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National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

Coordinating committee

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Anriette Esterhuysen (APC)
Flavia Fascendini (APC)
Emilar Gandhi (Facebook)
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Roxana Bassi (APC)

Editor

Alan Finlay

Assistant editor, publication production

Lori Nordstrom (APC)

Proofreading

Valerie Dee
Lynn Welburn

Graphic design

Monocromo
info@monocromo.com.uy
Phone: +598 2400 1685

Cover illustration

Matías Bervejillo

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A special edition of GISWatch, "Internet governance from the edges: NRIs in their own words", is being published as a companion edition to the 2017 GISWatch annual report. It looks at the history, challenges and achievements of NRIs, as recounted by their organisers. It is available at <https://www.giswatch.org>

Arab Internet Governance Forum (Arab IGF)

MISGUIDING MULTISTAKEHOLDERISM: A NON-GOVERNMENTAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE ARAB IGF

Jessica Dheere and Asser Khattab

SMEX

<https://smex.org>

Introduction

Despite auspicious beginnings, the evolution of the Arab Internet Governance Forum (IGF) over the last six years has left stakeholders around the region deeply skeptical of its future. Not only has the forum had little positive policy impact, but also its commitment to multistakeholderism and other key internet governance principles has been called into question, even by some of its founders. In mid-2016, this sentiment was reflected in an email circulated on a mailing list of internet governance stakeholders in the MENA region. The email bore the subject line “Shall we try to save the Arab IGF?”¹ The author had just heard that there would not be a 2016 forum and wondered whether pressure should be applied to host the event, or “potentially take it over altogether and aiming at hosting a smaller-scale more inclusive Arab IGF.”

Others on the thread – from the academic, civil society and technical communities – responded to the alarm, echoing that a 2016 forum was unlikely and lamenting that the Arab IGF was not keeping pace with other regional forums, such as in Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region, specifically with regard to multistakeholderism. A third respondent suggested hosting an alternative, dialogue-focused multistakeholder event in the absence of a full-fledged forum. Ultimately, the thread closed with a proposal to form a common position so that the group could “speak with one voice on the Arab IGF issue.” While a position was never formalised, the email exchange represents just one of several similarly themed conversations that have taken place in Arab internet governance circles since the end of the forum’s initial four-year mandate, which coincided with the last Arab IGF to date, in December 2015.

Against the backdrop of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, the depth of the sense of loss and disappointment these conversations expressed can be measured against the heights of enthusiasm felt when the Arab IGF was first launched in Kuwait in 2012. As one of the only regional spaces where people from government, civil society, the private sector, and academic and technical communities could come together on equal ground to discuss, explore and propose internet policy, the forum held great promise. It was viewed by many not just as an opportunity to bring the Arab perspective and culture to global internet governance, but also as a chance to usher in a more open, transparent, participatory model of governance in a region often referenced for its decades-long dictatorships, protracted conflicts, and the repression of human rights.

While some of that promise was realised, questions about the viability of an Arab IGF persist. In our analysis, drawn from primary documents, transcripts, Arab IGF chairpersons’ reports, interviews with key organisers and stakeholders from all sectors, and SMEX’s² participation in the forum and other processes, we propose that the Arab IGF has faltered as a result of its design as a lever to develop a unified Arab internet policy agenda, improvised processes, and divergent views of multistakeholderism, all of which gave governments disproportionate control over the forum.

Then, instead of providing a vent for criticism and an opportunity to address the intrinsic flaws, a two-year, top-down evaluation process has exacerbated the feeling among some stakeholders that the forum may never reflect the key internet governance principles of being open and transparent, inclusive, bottom-up, multistakeholder and non-commercial, which initially drew them to the Arab IGF. With the evaluation process complete and a new Arab IGF Charter on the horizon, many are asking not only

¹ Email to the now-defunct MENA Coalition mailing list received by the authors on 27 July 2016.

² SMEX (<https://smex.org>) is a Lebanese civil society organisation that conducts research and advocacy on digital rights in the Middle East and North Africa. SMEX representatives have participated in three of four Arab IGFs, hosted the 2016 Middle East and Adjoining Countries School of Internet Governance, and also proposed a session to debrief on the Arab IGF at the 2017 global IGF in Geneva.

“What’s next?”, but also whether a regional forum is in fact a means to achieve multistakeholder internet governance in the Arab world.

Policy, economic and political background

The Arab IGF defines the region it serves as the 22 members of the League of Arab States (LAS),³ the region’s primary intergovernmental organisation. These states extend across a band of northern Africa and western Asia, from Morocco to Yemen. More than 400 million people live in the region. Islam is the primary religion, and Arabic is the common language. Despite these shared traits, which can be overemphasised in international contexts where LAS states sometimes act on policy together, local culture and dialects, forms of government, levels and sources of wealth, current political challenges, and tolerance for diversity vary greatly from country to country.

Nonetheless, political and social structures across the region are pervasively patriarchal, and authoritarian and quasi-democratic regimes alike tend to enact and enforce public law and policy that restrict civil and political rights, despite commitments under international law. In many states, these laws and policies are developed with little to no public input. They are often justified by the need to preserve morality, Islam, public order, the reputations of power holders, relations with neighbouring states, and national security. Defamation is a criminal offence in every Arab state, and in many countries, criticism, even when constructive or true, can be considered an insult or false news, and thus, a crime. Actions by authorities that compromise rights are often justified with arguments for security.

With the advent of the internet to the region in the late 1990s and early 2000s and the proliferation of self-publishing and social media in the mid-2000s, Arab technologist-activists began to exploit the internet to expand the civic space available to counter these regimes. Their use of digital networks helped them build movements that led to the 2010-2012 revolutions and uprisings that later became known as the Arab Spring. Before long, this mass organising and expression was muted by governments across the region, which applied both legal and extralegal measures to circumscribe this new digital sphere.

The history of the Arab IGF and how the “marginalisation” of governments neutralised multistakeholder aspirations

Gaining legitimacy through multistakeholderism and the beginnings of the Arab IGF

The birth of the Arab IGF stretches back to the 2003 and 2005 World Summits on the Information Society and the first global IGFs, where an absence of Arab expertise and involvement in the global internet policy debate was noted.⁴ This absence spurred the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), one of five regional UN commissions “promoting cooperation and integration between countries in each region of the world,”⁵ to engage the LAS and its member countries to expand their awareness of the internet as a driver of development. Initially, the priorities of this engagement were to advocate for the .arab and برع top-level domains and more Arabic digital content.

To further this engagement, in 2009, ESCWA and the LAS established the Arab Dialogue on Internet Governance (ArabDIG).⁶ An ArabDIG report⁷ published later that year called for active participation by Arab countries, as well as a “unified position for Arab countries”, in the global internet governance debate.⁸

Building on this report, in 2010, the ArabDIG presented a regional roadmap⁹ for internet governance. This roadmap set a three-stage process (conceptualised in Figure 1) for developing a regional approach to internet governance and was meant to serve as a “guideline for decision- and policy-makers in the Arab countries.” Stage 1 was the roadmap. Stage 2 consisted of guidelines for implementation of the roadmap and monitoring progress.¹⁰ Stage 3 anticipated a regional plan of action that would be adapted through the creation of aligned, state-led national action plans.¹¹ The roadmap culminated in a call for Arab stakeholders¹² to join the process. The call also explicitly referred

3 The states are: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Since 2011, Syria’s membership has been suspended.

4 ESCWA. (2009). *Internet Governance: Challenges and Opportunities for the ESCWA Member Countries*. <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/internet-governance-challenges-and-opportunities-escwa-member-countries>

5 <https://www.unescwa.org/about-escwa>

6 <https://www.unescwa.org/sub-site/ArabDIG>

7 ESCWA. (2009). Op. cit.

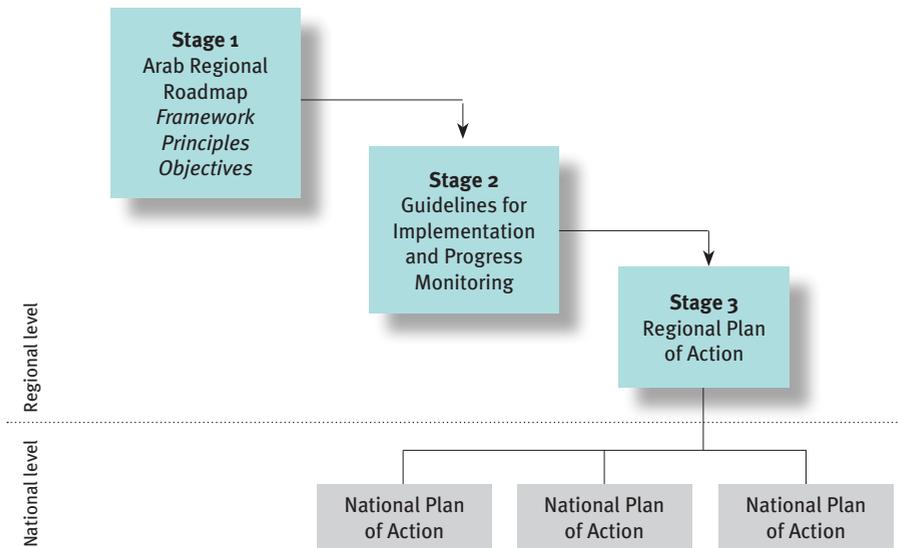
8 Ibid.

9 ESCWA. (2010). *Arab Regional Roadmap for Internet Governance: Framework, Principles and Objectives*. <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/arab-regional-roadmap-internet-governance-framework-principles-and-objectives>

10 The six subprogramme areas are institutional empowerment, critical internet resources, access, cultural and linguistic diversity, security and privacy, and openness.

11 ESCWA. (2010). Op. cit.

12 css.unescwa.org/ib/ictd/1301/16.pdf

FIGURE 1.**Three-stage process for developing a regional approach**

Source: ESCWA. (2010). *Arab Regional Roadmap for Internet Governance: Framework, Principles and Objectives*. <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/arab-regional-roadmap-internet-governance-framework-principles-and-objectives>

to the intent to establish a “future regional Internet governance mechanism to be implemented in the form of an Arab IGF.”¹³ The Arab IGF was where states could develop a shared vision for internet governance, without which, it was cautioned, they could lose influence in developing internet policy at the international, regional, and even local levels.¹⁴ The roadmap also stated that “Arab countries must ensure that all stakeholders’ needs, including the specific requirements of the region’s varied communities, are taken into consideration in the process of Internet governance.”

In early 2012, ESCWA and the LAS hosted a conference and public consultation in Beirut that laid the groundwork for the initial mandate of the Arab IGF, which was to last until 2015. At the meeting,¹⁵ 68 participants from 14 countries and all stakeholder groups shaped the goals, operational structures, and funding mechanisms for the Arab IGF. The LAS and ESCWA would lead the process (see Figure 2) as a team known as “the umbrella organisations”. The

National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority in Egypt¹⁶ was appointed as secretariat. From 2013 onward, the umbrella organisations and the secretariat together were called the Executive Bureau of Joint Coordination (EBJC). The umbrella organisations, and later the EBJC, would choose the host country and the members and chairs of the Arab Multistakeholder Advisory Group (AMAG), which like the global-level MAG was tasked with creating the forums’ programmes through a session proposal and review process.

Like the roadmap, the Beirut consultation highlighted the need for a multistakeholder approach, citing “that a multi-stakeholder, bottom-up approach had been used for the past 15 years in the establishment of internet management organizations in the Arab region and Africa.”¹⁷ Discussions also touched on a “participatory model for community involvement in policy making” and the idea of “the citizen becom[ing] a citizen of Internet,” an idea that had gained currency, particularly in internet-savvy communities, during the Arab Spring.

The meeting culminated in “an outcome letter which outlined the Arab IGF process as a

¹³ ESCWA. (2009). Op. cit.

¹⁴ Ibid.

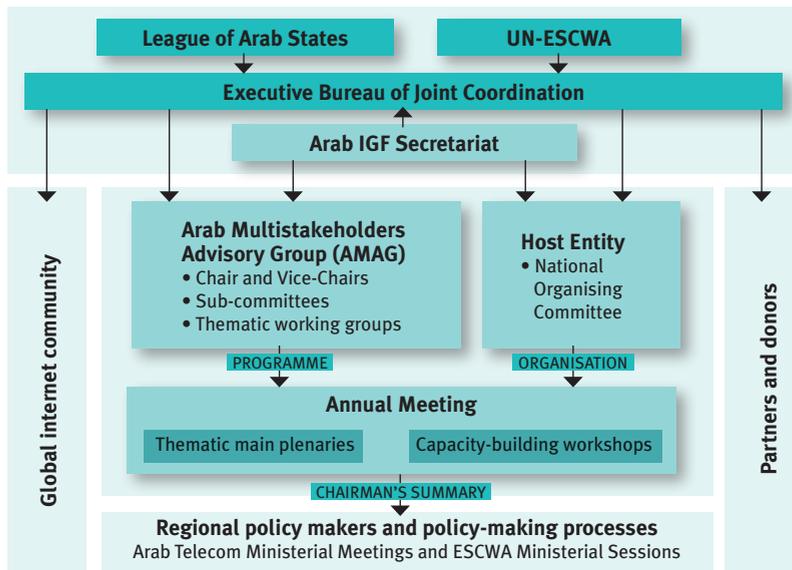
¹⁵ ESCWA. (2012). Conference and Public Consultations to Establish the Arab Internet Governance Forum. <https://www.unescwa.org/events/conference-and-public-consultations-establish-arab-internet-governance-forum>

¹⁶ www.tra.gov.eg/en

¹⁷ ESCWA. (2012). Op. cit.

FIGURE 2.

Organisational structure of the Arab IGF



Source: <https://www.unescwa.org/sub-site/ArabDIG>

decentralized platform for inclusive policy consultations that includes all stakeholders.”¹⁸ The letter was endorsed the next day by the Executive Bureau of the Arab Telecommunications and Information Council of Ministers at the LAS. Further, the LAS “commended the initiative [...] and called upon Arab countries to actively participate in the process.”¹⁹ The Arab IGF was born.

Thus far, every step of the process had in some way addressed the need for input from diverse stakeholders, signalling that there would be a commitment to multistakeholderism in the Arab internet governance process. Multistakeholderism, which says that all interested sectors can have not only equal representation but an equal voice, is the foundation of internet governance. Governments must have understood that it was the key to a global process which they wanted to join and influence. Further, if the governments had not expressed such a commitment at the outset, it is hard to imagine that the forum would have gained the needed traction among other sectors. Still, it was notable to have secured such a commitment to stakeholder diversity and input from governments in the region.

Even Saudi Arabia, which categorically rejects the principle of multistakeholderism, did not oppose moving forward.²⁰ Other governments went along, confident that with ESCWA and the LAS at the helm, they would be consulted on the “need and nature”²¹ of the forum as it evolved.

Government worries would have also been allayed by the fact that, unlike the global IGF, the Arab IGF was not conceived simply as a “new forum for multistakeholder policy dialogue” but rather as a tool “to operationalise the Arab internet governance roadmap,”²² which had governments’ support and called for a shared vision of internet governance in the Arab region. At the Beirut consultation, for instance, “[p]articipants emphasized the need for Governments to reach a common position on issues at the international level, especially considering the responsibilities at the national level.”²³

The subordination of the Arab IGF within a broader, government-centred process impeded it from realising its potential as a multistakeholder space. Its association with the roadmap as a space

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Interview with ESCWA Chief of ICT Policies Section Ayman El Sherbiny, 4 October 2017.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Interview with Ayman El Sherbiny; ESCWA. (2012). Op. cit.

²³ ESCWA. (2012). Op. cit. p. 11

for achieving consensus on the direction of internet policy enabled governments to assert control over its design, implementation and outcomes. The Beirut meeting reinforced this sense of prerogative. For instance, 49 of the meeting's 68 participants were from governments and the umbrella organisations.²⁴

Even more striking was the makeup of the core organising team establishing the Arab IGF, the intergovernmental bodies ESCWA and the LAS, which in the words of one stakeholder "are rather tied up with connections to governments, making it the single most dominant stakeholder to appease."²⁵ Current IGF guidelines strongly recommend that the core organising team consist of representatives from "at least three different stakeholder groups, with a goal to move to inclusion of all stakeholder groups over time (civil society, government, private sector, technical community)."²⁶ The meeting also recommended "mandating that the secretariat work through the Information and Communication Technologies departments in the Governments of Arab countries."²⁷

While in retrospect the disproportionate influence of governments may seem clear, at the time, the development of the Arab IGF raised the exciting prospect of a participatory dialogue on internet governance in a region that seemed to be re-making itself through the internet. Participants in the process cited the impact of internet governance on all aspects of life and "emphasized public engagement in formulating Internet policies" and "effective methods for engaging the public, youth and women in the Arab IGF initiative."²⁸ In addition, there was an understanding among many stakeholders that government participation was not just desirable but essential to the success of the forum.²⁹ As a result, the Arab IGF process had strong support from the emerging internet governance community, who began to mobilise to launch the first edition in Kuwait later that year.

From Kuwait to Algiers

More than 300 people attended the inaugural meeting of the Arab IGF in Kuwait in October 2012.³⁰ The forum, which was hosted by the Kuwait Information Technology Society (KITS)³¹ with the "blessing"³² of the Kuwaiti government, addressed issues of access and content, youth, openness, privacy and security, and critical internet resources.³³ In a session about the event at the 2012 global IGF in Baku, Azerbaijan,³⁴ panellists described the meeting as having generally exceeded expectations in terms of numbers of attendees and sessions proposed, as well as the diversity of stakeholders, transparency, and openness to fostering discussion. Civil society panellist Hanane Boujeimi called the event "quite fruitful", noting that it provided "a lot of room to initiate discussions" on freedom of expression and access to information, for example.³⁵

Still, there was room for improvement. Boujeimi highlighted that there was only "a little bit of representation from civil society." (Stakeholder breakdowns were not published in the chairperson's report.)³⁶ Christine Arida, a representative from Egypt's National Telecommunications Regulatory Agency, expanded on this point, calling for more awareness raising among youth and civil society actors who are "users of the internet" and not necessarily part of the "classical internet community".³⁷ The session also highlighted the need for capacity building on internet governance among all stakeholders and mechanisms for mutual exchange on internet policy between the Arab IGF and global IGF.

Five years later, stakeholders from all sectors continue to remember the Kuwait meeting as well organised, multistakeholder, and reflecting acceptable levels of transparency, openness and inclusion.³⁸ Despite the auspicious start in Kuwait, however, the commitment to multistakeholderism and other key IGF principles seemed to recede at the October 2013 forum in Algiers.³⁹

24 Two of the four civil society representatives were from the Arab Administrative Development Organization (<https://www.arado.org>), a "specialised organisation affiliated with the League of Arab States." SMEX was invited to this meeting, but did not attend.

25 Email exchange with Senior Lecturer at Södertörn University and ISOC Trustee Walid Al-Saqqaf, 15 September 2017.

26 IGF Secretariat in Collaboration with the IGF Initiatives. (2017). *IGF Initiatives: A toolkit to assist communities in establishing the IGF initiatives*. <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/nris-toolkit-how-to-start-your-igf-initiative>

27 ESCWA. (2012). Op. cit.

28 ESCWA. (2012). Op. cit.

29 Interview with technical sector stakeholder and member of the Technical Cooperation Working Group Chafic Chayya, 22 September 2017.

30 <https://www.unescwa.org/sub-site/ArabDIG/2012-2015>

31 www.kits.org.kw

32 El Sherbiny.

33 Arab IGF. (2012). *Chairman's Report*. <https://www.intgovforum.org/cms/2013/Arab%20IGF%20Chairman%20Report.pdf>

34 friendsoftheigf.org/session/347

35 Ibid.

36 Arab IGF. (2012). Op. cit.

37 friendsoftheigf.org/session/347

38 Interview with ICANN Stakeholder Engagement Coordinator of the Middle East Fahd Batayneh, 19 September 2017; email exchange with Walid Al-Saqqaf; interview with Middle East Regional Director for the Internet Society Salam Yamout, 21 September 2017.

39 Ibid.

The Algerian government pulled out all the stops to host the event, even refurbishing the long-disused Palais des Nations for the forum. But several stakeholders remarked that Algeria was a curious choice. Internet penetration in Algeria was estimated at just 16.5% in 2013,⁴⁰ but more important, the regime was known to monitor “the activities of political and human rights activists on social media sites such as Facebook,” where one critical post could lead to arrest.⁴¹ As the event neared, the preparation and hosting of the forum drew criticism from stakeholders in several sectors, as it became clear that the Algerian government had influenced the forum programme, “even going so far as to object to specific discussion topics and veto particular speakers.”^{42, 43}

Despite these reservations, the forum attracted an impressive 800 participants from 30 countries, 18 of them in the Arab region.⁴⁴ The attendees included five Arab ministers of telecommunications⁴⁵ and other high-level government officials. Nonetheless, the departure from the Kuwait forum was clear. “The Algerian government was, more or less, the star of the show – running and hosting the conference, taking part in every discussion with well-defined messaging, and guiding the general feel of the forum,”⁴⁶ wrote a Tunisian civil society participant soon after the forum. She also noted the “stark absence of local representation” among civil society and youth,⁴⁷ though the private sector was well represented and the event “fostered good discussion, particularly in the realm of Internet freedoms and absent infrastructure.” Stakeholder breakdowns were not published in the Algiers chairperson’s report.

Several observers also expressed concerns about the high levels of surveillance of the forum and its participants⁴⁸ as well as apparently choreo-

graphed interventions by Algerians in the audience that reinforced the government’s paternalistic approach to internet policy – “A state should monitor its citizens because it protects them the way that parents do their children,” was one such refrain.⁴⁹ In addition, representatives of the Algerian government complained about activists calling out ministers and countries by name, challenging their human rights records.⁵⁰ According to several accounts, one Algerian woman was escorted out of a session after asking a question directly to an Algerian public official.⁵¹

In the wake of these eruptions, an LAS representative suggested that there should be a code of ethics to govern how Arab IGF participants can speak to panellists at the forum.⁵² Then, on the third day, a security officer stood in front of SMEX executive director Mohamad Najem in an attempt to prevent him from being videotaped or photographed as he read an open letter from civil society.⁵³

In Algiers, the tensions between the idea of multistakeholderism and its implementation began to metastasise.⁵⁴ Up until Algiers, “there was initially a sense of optimism that the different stakeholders could have an equal level of influence in setting the agenda.”⁵⁵ With this forum, that hope started to recede. A line began to emerge between governments and other stakeholders, creating a kind of binary stakeholderism.

Compounding the problem, in the two succeeding forums, government participation declined. They complained of being “marginalised”⁵⁶ with 20% to 25% of attendees – which would constitute full representation among four or five stakeholder groups – while the proportion of non-governmental participants was between 70% and 75%.⁵⁷ Yet even as the two succeeding forums in Lebanon – often considered the region’s freest country – provided more space for non-governmental stakeholders to advance their issues and confront public officials,⁵⁸

40 www.internetworldstats.com/af/dz.htm

41 U.S. Department of State. (2014). *Algeria 2014 Human Rights Report*. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/236804.pdf>

42 El Dahshan, M. (2013, 20 November). Arab Netizens Pay a Visit to Algeria’s Police State. *Foreign Policy*. foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/20/arab-netizens-pay-a-visit-to-algerias-police-state/

43 El Sherbiny.

44 Arab IGF. (2013). *Chairman’s Report*. www.igfarab.org/EnCurrentMeetings.jsp?meeting_ID=3

45 Ibid.

46 Ben Hassine, W. (2013, 25 October). Second Arab Internet Governance Forum - Lack of Stakeholder Participation a Priority to be Remedied. *SMEX*. <https://smex.org/second-arab-internet-governance-forum-lack-of-stakeholder-participation-a-priority-to-be-remedied/>; Al Saqqaf; Batayneh; Yamout.

47 Interview with Access Now MENA Policy Analyst Wafa Ben Hassine, 15 September 2017.

48 Batayneh.

49 Ibid.

50 El Sherbiny.

51 Al-Saqqaf.

52 El Sherbiny.

53 Entry in a shared, private diary between Algeria Arab IGF participants.

54 Al-Saqqaf; Batayneh; Ben Hassine; Yamout.

55 Al-Saqqaf.

56 El Sherbiny.

57 Ibid.

58 Civil society representatives organised at least three workshops that approached internet governance from a rights-based perspective, including: “Between Protecting Rights of Access and Openness Online and Combating Extremism”; “The Continuous Attacks on Online Activism by Various Governments in the Region”; and “Digital Citizens and Digital States: Protecting Civil and Political Rights and Responsibilities in [sic] Internet Age”.

the participation from governments declined. The early optimism about the forum had been significantly, perhaps irreparably, compromised.

Ad hoc processes

While the 2012 Beirut consultation broadly defined the structure of the forum and the roles and relationships between the umbrella organisations, the secretariat, the AMAG and the host, the finer details about how the forum would be run were largely improvised on an as-needed basis.⁵⁹ ESCWA wanted to base the terms of reference for hosts, for example, on those developed for the international IGF, but learned that these terms were confidential, or “black box”.⁶⁰ The umbrella organisations wanted to adopt “a more transparent approach” and developed the following process: They asked entities interested in hosting the forum to submit an expression of interest, after which they would receive a full terms of reference and could submit a complete application. Then applications would be considered by the umbrella organisations based on a number of criteria, including the ability to provide security since it was a UN event. The selection process, however, was not as rigorously guided.

For example, for the 2013 forum, applications to host were received from four applicants: Lebanon, Algeria, one from the Moroccan government, and one from Moroccan civil society. The umbrella organisations recruited a subgroup of the AMAG to choose the host country. The subgroup did not include citizens of the countries in contention. A meeting was held to select the host, but in the end a decision did not have to be made. First, Lebanon withdrew on the pretext that the first forum was held in the eastern part of the region, so it was North Africa’s turn. Next, the Moroccan civil society organisation deferred to its government, and pledged to work with it if it was chosen. This left Morocco and Algeria in contention. Ultimately, the Moroccan government declined the opportunity in favour of Algeria, precisely because Algeria did not have the requisite experience, so it would be a way to introduce internet governance to “a closed country with an open-minded minister of posts and telecommunications.”⁶¹

Recruitment processes and the terms of reference for the AMAG were also improvised, and determined by the umbrella organisations on an ad hoc basis. Stakeholders mentioned a lack of transparency in selecting members and a lack of clarity

with regard to “what the duties and responsibilities were.”⁶² For instance, the chairperson of the AMAG was the same for the first two years; in successive years, the chair was still appointed by the umbrella organisations, even after a “secret ballot” process was held asking for input.⁶³

To some degree, the disagreements at the Algiers forum and later criticism can be traced to such ad hoc processes, which allowed for very little accountability to the wider multistakeholder community. The Algiers forum had left everyone dissatisfied. Civil society felt muted, while the LAS and its member governments asserted that, as hosts of the forum, they should have influence over the programme.

Going forward, the umbrella organisations tried to bridge this growing divide by rewriting the terms of reference for both the host countries and the AMAG to balance influence between them and to avoid future conflict. While the AMAG would be responsible for the forum programme, host countries would be able to appoint the session chairs. To avoid a repeat of the Algerian situation, the chair of the AMAG could not be from the host country government.⁶⁴

The clarification of the terms of reference helped set clearer expectations. Still, the processes by which hosts and AMAG chairs and members were selected remained ad hoc, in the hands of the government-dominated EBJC, not always merit-based, and less than transparent, making it difficult for stakeholders on the outside to gauge whether they adhered to the key IGF principles.

The host selection process for the next two forums was further complicated by the receipt of fewer applications. This was partially the result of the tensions created in Algiers and partially because of two other information technology meetings that would take place that year: the World Congress on Information Technology (WCIT) in Dubai⁶⁵ and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Plenipotentiary in Busan.⁶⁶

The cost to host the forum may have also been a factor, given the estimated USD 500,000 to USD 800,000 price tag.⁶⁷ By mid-year, there was no willing host and some people recommended cancelling the 2014 forum.⁶⁸ Instead, ESCWA, after consulting the AMAG and reluctant to “break the enthusiasm

62 Yamout; Al Saqqaf.

63 El Sherbiny.

64 El Sherbiny.

65 <https://www.itu.int/en/wcit-12/>

66 <https://www.itu.int/en/plenipotentiary/2014>

67 El Sherbiny.

68 Ibid.

59 El Sherbiny.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

and the stamina” for the Arab IGF, scrambled to establish a financial mechanism to support the forum⁶⁹ and began fundraising on day zero of the sixth IGF annual meeting in Istanbul, less than three months before the planned November event.⁷⁰ Thus, ESCWA became the official host of the third Arab IGF in Beirut.⁷¹

Ogero, Lebanon’s state-run telecom operator, contributed to the supporting fund as a strategic partner, but because the chair of the AMAG was president of the Lebanese Telecom Regulatory Authority, under the new terms of reference, Lebanon could not be the official host.

Despite the uncertainty and unorthodox preparations leading up to the first Beirut forum, the voice of civil society was amplified, owing to both the relative openness of Lebanon with regard to civil liberties as well as the presence of internet rights defenders on the AMAG. In addition, groups of local, regional and international civil society organisations⁷² worked together to stage several side events before and during the forum. One group of more than 40 “civil society organizations, activists, academics, technologists, and human rights advocates who work towards the realization of an open, accessible, and safe Internet” jointly developed a civil society statement⁷³ that was read at the closing session of the IGF, this time without interference. The statement discussed the plight of freedom of expression and detainees in the region, enumerated threats to online privacy, asserted access to the internet as a human right, and demanded access to information.

The third forum drew 530 attendees from 20 Arab countries, about one-third less than at the Algiers forum. Stakeholder participation was reported as 33% government, 20% civil society, 18% private sector, 13% tech community and academia, 8% international and regional organisations and 8% other.⁷⁴ There was still significant room for improvement in inclusivity, however, with gender distribution reported by one attendee at 72% men, 28% women.⁷⁵ Of 17 speakers on the first-day ple-

naries, she counted only one woman and “not a single civil society speaker.”

By mid-2015, there were no offers to host the final forum of the initial mandate, a sharp turnaround from two years earlier when governments were clamouring for the opportunity.⁷⁶ In addition, international internet governance organisations, including the Internet Society (ISOC),⁷⁷ Réseaux IP Européens Network Coordination Centre (RIPE-NC-C)⁷⁸ and Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN),⁷⁹ which had helped fund the forum in earlier years, had also begun to distance themselves, on the basis that the Arab IGF was not adhering to the basic principles of internet governance and was not moving in the right direction. Ultimately, in the absence of any other willing applicants, the Lebanese Ministry of Telecommunications hosted the 2015 forum.⁸⁰

Impact and evaluation of the original mandate

The 2015 Arab IGF in Beirut was the last forum covered by the initiative’s original 2012-2015 mandate and the final forum to date. The chairman’s report counted 720 attendees from 28 countries, of whom 27% were from the public sector, 21% from civil society, 6% from academia, and 23% from the private sector.^{81, 82} Nevertheless, said one attendee, civil society representatives “had little presence in the main sessions.”⁸³ Instead, as observed the year before, “[t]he plenaries were mostly composed by government and internet providers’ representatives, whose concerns – cybersecurity, financial issues – dominated the programme.” She also lamented the “all-male panels”, but noted that the issue was addressed by many people both on-site and online, and that “very little attention was paid to rights in general, and to gender rights in particular.”⁸⁴

Before the forum closed, ESCWA and the LAS announced the launch of AIGF2020, an initiative to evaluate the four IGFs that also halted further Arab IGF events until the stock-taking process was complete.⁸⁵ According to the announcement, AIGF2020 “aims to analyse and develop the Arab IGF process

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Arab IGF. (2015). *Chairman’s Report*. www.igfarab.org/En/ArabiGF2015.jsp

72 Among them SMEX, 7iber.com, Association for Progressive Communications, Web We Want, Electronic Frontier Foundation and Global Voices Advocacy.

73 <https://smex.org/statement-from-participants-of-arabifg>

74 Arab IGF. (2014). *Chairman’s Report*. www.igfarab.org/En/ArabiGF2014

75 Ben Youssef, D. (2014, 3 December). Arab IGF III: What we will remember. *Nawaat*. <https://nawaat.org/portail/2014/12/03/arab-igf-iii-what-we-will-remember/>

76 El Sherbiny.

77 Yamout.

78 Chayya.

79 Batayneh.

80 Sherbiny.

81 Arab IGF. (2015). Op. cit.

82 Email from ESCWA research assistant at the ICT Policies Section Zahr bou Ghanem, 5 October 2017.

83 Nachawati Rego, L. (2015, 22 December). The best and worst of the Arab IGF 2015. *APC*. <https://www.apc.org/en/blog/best-and-worst-arab-igf-2015>

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

in its second mandate that could extend until 2020.”⁸⁶ The initiative was also billed as a response to stakeholder concerns, among them that the forum was not adequately multistakeholder-driven. The review process was cited as “in line with global IGF practice.”⁸⁷

A representative of Ogero explained the rationale for the pause by saying that “the two umbrella organizations decided not to hold any annual meeting until they have put an end to all the issues people were criticizing. Many had said that the Arab IGF had veered off its course, so the year 2016 was dedicated to correct this path.”⁸⁸ Specifically, the AIGF2020 goals were to:

- Analyse the achievements of the first mandate of the Arab IGF process (2012-2015) with regard to the targets of the 2010 Roadmap on Internet Governance.
- Assess the impact of the Arab IGF on internet governance policies in the Arab region.
- Discuss challenges that faced the first mandate.
- Propose enhancements for developing the second version of the Arab internet governance roadmap as well as the second mandate of the Arab IGF, to be geared towards implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁸⁹

To many stakeholders, however, the evaluation process repeated the forum’s missteps, reinforcing prevailing perceptions of the disproportionate influence of government stakeholders, a commitment to multistakeholderism in name only, and a lack of transparency perpetuated by ad hoc decision making that ultimately prevented broader participation and accountability.

Several long-time stakeholders expressed reservations about the means by which the working group tasked with evaluating the Arab IGF process was formed. The AIGF2020 provided for the creation of an expert, multistakeholder Technical Cooperation Working Group (TCWG).⁹⁰ Members of this group would consist of internet governance experts identified by Arab governments and “other stakeholders from the broader Arab internet governance community.”⁹¹ That is, the members would

be recommended by governments and appointed by the intergovernmental ESCWA and LAS. Further, it established that “the umbrella organizations will lead all the activities of the [AIGF2020] initiative,” including:

- Forming the TCWG and calling for its meeting.
- Securing a virtual platform for internal working group communications that includes links to previous forum websites and hosting parties, “to increase collaboration and discussion” among the stakeholders.
- Welcoming any collaboration with sponsors who would like to help and assist the initiative.⁹²

Not only would ESCWA and the LAS control the selection of the members of the working group, but the TCWG meetings and their intersessional communications would be inaccessible to the vast majority of the Arab internet governance stakeholders. Such a process directly contravenes at least three of the five key IGF principles: being open and transparent, inclusive, and bottom-up. In addition, it ignores the global IGF guidance that “decisions are reached based on public consultations with different stakeholders and community members.”

Of the 25 people appointed to the working group, 17 were government representatives, some of whom had never participated in an Arab IGF. Two were from the private sector, two were from international internet organisations (ICANN and RIPE-NCC), three were from universities, and two were from civil society, including one from the international NGO Hivos and one from an NGO that has no visible track record in internet governance. In addition, two co-chairs were appointed, one from the Kuwaiti government and one from ESCWA.

Among its activities, the TCWG drafted and distributed a survey to assess the impact of the Arab IGF and collect suggestions for the forum’s improvement.⁹³ On 7 October 2016, the “Survey on the Arab IGF: Impact Assessment and Future Scenarios”⁹⁴ was sent from ESCWA-ArabIGF@un.org to a mailing list of more than 1,000 recipients. The online survey consisted of more than 100 questions and was open between 6 October and 18 November 2016.

Stakeholders generally welcomed the survey initiative, but expressed concerns that the

86 ESCWA-LAS. (2015). Developing the Arab IGF 2020 Initiative. Announcement by ESCWA and LAS. www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/uploads/announcement_aigf2020_escwa_las_initiative_v2_final.pdf

87 Ibid.

88 Interview with Ogero Chief of International Cooperation Zeina bou Harb, 22 September 2017.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 <https://www.unescwa.org/sub-site/ArabDIG>; and TCWG. (2017). *Report of the Technical Cooperation Working Group for the Development of the Arab IGF: Towards a New Charter*. https://www.unescwa.org/files/u533/aigf2020_tcwg_report_ar.pdf

94 <https://www.unescwa.org/sub-site/ArabDIG/2016-2017>

methodology made it difficult to get “useful data”.⁹⁵ For one thing, the survey had been based on the monitoring and evaluation framework from the 2010 internet governance roadmap. As such, the questions were designed to measure not so much the success of the forum as a multistakeholder space, as its success as a tool to operationalise the Arab internet governance roadmap. Respondents noted that about half the questions were “optional and open-ended” while others did not have all the possible exhaustive answers (in multiple choice format) one would normally expect.⁹⁶ Further, although it was developed in English, the survey was distributed only in Arabic, despite significant participation by non-Arabic-speaking stakeholders throughout the mandate. During the survey period, ESCWA also hosted an online webinar that introduced the AIGF2020 initiative, gave instructions on how to complete the survey, and provided 1.5 hours during which stakeholders could submit questions and comments to the working group.⁹⁷

In March 2017, the survey results, and related recommendations, were shared via email from ESCWA-ArabIGF@un.org with a link to a 32-page report and posted to the ArabDIG website.⁹⁸ Among the 217 respondents, 37% indicated that they had never participated in the Arab IGF, 32% said they participated only once, and half indicated that they did not read the forum’s reports.⁹⁹ The results were published in Arabic only. Four people interviewed for this report, all of whom completed the survey, said that they did not receive the results, thinking that they had not been published. After the results came out, ESCWA hosted a second webinar to gather feedback on the results from the wider stakeholder community.

The recommendations of the TCWG were organised into six categories: 1) overall recommendations, 2) objectives, 3) structure, 4) financing, 5) content and outcomes, and 6) communications strategies, media and outreach.¹⁰⁰ Overall, the recommendations echoed many of the suggestions heard previously. Many of them focused squarely on process, encouraging more active participation by governments, allowing more space for diverse

opinions, seeking more balance in the participation of stakeholders, increasing accountability and transparency in the work of the forum, and formally sending recommendations from the forum to Arab governments and tracking their implementation. Some recommendations dealt with content and capacity building, urging the forum to connect its mission to sustainable development, conduct research, and support capacity building. One recommendation also encouraged the creation of national IGFs. Others were purely logistical in nature, such as continuing to provide remote participation and speeding up visa processes.

In addition to developing and distributing the survey, the TCWG also considered suggestions to improve the governance of the Arab IGF. One such suggestion was to change the composition of the core organising team of the Arab IGF – the umbrella organisations – which now consists of two representatives each from ESCWA and the LAS. The proposal was to make it include one member from each of the two umbrella organisations; one member each from the secretariat, AMAG and host; and one member each from the government, private sector, civil society, and technical stakeholder groups for a total of nine. Although this composition would still have given intergovernmental agencies and governments more than 50% control of the EBC, the proposal was rejected. Other attempts to make the executive bureau more inclusive also failed.¹⁰¹

A technical community member of the TCWG said: “We should try to compromise. No-one said that the umbrella organisations or the governments should be left out of the equation, but other sectors need to be involved in the executive process, and I personally don’t mind the upper hand being for the government representatives, because the Arab world has its nature, we just want true inclusion of all stakeholders.”¹⁰²

In May 2017, the TCWG presented their findings and recommendations at a meeting at ESCWA in Beirut to develop a new charter for the Arab IGF, which is still under review by the LAS.¹⁰³ The outcomes of this meeting have not yet been made public. After the TCWG concluded its activities, the umbrella organisations invited members to form another working group to consult on a version 2.0 of the roadmap for internet governance. This working group was not announced, no new members were recruited, and not all members stayed, “because some of the people who believe in the forum do not believe in the

95 Batayneh.

96 Al-Saqqaf.

97 Email from ESCWA-ArabIGF@un.org, 28 February 2017.

98 Several people interviewed for this report, all of whom were aware of the survey, said that they did not receive the results, thinking that they had not been published. They were sent via email and are available in the TCWG report on the ArabDIG page on ESCWA’s website. <https://www.unescwa.org/sub-site/ArabDIG>

99 TCWG. (2017). Op. cit.

100 ESCWA. (2016) Op. cit.

101 Ibid.

102 Chayya.

103 Bou Ghanem.

roadmap,”¹⁰⁴ again calling into question the use of the forum as a tool to achieve a larger agenda.

Meanwhile, on 13-14 December, again at ESCWA in Beirut, members of the second working group will meet to discuss a new proposed roadmap on Arab internet governance and how the Arab IGF will fit in. Then, the new charter for the Arab IGF and the new proposed roadmap together will be presented for approval by government ministers at an upcoming meeting of the LAS. In the interim, the rest of the Arab internet governance community waits to see what will be decided for them.

Regional reflection

The Arab IGF has been connected to other IGF National and Regional Initiatives (NRIs) since its formation. At the Beirut consultation in 2012, former Egyptian ICT minister Tarek Kamel invoked the 15-year history of the African IGF as a successful example of a multistakeholder institution. Similarly, in the email that launched this inquiry, comparisons were made to regional IGFs in Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region, lamenting that the Arab IGF might be falling behind its peers. According to former AMAG member Wafa Ben Hassine, in the absence of an Arab IGF, “many people have decided to leave for the Africa IGF,” further weakening the Arab forum. Still, she says, “the experiences of those who participated in the Arab IGFs have encouraged them to start working on national NRIs in their countries.” Ben Hassine is now the vice president of the newly formed Tunisian IGF, which at the time of writing had planned its first forum in late October.

Lebanon is following a similar path. A national IGF process was formally launched in September with the convening of a multistakeholder programme group and the naming of a tentative secretariat. Already, however, some stakeholders are questioning why the secretariat consists only of representatives from the Ministry of Telecommunications. A bid by a civil society organisation for a place as co-secretariat was deflected on the basis that it would make coordination too difficult.¹⁰⁵

Finally, global internet governance stakeholders must also take care to model IGF principles at all levels. At several points, organisers of the Arab IGF referenced “black box” processes at the international level that hindered their progress in developing transparent systems. Global IGF actors also should take care to allot space for the multidimensional

reflection of NRIs at the international forum. At a June 2017 MAG meeting in Geneva, a wild-card proposal¹⁰⁶ to discuss and envision a future for the Arab IGF submitted by SMEX was inaccurately portrayed as only “criticism” and irrelevant to global internet governance by a MAG member who was also a member of the 2015 Arab IGF host team. The proposal was finally rejected as an “internal issue”, despite the fact that sessions focused on the Arab region had made the programme at the global IGFs in Istanbul and Baku, where the exclusive topic of both sessions was the success of the first Arab IGF. If the global IGF can allot space to share praise, it must also make space to consider criticisms, especially in the absence of any other relevant forum.

Conclusion

Despite significant criticism and broad agreement that the Arab IGF did not yield any significant policy impact, to even some of its most vocal critics it was “less a failure, than a successful first attempt.”¹⁰⁷ The forum succeeded in bringing people together from across the region to discuss the inner workings, as well as the potential and the pitfalls, of the internet. Also, “it proved that the Arab world has many people with interest and expertise in areas related to internet governance,” and even if it was not always multi-stakeholder, it did encourage people to embrace the concept of “multistakeholderism”, and drove many stakeholders’ initial enthusiasm and support.

As the forum evolved, though, it became clear that its design as a tool to develop a states-led regional internet policy agenda would threaten to undermine its multistakeholder aspirations and its potential for impact. In particular, disproportionate representation of governments on the core organising team and a need for government control contributed to improvised management of the forum. A lack of transparency in key processes alienated many stakeholders once committed to the forum. In turn, a desire for equal representation among non-governmental stakeholders made governments feel “marginalised.” Finally, the opportunity for the forum to correct course and diversify the organising team and address other criticisms ended up repeating missteps and drawing criticism itself.

An Arab IGF is expected in 2018,¹⁰⁸ and there is hope that grounding it in the UN 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals will give it new

104 El Sherbiny.

105 Conversation with Mohamad Najem, executive director, SMEX, 20 September 2017.

106 www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/igf-2017-ws-140-arab-igf-debrief

107 Yamout; Chayya.

108 El Sherbiny.

life,¹⁰⁹ but without a multistakeholder organising team and more defined and democratic processes for the selection of hosts and AMAG members and chairs, it is easy to imagine that non-governmental stakeholders will elect to spend their time engaging in processes in which they have more equal representation and influence, perhaps at a national IGF.

Action steps

The second mandate of the Arab IGF is now being planned. To improve on the first mandate and address widely held criticisms, we suggest that organisers and other stakeholders take the following steps:

- Decouple the mission of the Arab IGF from the Arab roadmaps for internet governance. The Arab IGF should be a forum for open dialogue on internet policy making, not attached to any other end goal or agenda.
- Diversify the stakeholder representation of the core organising team (i.e. the umbrella organisations and the EJBC).
- Develop the Arab IGF governance structure, processes and bylaws through a transparent, multistakeholder process. Make sure that these processes themselves are open and transparent.
- Open up the hosting requirements so that non-governmental entities can create consortiums to apply to host the event and access the supporting fund.
- Create a multistakeholder committee to evaluate applications for AMAG membership and empower AMAG members to elect their own chair and vice chair. Reinstate the AMAG's original mandate to develop the full programme of the Arab IGF.
- Encourage the formation and development of NRIs across the region, including youth and other themed NRIs.
- Non-governmental and particularly civil society stakeholders should build their capacity on internet governance principles and processes so that they are better prepared to hold a second-mandate Arab IGF and other NRIs accountable for their adherence to the key internet governance principles.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs) are now widely recognised as a vital element of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) process. In fact, they are seen to be the key to the sustainability and ongoing evolution of collaborative, inclusive and multistakeholder approaches to internet policy development and implementation.

A total of 54 reports on NRIs are gathered in this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch). These include 40 country reports from contexts as diverse as the United States, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea and Colombia.

The country reports are rich in approach and style and highlight several challenges faced by activists organising and participating in national IGFs, including broadening stakeholder participation, capacity building, the unsettled role of governments, and impact.

Seven regional reports analyse the impact of regional IGFs, their evolution and challenges, and the risks they still need to take to shift governance to the next level, while seven thematic reports offer critical perspectives on NRIs as well as mapping initiatives globally.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

2017 Report

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