



Conference

**Contentious politics in
the Middle East and
North Africa**

Wednesday, 8 March 2023

Chatham House, London

@CH_MENAP

CONTACT

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This conference seeks to assess what happened to the movements and agents involved in the Arab Spring uprisings and why, and second, show that these different forms of mobilization continue to be active despite the longevity of the status quo, conflicts, and authoritarian setbacks.

The conference brings together activists from across the Middle East to discuss their own experiences, and exchange views and lessons learned with peers from other Middle Eastern countries and the broader international community.

On the agenda:

- Formal political participation and change
- Informal politics
- Culture and contention
- Lebanon: cracking the status quo

Contentious politics in the Middle East and North Africa

The mass protests of the Arab Spring in 2010 initiated a wave of mobilization across the Middle East and North Africa which has lasted more than a decade and has taken many shapes: from formal political participation and informal politics to activism and cultural expression.

This conference is part of Chatham House's project on contentious politics in the Middle East and North Africa since the Arab Spring. The initiative seeks to question the current prevalent discourse depicting the Arab Spring as a series of failed revolutions, by examining the evolution and interaction of contentious actors in the region, from social movements and activists to the political regimes and ruling elites.

AGENDA

09.00 – 9.30 *Registration and refreshments*

09.30 – 10.45 **Session 1: Striving for change through formal political participation**

Formal political participation is an important channel that pro-reform activists and advocates in the MENA region have been using to push for political change. This panel reflects on participation in official political bodies in the context of working towards political change and reform, drawing on the individual experiences of the speakers. This is situated in the broader national and regional contexts in which these experiences are embedded. The panel aims to uncover lessons learned, cross-country comparisons, and future prospects for formal political participation as a tool of change.

Speakers

Rafat Al-Akhali, Fellow of Practice, Strategic Projects, Blavatnik School of Government

Hind Kabawat, Director of Interfaith Peacebuilding, Center for World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution, George Mason University (via Zoom)

Amr Salah, Instructor and PhD candidate, Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution, George Mason University

Elham Saudi, Co-Founder and Director, Lawyers for Justice in Libya

Chair: Hesham Sallam, Associate Director and Research Scholar, Program on Arab Reform and Democracy, Stanford University

10.45 – 11.15 *Refreshments*

11.15 – 12.30 **Session 2: The resilience of informal politics**

Political mobilization continues in the MENA region as people take to the streets and utilize other informal political means to call for reform and political change. Violent crackdowns, attempts at co-optation, and other means of suppression exercised by ruling regimes have not dented this mobilization. The panel draws on the experiences of the speakers to reflect on what is keeping mobilization going as a tool of public expression of dissent against all odds, lessons learned from national and regional contexts, and the link between formal and informal political engagement.

Speakers

Hayder Al-Shakeri, Research Associate, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

Chaima Bouhlel, Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

Asma Khalifa, Research Fellow and PhD Candidate, German Institute for Global and Area Studies

Shadi Sadr, Co-founder and Executive Director, Justice for Iran

Chair: Alaa Tartir, Director and Senior Researcher, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

AGENDA

12.30 – 13.45 *Lunch*

13.45 – 15.00 **Session 3: Culture and contention**

The art and culture domains have been important avenues for political expression since before the Arab uprisings. This panel reflects on artistic and cultural production in the MENA region as social and political commentary and as a tool of contention interrogating the status quo.

Speakers

Mohammad Al Attar, Playwright, Theatre Maker and Essayist

Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, Founder, Barjeel Art Foundation, Lecturer, Bard College Berlin; Fellow, Institute for Advanced Study Berlin

Jasmina Metwaly, Visual Artist and Filmmaker

Leila Sansour, Filmmaker; Founder, Open Bethlehem (via Zoom)

Chair: Lina Khatib, Director, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

15.00 – 15.30 *Refreshments*

15.30 – 16.45 **Session 4: Cracking the status quo: Lebanon as a case study**

Lebanon has been witnessing cycles of contention for almost two decades as citizens mobilize calling for reform, with demands escalating to reform and change of the political system. The ruling elite in Lebanon have been adept at keeping the political system in place, but there have been significant gains made by nascent independent political parties and civil society. This panel sheds light on these gains through reflections on the individual experiences of the speakers to show how pro-reform advocates are challenging the political status quo in Lebanon.

Speakers

Laury Haytayan, Middle East and North Africa Director, Natural Resource Governance Institute (via Zoom)

Michel Helou, Secretary General, Lebanese National Bloc

Diana Moukalled, Journalist; Co-founder and Executive Director of Daraj Media

Nizar Saghieh, Executive Director, The Legal Agenda

Chair: Farea Al-Muslimi, Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

16.45 – 18.30 *Networking reception*

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES



Rafat Al-Akhali

Rafat Ali Al-Akhali is a fellow at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, where he is the Convenor of the Council on State Fragility and the Global Engagement Lead for the International Growth Centre's State Fragility initiative. As a co-founder of DeepRoot Consulting, Rafat has been closely engaged in advising key stakeholders on political, economic, and development priorities in Yemen and has led and advised track II and track III initiatives in Yemen. Rafat previously served as Minister of Youth and Sports in the Government of Yemen (2014-15). Before being appointed as Minister, Rafat was leading the Policy Reforms team at the government's Executive Bureau for Acceleration of Aid Absorption and Support for Policy Reforms. Prior to joining the Yemeni government, Rafat has served as a Senior Consultant and Analyst for organizations such as PricewaterhouseCoopers and IBM in Canada, and was a member of the Accessions Division at the World Trade Organization in Geneva.



Mohammad Al Attar

Mohammad Al Attar is a Syrian playwright, theatre maker and essayist. At Damascus University, he completed a degree in English literature, followed by a degree in Theatrical Studies from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, Damascus. He then completed a master's degree in Applied Theatre at London's Goldsmiths University. His work takes place on the boundary between fiction and documentation. His plays like 'Withdrawal', 'A Chance Encounter', 'Could You Please Look into the Camera?', 'Antigone of Shatila', 'While I was waiting', 'Aleppo. A portrait of Absence', 'Iphigenia', 'The Factory' and 'Damascus 2045' were staged at various international theatres and festivals. Beside his writings for stage, Al Attar has written for magazines and newspapers with special focus on the Syrian uprising and the resulting conflicts since 2011.



Farea Al-Muslimi

Farea Al-Muslimi is a research fellow with the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House where he focuses on Yemen and the Gulf region. He is a co-founder and former chairperson of the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies (2014-2022). Al-Muslimi's writings and analysis on Yemen and the wider region have been published widely in international media.



Hayder Al-Shakeri

Hayder Al-Shakeri is a research associate with the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House. Prior to joining Chatham House, Hayder supported the Arab regional cooperation programme in the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining. Previous to this, he worked with the United Nations and Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency in Baghdad. He frequently provides commentary on Iraqi affairs on several platforms. Hayder holds a BA in Public Administration and Political Studies from the American University of Beirut (AUB) in Lebanon and an MSc in Development Studies from SOAS, University of London in the United Kingdom. He is also a fellow with the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC).

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES



Chaima Bouhlel

Chaima Bouhlel is an independent consultant to civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations, both local and international, focusing on local governance and decentralization, governance and rule of law, and citizen engagement, in Tunisia and Libya. Chaima was Programs Director at Barr Al Aman's team, a Tunisian CSO focused on the intersection of research and media as a way to form public policy. Prior to that, she was part of Al Bawsala's team, a Tunisian watchdog monitoring activities of parliament and municipalities, first as the Municipal Observatory Project Manager, and later, as the organization's president. Chaima is a former Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy non-resident fellow, and Ford Global Fellow. Chaima holds a B.A. in Molecular and Cellular Biology, with a Secondary in Government, from Harvard University



Laury Haytayan

Laury Haytayan is an oil and gas policy and geopolitics expert. She is the Middle East and North Africa director at the Natural Resource Governance Institute (NRGI) – an independent, international non-profit organization that provides policy advice, research and works on advocating for better managed resources and energy transition in oil rich countries. She played a leading role in establishing the MENA Oil & Gas Knowledge Hub in Lebanon in 2014. She has several publications, and she is a regular commentator on issues related to oil and gas in Lebanon and the East Med. She is the host of the Energy Espresso podcast – a solution-oriented podcast that answers questions on the status and future of energy and energy transition in Lebanon. She also teaches a course on the geopolitics of oil and gas in the East Mediterranean.



Michel Helou

Michel Helou obtained his MSc in Management from HEC Paris in 2013. He then joined Bain & Company, a leading management consulting firm, in Dubai. Michel moved to Beirut in 2015 to become the Executive Director of L'Orient-Le Jour, the oldest newspaper published in Lebanon, with a mission to modernize the group. For 6 years, Helou worked to restructure and turn the outlet into a digital-first media group, while fighting to maintain its independence and integrity. In February 2019, Helou took part in the relaunch of the National Bloc. In 2022, he ran for the parliamentary elections in the Baabda district and headed his list, securing 5,483 preferential votes. In November 2022, he was elected as the Secretary General of the National Bloc, succeeding Pierre Issa.



Hind Kabawat

Hind Kabawat holds a Masters in law and International Relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. She is the Director of the Interfaith Peacebuilding, Adjunct Professor at the Centre for World Religions and Diplomacy George Mason University. She is also President of TASTAKEL women organization for peace building and interfaith education. Hind is a former Visiting fellow at Harvard Law School Negotiation Program, former member of the High Negotiations Committee and former Deputy Head of the Syrian Negotiation Committee office in Geneva. She is a founding member of the Syrian Women's Political Movement and is on the Governing Board at Interpeace, Geneva. She is also Member of the Interfaith platform Kaciid for dialogue and coordination in the Middle East, and member of the international interfaith platform of Berghof Foundation.

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES



Asma Khalifa

Asma Khalifa is a Libyan activist and researcher who has worked on human rights, women's rights, and youth empowerment since 2011. She has spent her career contributing to the building of Libya's civil society and has worked on peacebuilding and conflict transformation in the country. For her efforts, Khalifa received the 2016 Luxembourg Peace Prize during the World Peace Forum in the European Parliament and, in 2017, she was named one of the "100 Most Influential Young Africans" by the Africa Youth Awards. Khalifa is also the co-founder of Tamazight Women's Movement, a think/do tank that is working on gender equality and research on the indigenous women of Libya and North Africa. She is also the co-founder of Khalifa Ihler Institute.



Lina Khatib

Dr Lina Khatib is director of the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House. She was formerly director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut and co-founding head of the Program on Arab Reform and Democracy at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. Her research focuses on the international relations of the Middle East, Islamist groups and security, political transitions and foreign policy, with special attention to the Syrian conflict. She is a research associate at SOAS, was a senior research associate at the Arab Reform Initiative and lectured at Royal Holloway, University of London. She has published seven books and also written widely on public diplomacy, political communication and political participation in the Middle East. Lina is a frequent commentator on politics and security in the Middle East and North Africa at events around the world and in the media.



Jasmina Metwaly

Born to a Polish mother and an Egyptian father, Jasmina Metwaly is a Cairo-Berlin-based artist and filmmaker, member of Mosireen collective and media archive 858.ma. She works in video and film, and has recently started drawing again. She likes to work with people and their histories, within different material including texts and archival material. Rooted in performance and theatre, her works focus on process-based practices, that have a social effect through which generates tension between participants and audiences. Taking a position of an onlooker/story-teller, she investigates the ways in which images transgress, how the role of the person behind the camera changes with stories, and how these impact collective memory. She is interested in how stories create stories blurring the preconceived boundaries between documentation and fiction.



Diana Moukalled

Diana Moukalled is a Lebanese journalist and documentary producer/director with almost 30 years of experience in media. She has covered hot zones in Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen and many more. Diana has shot more than 50 hours of documentaries, tackling socio-political issues in the MENA/Arab region and globally. She began her career in 1993 as a general news reporter at Future TV. In 1999, she launched a documentary series called "Bil Ain Almujaradah", covering hot political and social topics in conflict zones. In 2017, Diana along with two other founders launched Daraj.com; an independent media platform addressing controversial issues that are underreported in the Arab region. Diana is also a columnist and a media & gender trainer. She graduated from Lebanese University in 1991 (Faculty of Journalism).

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES



Shadi Sadr

Shadi Sadr is an Iranian human rights lawyer and executive director of London-based human rights NGO, Justice for Iran, which aims to eradicate impunity for human rights violators in Iran. Justice for Iran has had a leading role in using international accountability mechanisms and creating mechanisms to hold Iran's perpetrators accountable. Sadr was arrested twice in Iran for participation in peaceful protest. While living in exile, she was tried in absentia by the Revolutionary Court and sentenced to six years imprisonment and 74 lashes. Sadr was awarded several international prizes for her work in defending women who had been sentenced to death by stoning and other corporal punishments including Lech Walesa Award, Human Rights Tulip, Alexander Prize of Law School of Santa Clara University, and Women of Courage Award of the State Department. She has served on the judges panel of the international people's tribunals on Indonesia, China and Myanmar. Sadr is a PhD candidate at Leiden University.



Nizar Saghie

Nizar is a Lebanese lawyer and researcher who cofounded the Legal Agenda and has been its executive director since 2011. He is also a member of the editorial team of The Legal Agenda–Lebanon and The Legal Agenda–Tunisia. Nizar is a pioneer of the use of strategic litigation in Lebanon to advocate and defend causes related to civil, economic, and social rights and liberties. He is also a pioneer of social policymaking in relation to judicial independence, public property, the environment, marginalized groups, and public and union freedoms. Nizar has published research and helped draft bills on judicial independence, people who disappeared during the Lebanese civil war, people who use drugs, harassment inside and outside the workplace, workers' rights, and various other topics.



Amr Salah

Amr Salah is a Graduate Lecturer and PhD Candidate at the Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University. His research interests focus on Middle East's conflicts with particular emphasis on the Egyptian case. Before joining Carter School, Amr was a Research Fellow at Peace Research Institute Frankfurt. He has numerous contributions to Arab journals and newspapers, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, The National Interest, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and Freedom House. Amr cofounded and held senior positions in liberal opposition parties between 2007-15. He was also a member of the 50-committee that drafted the Egyptian constitution endorsed in a referendum in 2014 and was Assistant Secretary of the Freedoms and Rights Committee in the constitutional assembly.



Hesham Sallam

Hesham Sallam is a Research Scholar at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, where he serves as the Associate-Director of the Program on Arab Reform and Democracy. He is also a co-editor of Jadaliyya e-zine and serves on the editorial committee of the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP). He is author of *Classless Politics: Islamist Movements, the Left, and Authoritarian Legacies in Egypt* (Columbia University Press, 2022), co-editor of *Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World* (University of Michigan Press, 2022), and editor of *Egypt's Parliamentary Elections 2011-2012: A Critical Guide to a Changing Political Arena* (Tadween Publishing, 2013).

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES



Leila Sansour

Leila Sansour is a British/Palestinian filmmaker who has worked with Aljazeera and ITN news. She is best known for her two independent documentaries- Jeremy Hardy versus the Israeli Army and Open Bethlehem. Both films came out in UK cinemas to a high critical acclaim and were screened at the British parliament and the US congress. Leila was involved with several Palestinian public diplomacy projects, most notably Open Bethlehem which she founded in 2005 and which still has ambassadors all over the world. She is currently working on a new arts project with Sussex University called Planet Bethlehem. The project aims to create an immersive online space that will house a unique archive of Bethlehem and challenge the way we tell histories of cities.



Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi

Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi is an Emirati columnist and researcher on social, political and cultural affairs in the Arab Gulf States. He is also the founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation, an independent initiative established in 2010 to contribute to the intellectual development of the art scene in the Arab region. He has taught 'Politics of Modern Middle Eastern Art' at New York University, Yale University, Georgetown University, Boston College, The American University at Paris, Columbia University and currently at Bard College Berlin. Sultan is also currently a Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg, The Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin.



Elham Saudi

Elham Saudi is an international lawyer specialising in international human rights law and international humanitarian law. She is the co-founder and director of Lawyers for Justice in Libya, a non-governmental organisation working on promoting human rights and rule of law in Libya, including through advocacy, research and seeking accountability for human rights violations and international crimes. Elham is one of the experts who drafted Libya's first comprehensive law on the protection of women, which is due for consideration by the country's House of Representatives. Elham was a member of Libya's UN-led political process, the Libyan Political Dialogue, and was a judge on the panel presiding over the Aban Tribunal, the International Peoples' Tribunal on Iran's Atrocities of November 2019. She is a former visiting professor at the Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice.



Alaa Tartir

Dr Alaa Tartir is a Senior Researcher and the Director of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Programme at Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Tartir is also a Research Associate at the Geneva Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development, and Peacebuilding (CCDP), a Global Fellow at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), a Program and Policy Advisor to Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, and a Governing Board Member of The Arab Reform Initiative (ARI). Tartir publications can be accessed at www.alaatartir.com



CONTENTIOUS POLITICS SINCE THE 'ARAB SPRING'

Alongside regional thinkers and practitioners, Chatham House unpacks and challenges the problematic, and now dominant, narrative of failure of the 2010/2011 revolutions, by introducing a more nuanced analytical lens to understanding the evolution of change in the region and its contentious politics.

The project seeks to challenge such problematic narrative by interrogating the events in the Arab region since 2010 in a critical light.

The project is supported by the Carnegie Corporation New York.

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