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## **First Middle East & North Africa civil society regional roundtable on RtoP convened by ICRtoP and Permanent Peace Movement**

From 17-18 December 2012, the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect and Coalition member,

[Permanent Peace Movement](#)

(PPM), convened a regional workshop for civil society organizations from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Held in Broumana, Lebanon, this two-day event served to increase awareness and understanding of the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP, R2P), highlight the relevance of the norm to conflicts in the region and learn from civil society on how RtoP relates to the existing work of their organizations. As this was the first such event in the region, the majority of participants had a limited background on the norm.

NGO delegates participated from throughout the region, with representation from fourteen MENA states and territories. Participants came from a range of diverse backgrounds, with individuals representing organizations working on women's rights, international justice, inter-communal peacebuilding, and human rights research and documentation. Additionally, there was representation by the League of Arab States, the Lebanese Parliament, the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and RtoP (OGPRtoP), the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA), and the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC).

### *Day one*

The morning session of the first day included presentations by the ICRtoP and WFUNA focusing on the norm's background and the operationalization of RtoP, respectively. ICRtoP's Outreach Officer, Megan Schmidt, reflected on how the Responsibility to Protect developed into a norm unanimously endorsed by Heads of State and government at the 2005 World Summit, as well as how RtoP has advanced since then. In focusing on the operationalization of RtoP, WFUNA's RtoP Officer, Laura Spano, provided an overview of the range of preventive and reactive measures available to actors at all levels. Additionally, she assessed both conceptual

and operational challenges for the norm and clarified several common misconceptions.

In the afternoon, presentations focused on related agendas and the role of national and regional actors in implementing RtoP. Ms. Fawziya Al Hani of the Forum of Gulf Dialogue (Saudi Arabia) spoke on the topic of gender and RtoP, and reflected on the work of her organization to challenge the social culture in Saudi Arabia to establish the environment and mechanisms necessary to empower women and advocate for equal rights. Following this discussion, Dr. Raouf Sayah, a retired General from the Lebanese Armed Forces, provided a historical overview of the global experiences of crimes against civilians and international measures taken, including the adoption of international humanitarian and human rights law, to ensure their protection. Mr. Ghassan Mokhayber of the Lebanese Parliament and Mr. Fadi Abi Allam of Permanent Peace Movement then presented on the role of national and regional actors, with Mr. Mokhayber stating that a key remaining challenge is mobilizing the political will to operationalize protection. The final presentation of the day, by Mr. Abi Allam, highlighted the central role of early warning in ensuring that situations do not deteriorate, and recalled the importance of peacebuilding to ensure the necessary rebuilding of institutions and healing of communities post-conflict.

### *Day two*

The workshop's second day included panels with presentations by Ms. Eli Smette of the OGPRtoP, who, in addition to discussing the mandate and work of the Office, provided a legal analysis on RtoP crimes with regional examples from case law. Participants then examined the cases of Yemen, Egypt, Bahrain, the Occupied Palestinian territories, and Libya, with civil society experts from the countries assessing if and how RtoP applied to the situations. Additionally, a roundtable discussion was held to examine the ongoing crisis in Syria, the risks of sectarian violence within the country, and the threat of regional spillover of the war. The countries in focus showcased the range of situations in and relevance of RtoP for the MENA region, with some countries in a state of instability, others taking action to rebuild institutions and communities post-crisis, and still others continuing to experience gross human rights violations and RtoP crimes. As in any crisis, the discussion showcased the unique elements of each case, illustrating the diverse political and humanitarian considerations that influence responses by actors, as well as the challenges that arise in preventing and responding to RtoP crimes. As workshop participants originated and traveled from states where there has been the threat or commission of RtoP crimes, they reflected on their experience and country history to discuss how RtoP could be further implemented in this region. While participants learned a great deal about the application of RtoP during this session, the organizers gained invaluable knowledge and greater insight into the complexities facing the countries and region as a whole from those in the room.

The afternoon session divided participants into small group sessions to strategize on how civil society can promote and advocate for RtoP in the region, the role of MENA governments and inter-governmental bodies in supporting the operationalization of the norm both regionally and

globally, and if and how participants' organizations can incorporate RtoP within their work. Challenges identified by both groups included the lack of awareness of RtoP amongst civil society, governments, and intergovernmental bodies in the region; the political climate, as some states are experiencing unrest or are following a period of transition and others are fully immersed in a state of crisis; and the lack of financial support both for carrying out civil society activities on mass atrocities prevention, as well as developing or strengthening national and regional mechanisms to operationalize RtoP. Although some participants noted that work on RtoP would be difficult if not impossible in some cases, due to the situations within their countries, the groups discussed a range of actions that could be taken to promote RtoP amongst their constituencies, including organizing activities on the norm or establishing committees on the Responsibility to Protect within their organizations.

### *Conclusion*

At the start of the workshop, participants questioned the feasibility of implementing RtoP, particularly with regard to various regional situations and developments. There were points raised on the challenge in mobilizing the political will needed for states to act, fear that RtoP would be misused by domestic or international actors, and skepticism of how this norm differed from humanitarian intervention. However, as the workshop and discussion continued over the two days, participants increasingly agreed that, as states and the international community bear a Responsibility to Protect, RtoP can serve as a tool to hold governments as well as the international community accountable to protect populations from mass atrocities. There was agreement on the importance of prevention, understanding that this is the central tenet of the Responsibility to Protect, and understanding that the RtoP framework puts forward a spectrum of measures needed to prevent and respond to the threat of RtoP crimes. In discussing the challenges facing RtoP in the region, participants noted the critical role that civil society could play in overcoming these issues and advancing the norm. As the workshop came to a close, it was clear that there was overall support for and interest in further discussions and engagement on RtoP's applicability for the region.

*The ICRtoP would like to thank the co-organizers at the Permanent Peace Movement for their partnership on this initiative as well as all speakers and participants for working with us in this first step to advance RtoP in the Middle East and North Africa. The Coalition and PPM will be publishing a report on the roundtable in English and Arabic in the coming weeks.*

**See agenda**

[here](#)

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