

The Eighth Regular Report on Cultural Policy in the Arab Region

Cultural Policy in the Arab Region programme- Al Mawrid Al Thaqafy

From January 1st to December 31st, 2016

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El-funoun Palestinian Dance Troupe ©Nida Qatamish



The most important updates of cultural policies

Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen

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Introduction

The eighth report of the Arab Cultural Policies in the Arab Region program presents the latest updates to cultural policies in 12 Arab countries between January 1st and December 31st, 2016. The report includes updates and news from all Eastern Arab countries (Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq) and countries of Maghreb region (Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania), as well as Egypt, Sudan, and Yemen.

This report is part of the Cultural Policies in the Arab Region program, launched by Al Mawrid Al Thaqafy¹, in association with the European Foundation², in 2009. The programme aims to build a knowledge base that supports cultural planning and collaboration in the Arab region, and supports initiatives of pressure groups seeking to improve the situation of cultural policies in their respective countries. Ettijahat-Independent Culture collaborates with the program through its research and knowledge aspect, and drafts regular reports on cultural policies.

The 2016 report focuses on four topics, including:

- **Forms of civil and professional organisation:** This section includes the most important updates about rules and regulations pertaining to the work of artists, unions, and the freedom of cultural and artistic organisations in the Arab region.
- **Making culture available to a wider audience:** This section covers spreading cultural infrastructure, programs, and initiatives and making them available to a wider audience in the countries covered by the report. The topic also discusses the centralisation of such activities in big cities, away from peripheral areas, marginalised communities, and villages; and the attempts to change this reality through cultural policies and strategies.
- **Freedom of expression and cultural rights:** This section examines the reality of freedom of art and cultural expression in the countries covered by this report, as well as the violations of the rights of artists and cultural actors in 2016. It also covers the positive changes in protecting the rights of artists and cultural actors in countries which seek to enhance them.
- **Funding culture:** This section covers the available funding to support culture and art, focusing on the government budget for cultural activities, where information is available. The section also compares the size of investment in the cultural and art sector in Arab countries, and the priorities reflected in their announced budgets.

These topics were chosen for their impact on the landscape of Arab cultural policies. They are the issues we believe are worthy of considering in any future development process of the cultural policies. They are also the most problematic topics in cultural policies in 2015, demonstrated in the seventh report on cultural policies for 2015³ Thus, we believe it is important

¹ For more information about the programme, please visit Al Mawrid Al Thaqafy's website [here](#).

² For more information about the European Foundation, click [here](#).

³ To read the seventh report on cultural policies, click [here](#).

to continue examining these issues in 2016 to understand the transformations of the cultural landscape over the years.

These topics are also the priorities for the cultural policies program in the Arab region in 2016; from working on regulatory structures, which contribute to making culture available to wider audience; to freedom of expression and artistic practice, which is one of the most pressing issues in the Arab world; and funding and supporting culture, and mechanisms to enhance this support.

These topics also encompass many details, such as new cultural rules and regulations; changes to established ones; civil movements aiming to achieve change in the cultural arena; the situation of civil liberties and freedom of expression, especially in the press; budgets allocated for culture and cultural infrastructure; local, regional, and international agreements and collaborations on culture; and all issues pertaining to the frameworks of cultural action managed within in each country.

To draft this report, 12 researchers, one from each of the countries the report covers, were contacted. Each researcher presented a research paper on the latest updates of the cultural policies landscape in their respective countries, based on the chosen four topics. Each paper answered questions that cover different facets of each topic. The researchers were chosen based on several criteria, including living in the country about which they wrote, working in said country's cultural field, having previous contributions to cultural policies research, their activity in the cultural field, and their ability to communicate with different cultural actors and organisation in their country. The papers were reviewed by comparing information and data to arrive at a summary, built on the papers within the determined topics. This report will be the result of the described process.

The report cites references that accurately reflect the reality of political rights, and civil and cultural rights in the 12 countries covered by this report. As such, information in this report is supported by statistics conducted in 2016. This is important to understand the general context of cultural policies in the region and to bridge a large gap resulting from lack of information and statistics on a national level in most of these countries. The chosen references enjoy a high level of credibility, objectivity, and accuracy, being built on international references of liberties and rights.

Most reports on civil and cultural liberties demonstrate the absence of any development of the culture and art sector, in terms of freedom of practice and expression, from the priorities of Arab decision makers, even though the sector is vital and has many investment and development opportunities. Decision makers view this sector as a worrisome nuisance, either because it is a source of free and diverse expression in a closed political and social environment, or because it is of no value within national policies.

Producing this report faced several challenges, namely the difficulty in accessing information,

due to the absence of accurate data on the budget items of culture and arts and their objects of expenditure, or because local reports documenting violations against artists are not present. In other cases, artworks and cultural products are subject to prevention or confiscation, especially during times of civil wars and conflicts, or in cases where there are no legislations that provide the right to acquire information. Not to mention the lack of research centres, as well as cultural organisations that can be consulted as sources of information. The report also covers several countries experiencing conflicts and wars, making the researcher's task more complex. In Syria, for example, we could not agree with a researcher inside Syria, which is one of the basic criteria for selecting researchers. Instead, a Syrian researcher who follows the cultural scene from abroad was commissioned.

Due to challenges in the research process, this report does not claim in any way that it covers all developments of the landscape of cultural policies in 2016. Rather, it attempts to give an overview of the cultural policies scene by addressing the most prominent events and looking closely at them in order to reach general conclusions, which will be shared with you in this report.

This report consists of four sections. Initially, it briefly describes the status of political, civil and cultural rights. Then, it focuses on the four main topics of the report and observes the most prominent cultural and political developments in 2016. This period has witnessed a lot of political and cultural developments, some of which were practices and violations against the development of the cultural status in the region. On the other hand, these developments have had a more positive form, as a promising movement has emerged pushing culture forward. The report derives a conclusion that summarises the main points that are related to the cultural policies landscape and some of the themes and aspirations that deserve to be examined in order to study the status of cultural policies in the near future.

We hope that this report will provide the reader with an overview, supported by details and figures on developments of cultural policies in the countries covered. We would like to thank all researchers who contributed to the completion of this report, whether in terms of participation in writing preliminary research papers, or in contributing to the analysis of these papers, as well as, data interpretation. Also, we would like to thank the national taskforces of cultural policies that contribute continuously to enrich the work for developing cultural policies in the Arab region.

I - The situation of political rights, and civil and cultural liberties in the region: overview and statistics

The situation regarding freedom of expression and cultural rights in the Arab region cannot be adequately assessed without looking at Arab countries’ international rankings in preserving political rights and civil liberties. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) lists Syria, Yemen, and Iraq as the countries with the highest rate of journalist killings¹ in 2016, with 26 journalists killed during the year.

Syria, Yemen, and Iraq as the countries with the highest rate of journalist killings

Arab countries covered in this report are still at the bottom of international ranking in freedom of the press, according to the 2016 report from Reporters without Borders (RSF),² as demonstrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Rankings of countries in freedom of the press according to RSF

Country	World ranking
Mauritania	48
Tunisia	96
Lebanon	98
Algeria	129
Morocco	131
Palestine	132
Jordan	135
Iraq	158
Egypt	159
Yemen	170
Sudan	174
Syria	177

¹ 10 Most Censored Countries, [online reference], in CPJ website, available on the Link; <https://cpj.org/x/2046>, Published: May 2006 2, Preview: 3 Jan 2017.

² To read the report from RSF, please click [here](#).

As the table demonstrates, countries covered in this report are still at the bottom of the World Press Freedom Index, except for Mauritania, which is not listed among countries which only partially respect political rights and civil liberties, according to a 2016 report from Freedom House.¹

Arab countries are still listed among the worst world countries in terms of political rights and civil liberties, being behind %72 of world countries. The freedom index in Syria scored -1 (negative score), and Sudan scored 6. The Freedom House report describes both countries as the worst of the worse.



Saada – Yemen, painting by Hakim Akel.

With the collapse of the political regime and the ongoing civil war, Yemen’s ranking keeps plummeting. Morocco’s ranking deteriorated as well, with activists being oppressed, public assemblies banned, and long prison sentences against journalists and civil society representatives. Table 2 below lists the rankings.

¹ To read the report from Freedom House, please click [here](#).

Table 2: Rankings of countries covered in the report in terms of political rights and civil liberties, according to Freedom House

Country	Political rights and civil liberties situation	2016 total score ¹	2017 ² Total score ³
Egypt	Unfree	27	26
Iraq	Unfree	27	
Palestine	Unfree	28	
Mauritania	Partially free	30	
Algeria	Unfree	35	
Jordan	Partially free	36	37
Morocco	Unfree	41	
Lebanon	Partially free	43	44
Tunisia	Partially free	79	78
Sudan	Unfree	6	
Syria	Unfree	-1	
Yemen	Unfree	17	14

Cultural liberties witnessed a significant deterioration in several Arab countries. Egypt was ranked third, worldwide for its systematic violation of art and culture rights. In 37 ,2016 violations were recorded in Egypt, compared to 17 in 2015.⁴

Egypt is ranked third in violating art and culture rights with 37 violations.

The violations included charging novelist Ahmed Nagi with ‘violating public decency’ in his novel *Using Life*. The Children of Streets theatre group members were arrested and jailed, after being charged with ‘inciting protest’ and ‘spreading terrorist ideas,’ after the group produced [videos critical of the government on YouTube](#).

Artists’ unions play a major role in restricting freedom of expression in the media, theatre,

¹ For more details, see the 2016 report [here](#).
² For more details, see the 2017 report [here](#).
³ Note: Annual reports usually use statistics from the year preceding their publications. Therefore, the 2017 statistics were listed, where available, to enable comparison.
⁴ For more details, see the report [here](#).

film, and music, which is a clear violation of international conventions signed by the Egyptian government. The musicians' union issued penalties to musicians and singers for 'indecent' or 'public obscenity,' instead of representing and defending artists. Due to such penalties, six female singers were suspended for 'wearing revealing clothes' and 'singing indecent songs,' according to the union.

Similar events took place in Tunisia, despite the revolution, where the union banned the Tunisian female singer Najlaa' from singing on the same charges.¹

On the list of the worst violators of culture and art rights, Syria comes right after Egypt. It is mostly the regime, as well as sometimes armed opposition factions, who are violating cultural rights. Next on the list is Iraq, where the ISIS terrorist organisation executed Ayham Hussein, a 15-year-old child, for listening to Western music.²

Eight violations of cultural rights were perpetrated in Morocco, most of which targeted journalists. This puts Morocco close to Egypt. The novelist Aziz Benhadouch was sued by a group of citizens who considered that his novel *The Island of Males*³ was offensive, and that it 'defames' them, even though the fictional novel was not set in any specific place or time.

These indexes and statistics summarise the status of political rights, and civil and cultural liberties in the Arab region. Most Arab countries are listed among countries that do not respect civil, political, and press rights; and do not support freedom of expression. It is obvious that there are not developments on this level, compared to the status of freedoms in the Arab region over the last two years. This is a key indicator of the status cultural policies, examined in this report.

¹ "Musicians' Union Bans Najlaa' from Singing and Sues Her," <https://goo.gl/Gf2P0C>, published on 27 March 2016, accessed on 4 February 2017.

² Images: "ISIS executes a child for listening to Western music," *Mazmaz Website*, Link: <https://goo.gl/MpZDLE>, published on 18 February 2016, accessed on 4 February 2017.

³ "Moroccan writer sued because his novel *The Island of Males* is suspected to relate to events in the past," *Al Marsad Newspaper*, Link: <https://goo.gl/Ywa9vi>, published: 9 August 2016, accessed: 4 February 2017.

II – Cultural policies in the Arab region

1 - Forms of civil and professional organisation

This section covers the developments in the rules and laws regulating artists' work and unions, as well as the freedom to create art and culture organisations in the Arab region in 2016 and whether such institutions impacted cultural life positively or negatively. The section lists changes in each country, from the Maghreb countries to the Eastern countries. Six countries witnessed no change in laws and regulations.

In 2016, Tunisia and Morocco witnessed regulatory developments pertaining to essential cultural issues, such as cultural diversity, creative industries, cultural gaps, and artistic vocations. This was an effort to keep up with international developments in arts, culture, and freedom of expression.

Unlike the countries mentioned above, in Egypt and Mauritania, new regulations, restrictive to artists and their organisations, were issued. In Palestine, cultural life was impacted by the political turmoil, and in Lebanon, only laws to regulate official cultural departments were passed.

Mauritania



The ceremony of the International Day for Cultural Diversity – ©culturim website

In early 2016, the cabinet issued a decree to create the National Institute for Music, Fine Arts and Performance Techniques. The cultural sector received the decree positively. However, a new decree made the new institute part of the Mauritanian Institute for Scientific Research, which ended the possibility to create the first independent academy for arts.

The possibility to create the first independent academy for arts was ended.

Morocco

The Moroccan government ratified Law No. 04.16 on the National Council for Moroccan Languages and Culture, on August 3rd, 2016. This was a pioneering step towards official recognition of cultural multilateralism in Morocco. Forming the council was cited in the fifth chapter in the 2011 constitution. Its mission is to protect and develop the official languages in Morocco, namely Arabic and Amazigh, as well as different dialects and cultural expressions in the country.

The Moroccan government also ratified Law No. 26.16, recognising Amazigh as an official language in Morocco, and containing mechanisms and instructions to include it in education systems and public life. The law aims to enhance communication

Morocco issues several decrees to recognise Amazigh as an official language.

in Amazigh in prioritised public domains, as an official language of the country and a common cultural heritage of all Moroccans, in support of national unity values, by preserving this language, protecting the Amazigh cultural and civil heritage, developing it, and capitalising on national achievements in this respect.

Moreover, on February 10th, the Moroccan parliament ratified the Law of Artists and Artistic Vocations¹, which was a development of Law No. 71.99, issued in 2003, to respond to the rapid changes in the cultural and artistic arena, nationally and internationally, and to meet the needs of artists and cultural actors.

Tunisia

In support of investment in culture, a new booklet was issued containing the conditions to create an independent, private cultural space. The lack of such regulatory framework led to many difficulties for artists and cultural actors who invested in culture both privately and independently.² With this booklet, private cultural spaces can now operate legally and become platforms for arts and cultural work.

¹ Moroccan Ministry of Culture, *The Law of Artists and Artistic Vocations*, issued to official newspapers on September 19th, 2016. To read the law, please follow this link: <https://goo.gl/rHFFam>.

² Ministry of Culture and Preservation of Heritage, *Decision on Creating a Private Cultural Centre*, 11 January 2016, Tunisia. To read the decision, please follow this link: <https://goo.gl/SZrNhT>.



Poster of Sfax, Arab cultural capital 2016

A new law benefiting artists and cultural vocations is also being developed. The first two items of the new law's second chapter assert 'the right of artists to freedom of artistic and cultural expression, as well as the right of artists to form associations, unions, and organisations which defend professional, social, and economic interests of artists, and promote their status in the society.'

Egypt

The latest law on civil society organisations, issued on November 29th, 2016, restricting civil action and facilitating censorship and prevention, is still casting its shadows on the future of civil and cultural action in Egypt. This is especially apparent as civil liberties are being severely restricted in the country.

Lebanon

Seven new decrees from the Ministry of Culture were signed in 2016, two of which, namely No. 3705 and No. 4382, focused on vocational regulation and cultural work. Decree No. 3705 regulates artistic vocations, allocating %2 of ticket prices for concerts

Allocating %2 of ticket prices for concerts and performances to the Artists Solidarity Fund.

and performances as taxes for the Artists Solidarity Fund. To the same end, the decree allocated %10 of the wages of foreign artists working in all artistic vocations in Lebanon for the same fund. Article Eight of the decree instructed specialised departments in the Public Security General Directorate not to issue visas for foreign artists unless said artists produce a receipt of paying %10 of their wages attached with a copy of relevant contracts.¹

¹ Republic of Lebanon's official newspaper. <http://jo.pcm.gov.lb/j2016/j52/contents.htm>.

Decree No. 4382 regulates how to manage and direct the fund for supporting cultural activities and industries, while other decrees focus on the field of archaeology.¹

It is noteworthy that archaeology got the biggest share of these decrees. The official governmental vision dominated the decrees, pushing for the regulation of the fund for supporting cultural activities and industries. The fund aims to finance public and private projects which support programs and activities in the fields of interest for the General Directorate of Cultural Affairs, and to finance and market the activities of cultural industries and the knowledge economy, especially supporting films, documents, and audio-visual material.

It is unclear whether independent cultural actors or the private sector had any role in writing the decree, or the way in which this fund would support their work, as the whole management of the fund is governmental.

Palestine



Yalla Yalla – Al Hara Theatre - Palestine
©Ata Jaber

¹ Decrees on Archaeology: a) Decree No. 3050, regulating how to create a council for museums, as well as deciding its missions, prerogatives, rules, and the mechanisms of management; b) Decree No. 3057, regulating mechanisms of preventive and urgent archaeologist interventions made by the General Directorate of Archaeology; c) Decree No. 3061, regulating the National Library and how to create its board of directors, as well as deciding its missions, prerogative, rules, and the mechanisms of management; d) Decree No. 3065, regulating the general inventory of moved old ruins; and e) Decree 4381, regulating the fund for ruins and historical monuments.

Considering that the regulatory council has not been active since 2007, new laws are being ratified through the president's office, depending on priorities. The Ministry of Culture is currently working on three laws: a) the law of the cultural development fund, which was written, reviewed, and sent to the ministry of culture; b) the law of preserving cultural and immaterial heritage, for which specialized workshops from UNESCO were held to review the law and adapt it to the convention on preserving cultural and immaterial heritage of 2003; and c) the law of the national library. These three laws are waiting the Palestinian Authority's presidential office to ratify them.

The Palestinian Ministry of Culture had drafted, in association with experts, a strategy for the culture and heritage industry, titled *Partnership and Development* for the years – 2017 2022. The national plan for culture comprises two elements. First, a political document containing national visions, priorities, and policies. The second element focuses on cultural sector strategies, and explains the strategic goal to which organisations will work to achieve by 2022.

In Algeria, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq; no new laws on culture and the arts were issued in 2016.

As such, new laws and regulations pertaining to the cultural sector were absent in six countries in 2016. In other countries, new policies and regulations are driven either by a political desire to restrict civil activity, such as the case in Egypt, or by political support for more cultural diversity and professional support for artists and creative industries, such as is the case in Tunisia and Morocco. Regulations are also being delayed because of high levels of centralisation, such as is the case in Palestine.

2 - Making culture available for a wider audience

This section examines the availability of cultural infrastructure, programmes and initiatives to a wider audience in countries covered by this report. Cultural programmes and initiatives were centralised in cities and capitals, away from peripheral and marginalised community in villages. The section will examine the attempts to change this reality through policies and strategies in 2016.

Centralisation dominates the Arab cultural landscape. Cultural services, activities, and events take place in capitals and urban centres, with very few to none which take place in villages, rural areas, or marginalised communities. This required a pressure from cultural activists and artists in Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia to incorporate the underprivileged and marginalised in national plans for making cultural products and activities available on a national level.

In Jordan, peripheral provinces witnessed no investment in cultural infrastructure, except for the city of Irbid in the north, Jordan's second largest city after the capital, Amman. The Irbid cultural centre was equipped with essentials. The museums sector suffers a lack of a

clear strategy to develop its administration, working mechanisms, and communication with the audience.

In Algeria, the centralisation of the government's management of culture has led to the marginalisation of local cultural actors, and the lack of cultural initiatives outside the capital city. The same occurred in Mauritania, where cultural and artistic activity is restricted to the capital Nouakchott, and the political capital Nouadhibou. Other provinces and big cities lack cultural activity completely. Even deeper marginalisation takes place in rural areas and small villages.

Lebanon, on the other hand, has witnessed promising initiatives by activists to hold cultural events outside the capital. Among such initiatives are opening the [Artist's House in Hammana](#), run by the Kahraba group¹; the creative residency programme organised by Apeal in the town of Ras Masqa²; and the opening of the Stars movie theatre in Nabatiyeh.³

Most cultural events directed at marginalised communities are often the first victims of budget cuts. The Iraqi Ministry of Culture cancelled the Marbid Festival in Basra. Palestinian cultural organisations suffer from severe financial crises that threaten their sustainability. The economic crisis in Sudan eradicated all local cultural initiatives and services, leaving only three theatres in the whole country.



The ruins of the Two Niles movie theatre ©Skynews website

¹ "Hammana Artist House," a Space for Art and Culture," *Assafir*. Link: <https://goo.gl/atcrS9>, published: 23 July 2016, accessed: 4 February 2017.

² "The Lebanese Association for the Development of Arts' launch the 'Creative Residency Programme' in Ras Masqa," *Assafir*. Link: <https://goo.gl/lwfyLL>, published 16 March 2016, accessed: 4 February 2017.

³ "The Ministry of Culture Patrons the Opening of the Stars Movie Theatre in Nabatiyeh and the Inauguration of the Lebanon International Theatre Festival," *National News Agency*. Link: <https://goo.gl/xNvpf4>, published: 22 August 2016, accessed: 23 January 2017.

In Yemen, cultural services have been halted. Cultural infrastructure has been destroyed due to the raging conflict. In the capital, Sanaa, part of the House of Books' yard was rented to an investor who turned it into a restaurant. The House of Popular Heritage (previously House al-Hamd) was confiscated and turned into a headquarters for al-Houthi fighters. Moreover, the war destroyed significant parts of cultural infrastructure and historical monuments, either by bombardment of the Arab coalition, or through bombings by militias. For example, the Cultural Centre of Hudaida, and the al-Saeed Cultural Foundation in Taiz were shelled, destroying valuable manuscripts. Some museums were completely looted, including the National Museum in Taiz, Alqahira Castle. The Baraqehs in al-Jawf were shelled and the Shibzi and Junaid domes were bombed along with al-Mudhaffar in Taiz. Al-Muhalhal in Omran was also shelled, as well as Prophet Shuaib Mosque. Koka-ban Fortress, Old Sanaa and the Haran Museum in Dhamar were also destroyed. According to the Statistics Centre in the Yemeni Ministry of Culture, 375 bombs and shells targeted historical and religious sites and monuments in Yemen.

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In Syria, the regime is trying to revive official cultural events which were absent for the last five years, such as reopening Damascus Book Fair in August, after a five-year halt, with the participation of 75 Syrian and Arab publishers.¹ The National Film Organisation held the third Festival of Youth Cinema and Short films,² and on September 4th, the organisation announced the sixth season of the project to support young filmmakers and screenwriters. In May, celebrating the 100th anniversary of the opening the first professional movie theatre in Syria, a festival, titled 'Cinema: an Endless Celebration' was announced,³ but was later postponed.⁴ The Theatre and Music Directorate announced a project to support young theatre professionals in October. The directorate held the first edition of the Lattakia Festival for Youth Theatre. Homs Theatre Festival was also back for the first time in eight years.

Most activities take place in Damascus, in an attempt to show that life is normal in regime-controlled areas. Areas under the Islamic State terrorist organisation lack all forms of cultural or artistic expression, considering that such activities may lead to activists' death.

Syrian artists, however, are notably active in their countries of refuge. Several Arab and European capitals have been hosting Syrian cultural events, such as Landscapes of Hope in

1 "Under the Patronage of President Assad, al-Attar Opens the 28th Book Fair in the Assad National Library," SANA. Link: <https://goo.gl/x6Py3R>, published on 24 August 2016, accessed on 27 January 2017.

2 "The Third Festival for Youth Cinema and Short Films Opens in Damascus Opera House," Al Baath Media. Link: , published on 12 April 2016, accessed on 27 January 2017.

3 Shaza al-Mouei, "An Endless Cinematic Celebration in Damascus, with Arab and International Guests," Bostah. Link: <https://goo.gl/BT0p4T>, published on 22 May 2016, accessed on 27 January 2017.

4 "The 'Cinema: An Endless Celebration' festival postponed," Al Watan. Link: <https://goo.gl/vsQN1q>, published on 22 May 2016, accessed on 27 January 2017.

Berlin, which included several performances and dialogue sessions, and the Syrian Mobile Film Festival, among other events. This indicates the loss of the cultural capital on a local level, and a complete absence on the national level. Most Syrian talents—artists, writers, and intellectuals—fled the country and currently live outside Syria. Cities such as Beirut and Istanbul, among others, are now full of Syrian cultural events.¹

In 2016, three initiatives were launched to make culture available to a wider audience, within national cultural plans in Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan. This was a result of pressure from cultural actors in these countries.



Landscapes of Hope – Berlin ©Franziska Preuß

Tunisia sought to enhance decentralisation and local governance of cultural work. In August 2016, the national unity government adopted the 'Cities of Art' programme², which aimed to decentralize culture, support the cultural movement in the periphery, and integrate arts into the daily lives of citizens.

¹ "Landscapes of Hope: Syrians Addressing German Hearts with Cultural Performances," DW. Link: <https://goo.gl/kiewPF>, published on 4 October 2016, accessed on 4 February 2017.

² Mufida Khalil, "After Launching the 'Tunisia: Cities of Art' Programme, Does the Periphery Obtain Its Right to Culture, or Will It Only Be a Space for Some Shows and Souvenir Photos," Morocco Website. Link: <https://goo.gl/pC1bKf>, published on 28 September 2016, accessed on 27 January 2017.

More than 600 Moroccan activists and cultural actors, including intellectuals, academics, artists, journalists, researchers, and experts from parties that would form the new government, demanded the inclusion of the 'Moroccan Cultural Plan' in the government program. This would consider culture as a vital, strategic sector. The 'Moroccan Cultural Plan'¹ is an ambitious strategic cultural plan that demands raising the budget for culture, as while some countries allocate %1 of their budgets to culture, Morocco was far behind in 2015, allocating only %0.25 for culture.

More than 600 Moroccan activists and cultural actors demand a higher budget for the Ministry of Culture through the Moroccan Cultural Plan

The petition asserted that the "sought culture is one that, necessarily, can be accessed by the underprivileged as a basis for common living," and indicated that "culture is an integral part of current and future development strategies, which enables the cultural product to yield added economic value."²

In Jordan, the Med Culture programme held meetings with the cultural policies taskforce in Jordan in May and December 2016. The taskforce included independent cultural actors,



The Did You Know initiative ©National Iraqi Cultural Policy Taskforce

¹ To read the electronic petition on the subject, please click [here](#).

² "Hundreds of Cultural Actors Demand the 'Moroccan Cultural Plan,'" *Hespress*. Link: <https://goo.gl/RpNsRB>, published on 26 November 2016, accessed on 10 February 2017.

and representatives from the Ministry of Culture. The meetings aimed to set a vision and a strategy to support the Ministry of Culture, as well as public and private entities and the education sector, to enhance cultural policies in such a manner as to arrive at better cultural legislation, and create a safe environment for cultural work in Jordan. The meetings concluded with recommendations, models, and plans that will be proposed in 2017. Peripheral provinces and marginalised communities had the highest share of recommendations to make culture and the arts available to a wider audience, and to adopt decentralisation by the government and cultural actors.

It was noteworthy that Iraqi writers were especially active through Cultural Houses in provinces where there are no headquarters for writers' unions. This activity merits following and examination in 2017. Such houses may turn into alternative spaces which host cultural and art activities on local levels in Iraq.

As evident above, cultural planning in the Arab region remained centralised in capital cities and urban centres in 2016. Three countries made considerable efforts to counter this phenomenon, namely Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan. Cultural actors in these countries demanded more inclusive cultural planning to make culture available to a wider audience. In Iraq and Lebanon, there are limited initiatives to create cultural events outside big cities, and such initiatives deserve encouragement and following. The turmoil in Yemen prevented the process of making culture available to a wider audience, since all communities suffer from a destructive war. Official cultural efforts in Syria were highly politicised.

III – Freedom of expression and cultural rights

This section addresses the status of freedom of cultural and artistic expression in the countries covered by the report. It presents an overview of the violations of intellectuals' and artists' rights in 2016. The section also cites positive development in protecting art and cultural rights in countries which aim to enhance them.

Violations of liberties and cultural rights escalated in the countries covered by the report in 2016. Leaving aside some steps forward in Morocco and Algeria, the general trend is restricting and violating freedom of expression by individuals and institutions. Journalists are being killed and kidnapped in countries with severe political turmoil. Regimes are mostly responsible, but also some opposition forces to a lesser extent. In countries where authorities want to take societies to the pre-Arab Spring era of 2011, artists are being thrown in jail and their work is being confiscated. Legislation is also restricting any remnants of artistic freedoms.

The most prominent positive development in preserving freedom of expression and cultural rights was the Moroccan government's ratification of Law No. 04.16, on August 3rd, 2016. The law decreed the establishment of the National Council for Moroccan Languages and Culture, explained earlier in the first section, alongside Law No. 26.16, which recognises Amazigh as an official language, and provides instructions on how to integrate it into education

and public life. These laws are a positive development in an issue which was discussed for decades and which is essential to respecting and preserving the culture of citizens of non-Arab origins, as well as the rights of minorities.



Graffiti in the Hama neighbourhood in Algiers.

Another positive development took place in Algeria. Independent artists have become more active as pressure was applied against censorship and the persecution of artists, especially after the police arrested musician Mohammed Doha on January 16th. The arrest led to a solidarity movement among artists, calling for the right of artists to present their work in public spaces and interact directly with their audience. The solidarity spread from the Odan square in Algiers to social media, and even some European capitals. Algerian law still prevents demonstrations without prior official permission, even after the state of emergency was lifted in 2011. This is an obstacle facing any effort to broaden the scope of artistic practice on the Algerian street. There was increasing pressure from cultural actors since 2011 to eliminate the requirement to obtain permission for art performances in the streets. The government's response was mixed.

In Algeria, a film screening was banned. The ban was challenged when the 'Project'heart' association, the organizer of the 'Bejaia Film Laboratory' in 9-3 September 2016, rejected the decision of the ministerial censorship committee to ban the screening of the film *Vote Off* by Faisal Hammoum, under the pretext that it offends national symbols and sovereignty as it examines young people taking part in an election for the first time in 2014.¹ Challenging the ban, the film was screened on the event's final day.

Bejaia Film Laboratory challenges a film ban by screening it on the event's final day

¹ For more information about the film and the event, please click [here](#).

In Jordan, writer Nahed Hattar was assassinated after sharing a satirical cartoon, mocking ISIS' interpretation of Islam, on his Facebook page. Certain religious group found the cartoon offensive to Islam itself. The writer was assassinated, even though he did not draw it. This is the first assassination resulting from inflammation since 1970.

Sudan witnessed severe restrictions as security apparatus constantly intervened, with no legal basis, by banning or obstructing cultural activities. The film *Handful of Dates*, based the work by famous Sudanese novelist Attayeb Saleh, was obstructed for routine and administrative reasons. The Sudanese Writers' Union was closed, but the union appealed to the court and was able to overturn the decision in December, 2016. Moreover, the headquarters of the al-Shurouq forum was confiscated and newspapers were severely censored. For example, the Journalists for Human Rights network published a list of confiscations over five days, from November 28th to December 2nd, when issues several newspapers; namely *Attayyar*, *Assayha*, *Alwatan*, *Alayyam*, *Aljareeda*, and *Alyawm Altali*; were confiscated almost daily.¹

The political turmoil in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen led to severe violations of cultural rights. The Syrian regime is still detaining artists and writers, including Zaki and Mehyar Cordello, actress Samar Kokash, and writer Adnan Zarraei, among others. The artists' union is referring artists who take stands against the regime to so-called 'disciplinary councils' and 'terrorism courts' even if they were outside Syria, as a punishment for their political opinions. The union issued a declaration to refer artists who opposed the regime to a disciplinary council, because "they did not pay their union fees." Most of the artists mentioned in the declaration live outside Syria, and are sentenced to prison by the 'terrorism court' which the regime created after the uprising. Among the artists Jamal Suleiman, Abdulhakim Qutaifan, Mai Skaff, Maxim Khalil, Louise Abdulkarim, Sameeh Shqair, and Mazen al-Natour; all of whom are opposed to the regime.²

Journalists are still being threatened, detained, and kidnapped in Iraq. Some TV stations were closed by official decisions, such as the case with Albaghdadiyah TV, which was banned from broadcasting by an order from the Iraqi Media and Communication Authority. In Yemen, 100 violations against journalists, photographers and websites were recorded. These include kidnapping, threatening, inflammation, and assault, as well as banning websites. The perpetrators belong to both parties of the conflict in Yemen, with a complete halt of all cultural activity.

¹ "Journalists for Human Rights: Documenting the Status of Freedom of the Press and Expression in Sudan and South Sudan," Sudanile. Link: <https://goo.gl/5n8Txf>, published on 3 May 2016, accessed on 20 January 2017.

² "New Punishment from the Syrian Artists Union for Artists Who Oppose the Regime in a 'disciplinary council,'" *Ettihad Press*. Link: <https://goo.gl/txkuwm>, published on 11 October, accessed on 10 February 2017.

Palestine, Lebanon, and Mauritania also witnessed violations of cultural rights. In Palestine, 73 complaints about violations of freedom of expression were recorded. A Lebanese student, Bassel al-Amin, was taken to prison after he criticised the Lebanese government’s treatment of Syrian refugees on his Facebook page.¹ Another student was detained for criticising a former president, and several film screenings were banned in four festivals.

73 complaints about violations of freedom of expression were recorded in Palestine.

Mauritania, the country with the best ranking among Arab countries in freedom of expression, witnessed many violations, including harassing artists, imposing financial penalties, banning a programme criticising several officials including the President, confiscating satirical cartoons, taking artists who criticised the President to court, and the vicious attack on a female Mauritanian filmmaker who stopped wearing traditional attire



Graffiti -El Sayed- in Haret al-Zabbalin neighbourhood in Egypt.

In Egypt, which is ranked third among Arab countries in violations of cultural rights, the new civil associations law was issued on November 29th, 2016. The law restricts civil work and allows the government to practice more censorship and restriction as they see fit. For example, under the new law, the government can ban any activity that the government five

¹ Hassan Mohammed, "Defending Syrians Offends the Lebanese Government," *Rozana website*. Link: <https://goo.gl/aVYniQ>,

suspects might affect national security and public order. Moreover, the government can intervene in associations' work and sources of funding. The law also allows penalties up to five years in prison, without proper permission."

Under this law, legally registered cultural organisations would lose all independence, and become under constant threat of closure. The freedom of any organisation's staff may be threatened in case they were suspected to be critical of certain situations. They could also be denied access to information, as well as funding. All this means effectively assassinating organisational cultural work.

As is evident above, in 2016, violations of freedom of artistic expression and production have been continuing as in previous years. Despite the few positive steps forward in freedom of expression, this year could be even worse than previous years. The writer, Nahed Hattar, was assassinated in Jordan for sharing a satirical cartoon mocking ISIS on Facebook. Bassel al-Amine was jailed for expressing his opinion on Facebook. Egyptian authorities strived to restrict civil work in the country. It is a bleak picture, that of the status of cultural and artistic rights in the Arab region in 2016. There was a clear deterioration in civil liberties, as freedom of expression, and freedom to organize and receive support were severely under attack. Despite this deterioration, there were prominent efforts by Algerian cultural actors to challenge banning and confiscation, and positive efforts in Morocco to recognise, support, and legalise cultural diversity.

IV – Funding

This section of the report focuses on funding available to support arts and culture throughout 2016. Particularly, it focuses on budgets of the ministries of culture, in case information and items related to these budgets are available. Also, the section compares the size of arts and cultural investment that the Arab countries allow for the arts and culture sector and the priorities reflected in their declared budget items.

Governmental budgets allocated to the cultural sector in the Arab world in 2016 ranged between 5 million or less, in Mauritania, and more than 230 million USD in Egypt, which is shared by the Ministry of Culture and Youth, as well as the ministry of Religious Affairs without specifying their respective allocations.

Ministry of Culture’s budget in Mauritania for 2016 does not exceed 5 million USD.

Most government budgets are being set as to prioritise the following aspects: administrative expenses (government employees’ salaries), infrastructure and official cultural events, such as arts and cultural festivals. During the process of preparing a budget, items are rarely allocated to support local initiatives or cultural programming outside the traditional frameworks of the ministries’ duties and functions, which often favours specific artistic expressions with content which lacks criticism and diversity.

In cases where countries are experiencing economic crises, budgets which are allocated to culture are the first to suffer massive cuts. Moreover, events become subject to cancellations,



Theatre Festival in Jordan, 2016

as in the case of Algeria, which will be presented in this section. In extreme cases, the Ministry end up being closed or attached to another ministry, as in the case of the Ministry of Culture in Jordan in 2003, or in Sudan, where libraries and museums are being closed. Another case is in Iraq, which cancelled local festivals, but kept prize of the specialised literary library in Najaf, which is worth 384,000 USD, and constitutes a big item in the cultural budget, valued at 1.5 million USD.¹

It was noted that ministries' plans and strategies are being made in isolation from cultural actors and audiences at both national and local levels. This leads to the repetition of certain items that may not have any significant importance or impact on the art and culture sector. The independent cultural sector does not participate in developing plans and making budgets for cultural work. Instead, the practice of budgeting is being limited in the bureaucratic government budgeting process.

Furthermore, the full dependence on government funding grants artists neither full control over their creativity nor the final decision about their artistic choices. In countries where violations against cultural rights and freedom of expression are at the highest levels, the obsession with prevention and confiscation is a major source of concern for artists and cultural actors.

As such, many artists try to find external supporters or they turn to the private sector—if present—in order to avoid bureaucracy or government repression. This situation applies to all Arab countries, and no country has witnessed any change worth mentioning in 2016. Only in rare cases did artists have more freedom in their search for funding, most notably in cases where the government tries to support investment in creative industries and provide direct support for production and technical marketing such as Morocco, whose experience in establishing the [Moroccan Music Export Office \(MOMEX\)](#) will be presented in this section; or in the search for international support under cultural cooperation agreements of some cultural sectors in countries where allocating budgets to the cultural sector has stopped, such as Algeria, which has reduced the budget of the Ministry of Culture.²

Once again, Tunisia and Morocco's efforts are prone in this respect. A symposium was held in Sfax, in October 2016, to develop a new cultural policy emanating from the civil society

¹ "Al-Sumaria News publishes the 2016 budget issued by the Ministry of Finance," Al-Sumaria News, Link: <https://goo.gl/7LlkTP>, published on 16 July 2015, accessed on 10 February 2017.

² Algerian Minister of Culture Ezzeddine Mihoubi signed a cultural exchange programme with North Korea for the years 2019-2017, in accordance with the agreement signed between the two countries on September 1964, 16. The new agreement supports the exchange of technical teams, as well as cooperation in the fields of publishing, translating literary works and entrusting experts with tasks of preserving cultural heritage. It seems that Mihoubi is heading towards the openness of the Algerian cultural scene outside its traditional and established frameworks. He concluded his year with a visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran, exploring ways to enhance cultural cooperation between the two countries. He signed, with his Iranian counterpart, agreements in cinema between libraries, restoration of documents and manuscripts in music, and in the visual arts. This approach seems to necessitate a political and strategic rapprochement in accordance with the Algerian vision which is based on reviving and organizing old alliances.

after a civil initiative, and the support of the private sector and the civil society support program, in addition to the participation of the Tunisian General Labour Union. The symposium made several recommendations, including support a new legal framework for artists, establishing support for the cultural civil society, calling for diversification of cultural production's sources of funding, and reducing reliance on public support to ensure independence.

Other recommendations included allocating about 100 million USD to the cultural sector, a %20.27 increase compared to 2015. About 22,237 million dinars (about 10\$ million) were also allocated to direct financial support for arts.¹

About 10 million USD of direct governmental support for arts, and increase of over %20 to the cultural sector in Tunisia.



Poster of the symposium of Africa and the Middle East for Music in Morocco

In Morocco, the Moroccan Music Export Office (MOMEX) was established in 2016, in partnership with the Ministry of Culture, and with the support of the Heba Foundation and The Cherifian Office of Phosphates (OCP). The office's objective is to introduce Moroccan music and keep pace with artists through promotional tours and participation in international musical forums, to arrange contacts with festival programmers abroad, to disseminate

¹ Tunisian Ministry of Finance, *The 2016 Budget*, Section 20: Ministry of Culture and Heritage Preservation, October, 2015. Link: <http://bit.ly/2kWmupb>.

information in order to provide it to professionals, to keep up with art projects on the new digital stands, and to facilitate the movement of artists at the international level.

It is considered a pioneering step that deserves follow-up on the public-private partnership (PPPs) in the field of supporting creative industries.¹

The budget of the Ministry of Culture in Algeria decreased by %65, from 463 million USD in 2015 to 167 million USD in 2016, after low oil revenues pushed the government to adopt austerity measures. That prompted the Minister of Culture to adopt the approach of encouraging cultural investment and to open the way for the private sector to contribute to financing and revitalising the cultural sector, instead of full dependence on government support over the past decades.

Budget of the Ministry of Culture decreased by %65, compared to 2015

Reduction of culture budget also created the need to seek alternate sources of support for the cultural infrastructure and for building its actors' capacity through activating international cultural conventions. This was apparent as China donated 30 million EUR to support the construction of the Algeria opera house. There are also cooperative relations with Iran in the fields of cinema, documents and manuscripts restoration, music, dramatic arts, and visual arts.

As for the rest of the countries, they continue to take the same approach they took before 2016, where 2.3 million USD was allocated to support the archaeological sector in Lebanon, away from culture and the arts. The budget items have not been published, and the research team was able to obtain them.

According to the collected data, Palestine is the only country in which the civil financial support for culture is higher than the government support. The Palestinian National institution—according to the strategic plan of the Foundation for the years 2016-2014 reaches 37 million USD, forming %29 of its general budget over the three years.²

Palestine is the only country in which the civil financial support for culture exceeds its governmental counterpart.

Notably, Tunisia and Morocco attach great importance to investment in culture. This is reflected in budget allocations for culture. In Algeria, Palestine, Sudan and Iraq, the year 2016 witnessed a significant decline in culture funding. The rest of countries did not see any significant changes in both cultural budgets and methods of funding artistic and cultural activities.

¹ Tunisian Ministry of Finance, *Government Budget for 2016*, Section 20: Ministry of Culture and Preserving Heritage, October 2015. Link: <http://bit.ly/2kWmupb>.

² To read the strategic plan of the Collaboration Foundation for 2016-2014, please click [here](#).

Conclusion

As this report shows, a number of basic features define the landscape of cultural policies in the Arab region: the centralisation of cultural activity, the absence of new cultural legislation that could support culture, the decline in culture funding, and the increased violations against freedom of political and cultural expression, as well as freedom of speech. This is accompanied by civic and cultural initiatives in some countries that seek to improve laws that regulate cultural activity.

Polarization dominates the artistic and cultural landscape in the Arab region, six years after the Arab Spring. Several countries covered by the report share in political and social turmoil. Most governments try to associate censorship and restriction with national security, and to subordinate cultural production to their official discourse. It is an essential feature that characterised the regular reports on cultural policies of the previous years and present this year.

This has manifested in using more cultural legislation to hinder collective and organisational work such as is the case in Egypt, where the new law of associations obstructs the development of civil work, and makes the situation more difficult for associations. In Palestine and Sudan, centralized decision-making and bureaucracy continue to slow down cultural production. The absence of new cultural legislation in half of the countries covered by the report clearly indicates the stagnation and ambiguity of cultural policies and strategies. On the other hand, budgets and means of supporting cultural production have decreased in more than one country, especially Algeria, where the budget of the Ministry of Culture has fallen by %65 compared to last year's budget. Ministries of culture, and cultural activities generally, are usually regarded as a luxury. Their budgets are the first to suffer cuts during wartimes and economic crises. However, interest and investment in culture is prominent in Tunisia and Morocco.

Some countries, such as Tunisia, have advanced significantly towards the development of cultural action mechanisms through adopting legislation and policies that are more open to civil work and partnership with civil society organisations. Morocco is on the same path, working eagerly towards more multilateralism and allowing the development of creative industries, as well as individual and collective cultural work.

In all Arab countries, violations of cultural rights have escalated alarmingly. Censorship, prohibition, imprisonment, and detention affects internet activists, bloggers, journalists, and other opinion makers. Artists' unions took politicised, police-like approaches which limit freedom of artistic expression. Arab countries rank low in all international indicators of freedom of expression and cultural production. The report outlines challenges that seriously face cultural rights in the Arab region and a more severe restriction of freedom of expression and freedom to receive support.

The report also observed how centralization dominates cultural activity in the Arab region, particularly in capitals and urban centres. However, Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan have dealt with centralization differently. Cultural actors pressed for greater decentralization, and making art and culture available to a wider audience. In Iraq and Lebanon, attempts to hold cultural events in the periphery continue in initiatives that merit following. The political turmoil in Syria and Yemen is preventing any new developments in this area.

The report has outlined some points that merit further study in the future, such as cultural policies in Tunisia and Morocco, where efforts merit following up at the level of legislation, policies, programmes, and conditions of cultural actors and artists. The success of these efforts may allow cultural actors in the rest of the Arab world to benefit from these experiences and apply them in the near future. Also, the report concentrated on the situation in Tunisia, which remains fragile with regard to repressing dissidents and critics of the authorities.¹

Also noteworthy was the recurrence of the ‘culture and counter-terrorism’ theme. This term was increasingly used during discussions about cultural strategies and policies. Anti-terrorism and cybercrime laws were used to stifle freedom of expression in countries such as Jordan, Tunisia, and Egypt. It is expected that these laws will be increasingly used, under various pretexts, to curb debate and expression, which is especially prominent on cyberspace, due to the absence of free platforms.²

The current state of culture funding also raises many questions about the relationship between funding and sustainability of cultural work. The independent cultural sector is expected to face external funding crises, because international funding sources are dedicating towards humanitarian relief in countries experiencing armed conflicts, such as Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. There may also be vigorous attempts by the authorities to restrict the ability of the independent cultural sector to obtain support. Therefore, cultural actors must concentrate their efforts to preserve and sustain their creative acts away from international financial institutions by exploring models of art funding and management around the world, yet within political and social contexts similar to those of the Arab region.

¹ To read Amnesty International’s report about freedoms in Arab Spring countries, including Tunisia, please click [here](#).

² To read the report from Electronic Frontier Foundation on censorship imposed by governments on expression through the internet, please click [here](#).

