

**ASFARI FOUNDATION**



# MIGRATION TRENDS OF LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN THE LEVANT

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## **UNDERSTANDING THE MIGRATION OF LEVANTINE CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS TO THE GLOBAL NORTH JUXTAPOSED BY INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS REGISTERING IN THE REGION**

This document summarises the key findings, trends, and recommendations regarding the migration of civil society organisations (CSOs) and International Organisations (IOs) in the Levant region, shedding light on their impacts and challenges. It also calls for further research to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play in the region's civil society landscape.

# CONTENTS

## Page numbers

01

02

05

06

07

07

07

07

**Introduction**

**Research Process**

**Local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)**

**Impacts of IOs Migration**

**Humanitarian Focus**

**Recommendations**

**Conclusion**

**Further Research**





## INTRODUCTION

Civil society in the Levant is facing severe challenges, as activists striving for increased freedoms encounter repressive measures. Despite popular demands for greater liberties, deeply entrenched systems of repression persist in the region. Journalists and human rights defenders grapple with life threatening obstacles from the state as they attempt to shed light on and address state abuses. While political rights and civil liberties remain scarce in the presence of despotic regimes, civil society continues to fight for democracy.

In response to the crackdown on civil society, activists, and CSOs have been compelled to explore alternative avenues to champion democracy and human rights. This has led to the establishment of CSO offices and registering in the diaspora or global north. This paper assesses the factors driving CSOs to relocate away from their places of origin and the far-reaching consequences of this shift, for civil society across the region as well as the functioning of Levantine CSOs.

It looks at these impacts alongside the registration of IOs offices in the region and what impacts this has had on local CSOs. Registration in the global south emerged in the 1990s and was driven by prominent organisations such as Oxfam and Action Aid. IOs aimed to bridge the gap between them and local communities as part of the broader localisation agenda that seeks to empower local CSOs. Their motivations beyond the localisation agenda included, credibility and accountability concerns; improved operations by being closer to the contextual realities of countries; access to locally available funds, including government funds; and to align with the shift away from the North-South resource transfer model.

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## RESEARCH PROCESS

The research process

was delineated through

the following steps:

### **Identification of the trend**

The research was instigated by the identification of a recurring pattern wherein CSOs from the Levant region were relocating to the global north, while IOs established their presence in the global south. This observation triggered an investigative interest to better understand the underlying drivers and implications of this phenomenon.



### **Literary Analysis**

An initial phase of desk-based research was undertaken to survey the existing research on these observations. The analysis revealed a noteworthy lack of research addressing the migration of CSOs, but it identified a considerable amount of research on the parallel registration of IOs in the global south. The research landscape signalled an opportunity to delve into the underexplored area of CSO migration.



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## RESEARCH PROCESS

### **Primary Data Collection**

To gain a more profound understanding of the trend, qualitative interviews were conducted with Levant-based CSOs that had relocated to the diaspora or global north. These interviews uncovered first hand insights into the motivations, challenges, and consequences associated with the migration. The findings added nuanced depth, for instance it shed light on a twofold pattern of migration: first to the diaspora and second further north to Europe.



### **Comparative Assessment and Validation**

Parallel to the primary interviews, the research integrated a comparative analysis by drawing upon existing secondary research that explored the migration of IOs to the global south. These findings were then supported by comments and opinions from actors working in the field, which validated the pattern's relevancy to the Levant context.



### **Aim and Objectives**

The overarching aim of the research was to unravel the dynamics of the observed movements and ascertain its potential as a broader trend. The research objectives centred on deciphering the driving forces behind CSO migration, evaluating the impacts on civil society in the Levant, and projecting the potential future implications for both civil society entities and the region.



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## RESEARCH PROCESS

### **Multifaceted Exploration**

Acknowledging the multifaceted nature of the trend, this paper recognises various interconnected issues associated with CSO migration and IOs registration. These complexities are noted throughout, and we hope this paper instigates further exploration into these areas for a comprehensive understanding of the civic space in the region.

In essence, this research methodology strategically integrated desk-based analysis, interviews with actors working in the field, and comparative assessments of different sources for a multifaceted exploration of the observations of parallel CSO migration and IO registration. By synthesizing insights from various sources, we were able to identify the observations as a trend and the research then aimed to provide a comprehensive perspective on the drivers, impacts, and potential future trajectories of the civil society landscape of the Levant region. It also intends to enhance awareness and discourse of the trend with the potential for further research on issues identified in the paper.

# Local Civil

# Society Organisations

# (CSOs)

## 2 Waves of Migration

### First wave

The Levant region has witnessed two distinct waves of migration among local CSOs. The first wave began with actors in Levantine countries who were engaged in democracy building and human rights initiatives. These individuals faced escalating threats from their own governments, including death threats, arrests, and the closure of CSO offices. The onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011 further intensified these threats, compelling many to seek refuge in the diaspora, primarily in Turkey. The diaspora provided relative safety and allowed them to exercise their rights to associate, assemble, and register CSOs. Additionally, it offered cultural affinity and geographical proximity to their home country.

However, the diaspora itself eventually faced increased crackdowns, particularly in Turkey in 2018, forcing Levantine civil society actors to seek even safer alternatives. This gave rise to the second wave of migration, primarily to European countries.

### Second Wave

The second wave of migration was influenced by a combination of push and pull factors. Levantine CSOs in the diaspora no longer enjoyed the benefits that initially prompted their move, as they faced the forced closure of their CSOs, threats, and harassment. Actors in these CSOs were compelled to relocate to Europe, which offered favourable environments for their mandates. Countries like France and Germany provided liberal freedoms that supported the rights to expression, association, and assembly, as well as the ability to register as NGOs.

Remarkably, throughout these waves of migration, it was the management functions of CSOs that migrated, while the rest of the organisation remained close to the native country. This strategic approach allowed CSOs to mitigate the threats they faced while still maintaining a presence in the Levant.



# IMPACTS OF IOs MIGRATION

The migration of IOs had both positive and negative impacts. IOs, with their size and international reputation, possessed the resources and capabilities to exist in shrinking spaces, supporting local civil society in challenging environments. Collaborative dynamics empowered local voices and avoided the dominance of a global north narrative. However, funding disparities with CSOs, talent drain, and dependency on IOs emerged as significant challenges.



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## **HUMANITARIAN FOCUS**

IOs primarily focused on short-term humanitarian efforts, often at the expense of democracy and human rights initiatives. While these efforts addressed immediate crises, they fell short in addressing external factors contributing to migration, such as macroeconomic issues and ad-hoc deportation measures in host countries. This resulted in the disenfranchisement of migrants in host countries, hindering their participation in civil society and democracy-building efforts.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

To address these challenges and enhance the health of civil society in the Levant, several recommendations are proposed:

- Provide migrants with a voice and encourage space for CSO independence.
- Conduct an independent review of the aid architecture to enhance coordination.
- Explore collaborative South-South cooperation to empower local voices.
- Prioritize long-term humanitarian agendas that address structural issues.
- Encourage IOs to focus on democracy and human rights building alongside short-term humanitarian efforts.

## **CONCLUSION**

The observed migration patterns among IOs and CSOs underscore the importance of credibility and adaptability in the face of repression. Levantine CSOs have shown resilience in finding ways to continue their fight for democracy. However, it's essential to ensure there is a balance of power and collaboration between IOs and CSOs to secure the future of civic space in the Levant.

## **FURTHER RESEARCH**

This paper highlights interconnected issues that warrant further exploration:

- The role of donors and their impact on power imbalances between IOs and CSOs, as well as the focus of IOs' work.
- The reality of Levantine CSOs operating in Europe and the challenges they face.
- The voices of migrants and their ability to establish CSOs in host countries.
- How the findings in this paper fit into the wider repressive environment in the Levant.



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