

The World Humanities Report

# Case Study: The Arab Council for the Social Sciences

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# Case Study: The Arab Council for the Social Sciences

Reem Joudi Arab Council for the Social Sciences

The Arab Council for the Social Sciences (ACSS),<sup>1</sup> established in 2010 in Beirut, is a regional nongovernmental organization that aims to strengthen social science research and knowledge production in the Arab world. It supports academic institutions and researchers in their research, publishing and pedagogical endeavors. Their aim is to foster and “enrich public debate about the challenges facing Arab societies.”<sup>2</sup> These challenges are multifaceted, cutting across the heterogeneous social, political, and cultural landscapes that shape the region.

The ACSS identifies and addresses the needs of social science and humanities (SSH) communities and scholars in the Arab region; builds the research capacities of individual researchers and academic institutions; promotes and produces high-quality, independent research; provides spaces for scholarly debate, communication, and exchange; supports the role of SSH for social justice and policymaking, encourages and supports critical thought and intellectual freedom; forges and maintains networks among researchers, academics, policymakers, and the media; and disseminates research within and outside the Arab region.

The ACSS’s research support programs include small and medium grants for researchers, teams, and institutions; postdoctoral fellowships; conferences, forums, and lectures; as well as the Arab Social Sciences Monitor (ASSM) led by Nada Chaya. The ASSM is dedicated to “surveying the landscape and assessing the trajectory of social science research in Arab countries as well as following up on emergent research agendas and themes.”<sup>3</sup> Using quantitative and qualitative research, it documents and analyzes regional knowledge production infrastructures, characteristics common to SSH communities, and existing and possible roles for SSH research in policy and public debate in the region.

The extensive quantitative and qualitative research is showcased and analyzed in a biennial ACSS publication, titled the *Arab Social Sciences Report* (ASSR). So

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.theacss.org>.

<sup>2</sup> ACSS responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> “Arab Social Science Monitor,” Arab Council for the Social Sciences, <http://www.theacss.org/pages/arab-social-science-monitor>.

far, there have been three editions. The lead author of the third ASSR (2019), Ahmad Dallal, looked at which institutional and occupational features support or hinder the career paths of SSH scholars in the Arab region. In one of the commissioned background papers informing the report, historical anthropologist Fadi Bardawil examined the autobiographies of Arab intellectuals. He notes the value of life histories in providing “valuable insights about the workings of Arab intellectual, and academic, spheres,” as well as presenting “detailed first-hand accounts of how the political powers of the postcolonial Arab states undermined the autonomy of research and teaching at their universities”; “ethnographic vignettes” of daily life at particular historical moments; and indications of how “Arab intellectuals position themselves in relation to linguistic and geographic landscapes.”<sup>4</sup>

As part of their effort to support more innovative and diverse research, the ACSS engages in regional and international collaborations, noting that “networking with universities and other institutions in the region allows [the ACSS] to reach more researchers and to identify and address their needs.” The organization also fosters more inclusive “forums for exchange” among regional social scientists and humanities scholars.<sup>5</sup> They offer undergraduate and graduate students mentorship, training workshops, and online courses, and they supplement university teaching through research and support.<sup>6</sup>

The ACSS funds junior and senior scholars through a host of grants programs, encouraging research publication on the region by indigenous scholars. They offer training and networking opportunities for aspiring, early career, and established academics. The organization provides publishing, pedagogical, and discussion platforms intended to support more eclectic, critical, and relevant thinking for better quality research in the Arabic language.

Their emphasis on South-South engagement is exemplified by their collaboration with the Latin American Council of Social Sciences and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa. They likewise note the importance of working with institutions in Western Europe and the United States, notably through their partnerships with the Fondation Maison des sciences de l’homme in France and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The ACSS’s pedagogical initiatives include summer schools for undergrad-

<sup>4</sup> Fadi Bardawil, “Memoirs of Arab Intellectuals: An Archive of Intellectual Practices,” *Arab Social Sciences Report 3* (2019): 1, 2.

<sup>5</sup> ACSS, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey.

<sup>6</sup> Included in their list of university partners are the American University of Beirut, the Lebanese American University, the American University in Cairo, Cairo University, Birzeit University (Palestine), and Sfax University (Tunisia).

uates, postgraduates, and early career scholars; mentorship around publishing; and ethics training programs.<sup>7</sup> Each looks to rethink how research is valued and approached in Arab universities. The New Generation project, launched as a pilot in 2015 in collaboration with UNESCO, addressed high school students for the first time. It involved research on what high school students, teachers, principals, and parents know about potential careers and majors in SSH fields, as well as the factors shaping their attitudes toward them. The ACSS also created and tested tools to counter prevalent misconceptions around humanistic fields of study, including the idea that social sciences are reserved for lower-achieving students. This included a film titled *Towards a New Generation of Social Scientists*, which was meant to provide examples of related university majors and career choices. This project fed into the conception and launch of the New Generation Fellowship: “a new generation of social scientists who are committed to critical scholarship and research, teaching and mentorship, and public engagement.”<sup>8</sup> The ACSS efforts therefore offer a crucial and critical bridge between the humanistic sciences and the lived realities in the region. Equally important, they strengthen research infrastructures and networks for collaboration for academic communities on various local and regional fronts.

The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the financial and political crises facing the ACSS offices, headquartered in Lebanon, caused financial obstacles, canceled events, and fundamental changes to working dynamics. The pandemic indirectly shed light on existing inequalities in various sectors, including academia, thus emphasizing the need to rethink research and knowledge production in times of crisis and in contexts of ongoing wars and structural violence. To clarify the effects of COVID-19 on Arab scholars, the ACSS carried out a survey. The results indicated that scholars spent less time teaching while their efforts to publish were stunted.<sup>9</sup> Women with children were disproportionately affected: at the same time that they worked at home, they were left with the bulk of the labor associated with childcare.

<sup>7</sup> The first cycle of the research ethics project was launched in 2020 under the title “Ethical Dilemmas in the Social Sciences.” It aims to tackle three main focus areas: respect of research participants, security, and power relations.

<sup>8</sup> “New Generation Fellowship,” Arab Council for the Social Sciences, <http://www.theacss.org/pages/NEW-GENERATION-FELLOWSHIP>.

<sup>9</sup> Caroline Krafft, *Academic Challenges in the Time of COVID-19: Arab Social Scientists and Humanists in Focus* (Arab Council for the Social Sciences, 2020), 30, [https://www.theacss.org/uploads/cke\\_documents/COVID-19-Survey-Report\\_DEC2020.pdf](https://www.theacss.org/uploads/cke_documents/COVID-19-Survey-Report_DEC2020.pdf).

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