principles, and stimulate the strong community of activists that has been built up.

## Concluding Messages

In order to show their relevance and expand their role, CSOs involved in advocacy need to reassess their strategies and revisit their analyses and tactics. What was previously politically possible may now be impossible. The world is changing more quickly than ever. Advocacy teams should be able to continuously reassess changing contexts and always look for opportunities to transform existing systems with creative interventions. Finally, fostering networking and cooperation with different stakeholders is a necessity in such complicated situations because it allows exchange of knowledge and experience and enable learning about successful civic engagement initiatives.



## Post COVID - 19 Economic Policies

**Ahmad Awad, Phenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies – Jordan**

*This article was published in Arabic on 18 May 2020 in [al-Ghad online newspaper](#).*

No economic practitioner or expert can deny the fact that economic policies will not be the same following the COVID-19 crisis. This opinion is not limited to individual experts, decision-makers, or pundits. It also includes international and regional economic and financial institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and European Union and Asian financial and economic institutions.

While there is no disagreement about fundamental transformations in the mechanisms of global and national economies, the conflict soon arises concerning the nature of changes required in economic policies resulting from the COVID-19 crisis.

However, there is still hope that humanity will not miss another historic opportunity to make fundamental changes to the main characteristics of economic policies after the same opportunity was lost following the 2007/2008 financial crisis and the following years. The missed opportunity in the Arab Region came in the form of the Arab Spring, which put such (neoliberal) policies at stake. Significant economic and social disparities had appeared. Unemployment rose. Equality and justice were absent from health and education systems on all levels. Economic policies in most low and medium-income countries focused on several neoliberal criteria in their financial and monetary (extreme) austerity measures due to pressures from International Financial Institutions. Privatization of public facilities increased and included liberalizing markets from government restrictions, freeing up trade and prices, and unleashing the role of companies, especially major corporations. Austerity policies take the form of several government measures to reduce public spending and the state budget deficit. They often encompass fewer expenditures on citizens' essential services and rights, such as

healthcare, education, transportation, and so on. They include an end to government subsidies on some basic commodities, in addition to pressures on wages in the public and private sectors. Following the global economic crisis, which took place almost a decade ago, and the social protests around the world, including the first wave of the Arab Spring, many decision-makers realized the gravity of aggravating social disparity and absence of justice as a result of a few controlling the wealth of all societies.

Responding to the wave of widespread criticism of the various economic policies that led to the emergence of these social imbalances, the IMF - being the leading player in shaping and defining economic policies - incorporated new concepts in its documents and reports. The idea of comprehensive and inclusive economic growth for all became prominent.

IMF documents are beginning to include calls to combat social inequality, generate employment, expand economic participation, and other topics related to sustainable development. None of these concepts and calls, however, have been reflected in changes in economic policies the IMF still "imposes" on countries that sign an agreement for financial restructuring, adjustment, and "reform" programs. Fiscal and monetary policies remain as they were before these crises.

As mentioned before, there is an opportunity to be seized to redraw economic policies and review the process of taxation to make it more just and progressive on income and wealth. Taxes on consumption (sales) must also be reconsidered, and the "targeted" social protection programs must be reviewed to develop universal social protection systems and prevent more people from falling into poverty. They should take into consideration

the provision of fair and adequate wages for a decent life, the provision of comprehensive health care and high-quality public education, and a genuine focus on applying decent work standards.





## Bahrain and COVID - 19

Dr. Ghania al-Elewy, Bahrain Transparency Association – Bahrain

Bahrain confirmed its first COVID-19 case on 21 February 2020, a school bus driver arriving from Iran via Dubai. On 25 February, nine new cases were registered, and all flights to and from Dubai and Sharjah were suspended for 48 hours. A ban on travel to Iran was imposed, although more than 1,000 Bahraini citizens were there for spring break; Unfortunately, it became a sectarian issue for some. The situation deteriorated daily. Some deputies said that stranded Bahraini citizens should remain in Iran and were not welcome in their country. At the same time, travelers from European countries and some Arab countries arrived quickly and were not tested. Thus, the focus diverted to those returning from Iran, and the pandemic was not appropriately addressed inside the country. One case in point is migrant workers who live in overcrowded quarters and challenging conditions.

The situation quickly developed, and more cases were discovered as a result of mixing and socialization. Consequently, Bahrain closed all schools, kindergartens, and universities for two weeks to limit the spread. Flights to and from Iraq and Lebanon were suspended indefinitely. The Health Ministry announced mandatory medical tests on all citizens and residents who went to Iran in February. The numbers increased as tests became more available, especially among expatriate workers. Bahrain was ranked fourth globally in the rate of per capita infections, reaching 114.6 cases per million (twice the China average). On 3 May 2020, the National Campaign to Combat COVID-19 announced the results of testing on the Health Ministry's website, indicating 144,155 tests, 1,657 active cases, 1,656 stable cases, one intensive care case, 1,718 recoveries, and eight deaths. It should be noted that the vast majority of cases are concentrated among expats.

### Bahraini Government Response

- The government formed a committee headed by the Crown Prince, the Deputy Supreme Commander, and the First Deputy Prime Minister charged with establishing precautionary measures to combat COVID-19 and protect the health and safety of citizens and residents. It involved cooperation and coordination between all public institutions. It launched a BHD 4.3 billion (\$9 billion) financial and economic package to achieve sustainable development for citizens, sustain public programs, and coordinate with all concerned bodies to ensure the availability of food and other products in local markets. It oversaw the continued operations of hypermarkets, groceries, cold-storage facilities, and bakeries and assured every one of the stability of food reserves in the Kingdom. It aimed to prevent residents from rushing stores, hoarding and buying more than needed. The government announced an \$11.39 billion stimulus package to support the economy during the pandemic and cover water and electricity bills during April, May, and June.
- The government continued to implement and develop flexible and stimulating administrative policies to enhance efficiency, increase employee productivity, and assist them to reconcile between their jobs in the public or private sector and their family obligations. It supported the sustainability of women's participation in the labor market amidst the pandemic. The authorities also implemented and followed-up on measures contributing to removing obstacles in affected sectors and provide expert economic advice to support women in business who face

difficulties in addressing the challenges of the current situation.

- The government allocated two portfolios, one to support 950 taxi, public transport, bus, and truck drivers by BHD300 (\$800) for three months. The second portfolio supported 829 driving instructors for the same amount and period, provided they do not have a commercial register and are not benefiting from pensions.
- Health support: The Ministry announced that the absorption capacity for treatment and isolation covers everyone and that treatment is available free of charge for all existing cases for both citizens and expats. It responded to the request of some citizens and residents to obtain treatment in private hospitals. It began cooperating and coordinating with several private hospitals to provide treatment for citizens and expats, according to set criteria and conditions.

### Civil Society Organizations

Civil society clubs, charitable, feminist, professional, and religious associations quickly mobilized to combat COVID-19 and its physical, psychological, and educational impacts. Several campaigns were initiated, all in the interest of the country, including the establishment of support teams or joining public committees. They faced a lack of organization and wasteful duplication of activities. The following achievements, however, have been praised by officials:

- The associations expressed their pride in the patriotic spirit and the honorable community partnership that was manifested in all official and civil powers in Bahrain. It encompassed associations, clubs, youth centers, councils, and religious assemblies in standing up to this



challenge, consciously and in a responsible national spirit from all the people of Bahrain. The associations stressed their refusal to let the sectarian dimension interfere in a manner that goes against national interests.

- Families, the opposition, and international organizations called for the release of thousands of political prisoners in Bahrain. Activists launched a Twitter hashtag (#اطلقوا\_سجناء\_البحرين - #Release\_Bahrain\_Prisoners) at 19:30, which was picked up by thousands of Tweets in Bahrain, especially by families of political detainees. Several indicated that their loved ones suffer from psychological and physical ailments related to their imprisonment for several years.

## The Private Sector

- A popular campaign called “Fina Khair” was launched on Bahrain TV to collect donations supporting the fight against COVID-19. It hosted the president of the Royal Charity Organization, which gave the first donation to the National Committee to Combat Covid-19. Bahrainis, residents, national institutions, companies, banks, associations, organizations, and other components of society, the economy, and markets interacted with the campaign and provided financial and in-kind donations for a total amount at the end of the live broadcast of BHD 21,081,065 (\$56 million).
- However, the private sector also benefited from the situation on many levels:
  1. ○ A draft law was proposed to pay private-sector salaries for three months, starting in April 2020. The unemployment fund will pay the salaries according to constitutional measures and in line with the social insurance law.
  2. ○ Electricity and water bills for individuals and companies will be covered for three months, starting in April 2020, at an amount not exceeding the bills from the

same period last year. The government is required to restructure administrative expenditures in a manner that does not impact the state budget.

3. ○ Commercial companies were exempted from fees owed on renting government industrial lands for three months, starting in April 2020. Tourist establishments and facilities were exempted from tourism fees for three months, starting in April 2020. The size of the liquidity fund was doubled to reach BHD 200 million (\$530 million), the central bank’s loan facilities were increased, and the lending capacity raised to the equivalent of BHD 9.8 billion to allow the deferral of payments and the extension of additional financing.
4. ○ Commercial establishments were exempted from labor fees from April to June. They include visa fees and monthly renewals for workers and establishments.

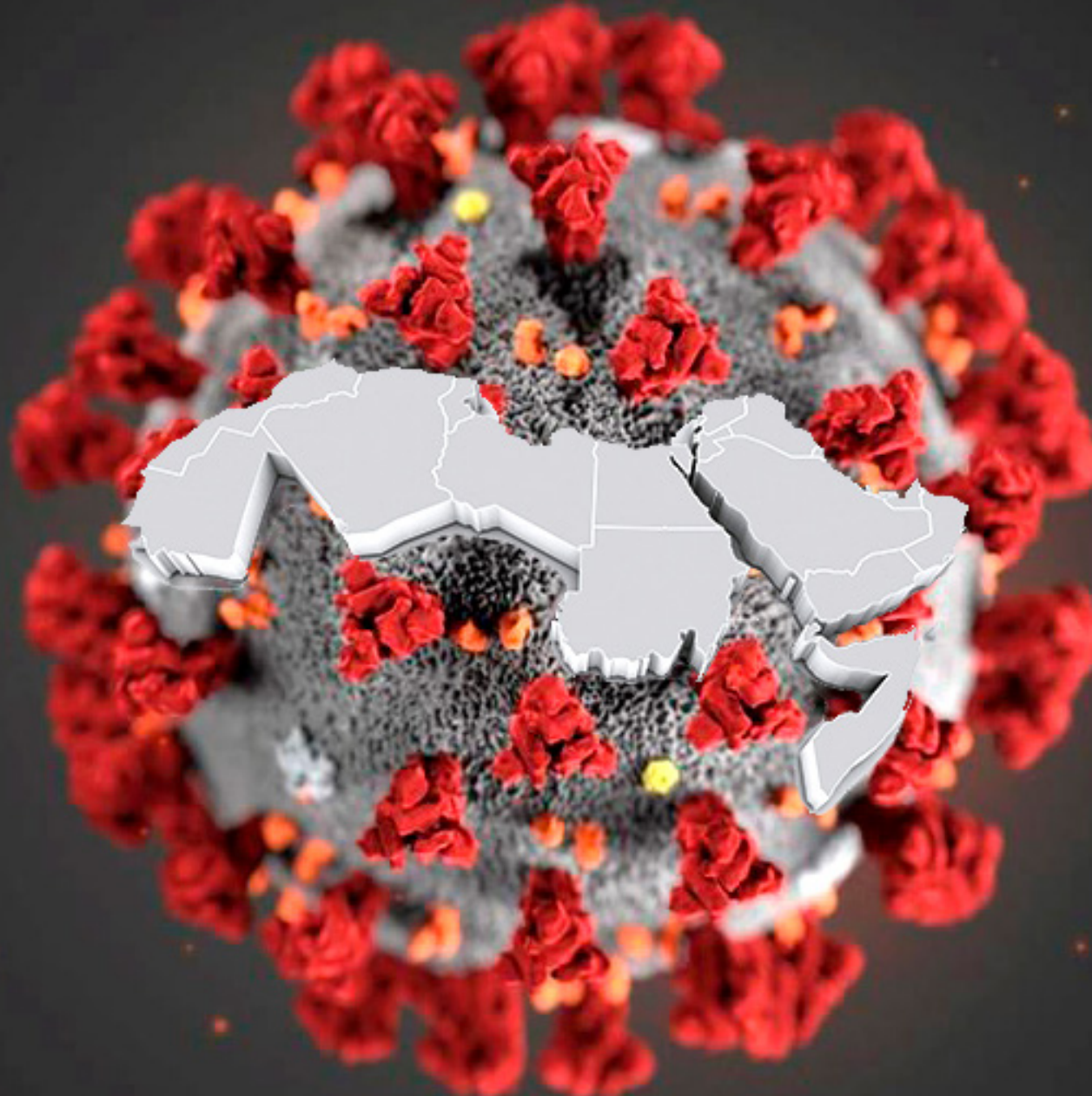
However, the private sector’s companies, banks, and investment firms exploited the government measures to combat the epidemic, without concern for the situation and its impact on citizens. It isolated itself from the general stand against the pandemic. Some of the publicity went too far in absolving itself from actual contribution, helping the state in this confrontation, and alleviating the burdens on citizens based on corporate social responsibility, especially of companies rooted in the market. Thus, legislation must be considered to commit private companies to a real application of the concept of social responsibility. Public authorities must be aware that the sector it had fattened up and pampered for so long has failed to assist in times of desperate need, showing its nature based on taking without giving.

## Future Challenges

The economic downturn is a source of concern for the people of the Gulf. It is linked both to the COVID-19 crisis and plummeting oil prices. They are expected to cause severe repercussions on the various areas of life in the region, most notably health, education, and infrastructure. Consequently, two significant concerns appear. The first is that the Gulf States might adopt austerity measures to reduce expenses and avoid a deficit in their budgets. The second relates to resorting to domestic and international borrowing through banks and the sale of bonds.











The Arab NGO Network for Development works in 12 Arab countries, with 9 national networks (with an extended membership of 250 CSOs from different backgrounds) and 23 NGO members.

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