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VIEWPOINT

The state of Arab philanthropy and the case for change

Naila Farouky

ABSTRACT

The Arab Foundations Forum (AFF) has spent the past two years studying the landscape in which the forum functions. AFF, as a membership-based network of philanthropic foundations based in and/or working in the Arab region, is uniquely positioned to canvass the region's donors, grant-makers, and civil society players, and to draw conclusions about the state of the region's philanthropic sector. The overarching conclusion presented in this viewpoint is that there are many challenges, but also ways in which we can help to mitigate these challenges over time. The article points to three key ways in which the philanthropic sector is being challenged.

L'Arab Foundations Forum (AFF) a passé les deux dernières années à étudier le paysage au sein duquel fonctionne le forum. L'AFF, en tant que réseau formé de membres de fondations philanthropiques basées et/ou travaillant dans la région arabe, occupe une position sans pareille pour sonder les bailleurs de fonds, entités d'octroi de subventions et acteurs de la société civile de la région, et pour tirer les conclusions de ces enquêtes quant à l'état du secteur philanthropique de la région. La conclusion globale présentée dans ce point de vue est qu'il y a de nombreux défis en présence, mais qu'il y a également des manières de contribuer à atténuer ces difficultés au fil du temps. Cet article indique les trois défis clés auxquels est confronté le secteur philanthropique.

Durante los últimos dos años, el Foro de Fundaciones Árabes (FFA) ha estado estudiando el ámbito en que se desenvuelve. El FFA, una red basada en la membresía de fundaciones filantrópicas, localizadas en —o trabajando en— la región árabe, se encuentra en condiciones excepcionales para sondear a los donantes, a las agencias financiadoras y a los integrantes de la sociedad civil de la región, lo que le permite llegar a conclusiones respecto a la situación en que se encuentra este sector en esa zona. A manera de conclusión general, el artículo establece que existen muchos retos, así como maneras para que, con el pasar del tiempo, se puedan mitigar los desafíos. Al respecto, el artículo examina tres maneras importantes en que el sector filantrópico está siendo desafiado.

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Introduction

There was a watershed moment in 2011, across the Arab region, when hope dared to rise. Following on the heels of the “domino uprisings” that seemed to sweep across the region – Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria, to name a few – there was perhaps but an inkling of that hope, but it was there nonetheless.

Not the obvious hope of new beginnings and fresh starts and an end to oppressive regimes and all of that. I'm referring more to the hope of what the consequences of all that could be: the hope that maybe, finally, there would be a paradigm shift that would allow for some of the decades-old

bureaucracies to at least diminish a little, the hope that maybe some of the more draconian laws restricting the freedoms of civilians would be somewhat lifted and relieved, the hope that we may finally be a region – in all its vastness and diversity and the sheer richness of our resources – that is allowed to begin building societies that can flourish and reach a modicum of the potential they promise. It was a significant moment, to say the least. And now, five years later, we take stock of where that moment has led us.

At the Arab Foundations Forum (AFF), we have spent the past two years in purposeful study of the landscape in which our forum functions – specifically the landscape of philanthropy and the players within it. AFF, as a membership-based network of philanthropic foundations based in and/or working in the Arab region, is uniquely positioned to canvass the region’s donors, grant-makers, and civil society players, and to draw conclusions about the state of the region’s philanthropic sector. The overarching conclusion is that there are many challenges, but also there are ways in which we can help to mitigate these challenges over time.

For focus and brevity, we can point to three key ways in which the philanthropic sector is being challenged:

- (1) The political environment is generally un-enabling for philanthropy to thrive in any significant way.
- (2) The lack of accountability and transparency in the sector – in fact, the lack of any expectation of either – is an impediment to the potential impact (and the measurement thereof) this sector can have.
- (3) The egregious lack of comprehensive data, even in the most basic sense, on the sector and on the deployment of philanthropic capital throughout the region is arguably catastrophic or, at the very least, of huge concern.

The big picture: where does Arab philanthropy currently stand? A SWOT analysis

One way to take stock and analyse the ecosystem of philanthropy in the Arab region is to apply the SWOT analysis approach – an examination of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing the region and our philanthropy ecosystem. This is also useful in providing an overview of the many pieces that make up the whole of this ecosystem.

Strengths

- The recent geo-political transition across the Arab region means there is increased awareness of the possibility of and potential for further change, as well as the awareness of the potential power of civil society and philanthropy in contributing to effective change.
- A burgeoning “youth bulge” across the region means there is a current and future generation of “change-makers” to be harnessed. The youth population (under 25 years old) in the region is estimated to be about 50% of the region’s approximately 380 million people – 190 million people who are poised to contribute to the region’s economy and development.
- There is wealth across the region, both in fiscal terms and human resources, which means there is abundant capital to be deployed.
- There is a long-standing tradition of giving in the region, so there is an embedded culture of giving and the will to give towards social good and change.
- Increasingly, there is awareness and readiness by players in the sector to implement more cutting-edge, innovative ways of giving – be it crowd-funding, legacy philanthropy, impact investing, etc.
- A multi-million-dollar capital market of regional philanthropy offers an advantage in light of reduced regional government spending on civil society and social issues. It can help fill the gap and will allow private sector capital to be increasingly deployed for public good.

Weaknesses

- A lack of strategic planning that goes beyond five years and a lack of a forensic accounting of crises and deep-rooted examination of the issues that lead to crises mean that impact is thwarted, interventions are short term, mitigation of those challenges is obstructed, and overall sustainability is threatened.
- Although there is wealth across the region, that wealth is unevenly distributed which decreases the opportunities for collaboration and cooperation among Arab donors.
- An egregious lack of data, knowledge-sharing, and a will to collaborate grossly diminish the potential for lasting impact.
- A weak infrastructure – be it on the government level, or other support institutions (education, banking, etc.) – means there is a lack of support for the implementation of more cutting-edge and innovative means of philanthropic giving across borders.

Opportunities

- There is renewed interest among philanthropists in the region to explore new, global trends in giving – whether strategic philanthropy, venture philanthropy, impact investing, and so on – and this allows for the opportunity to engage philanthropists in a new way.
- Access to a more global and connected platform allows for ease in sharing information and knowledge, engaging a more global audience, and is particularly useful in engaging a younger, more cyber-engaged population across the region.
- Shared interest – both regionally and globally – in combating the current rise in radicalisation means there is an opportunity to collaborate and engage in innovative ways to provide alternatives to the Arab region's youth and to create more long-term, sustainable models of giving and impact.
- There is a small, but rapid, growth community around social enterprise that some actors the region are nurturing, embracing, and connecting to youth. The future of Arab philanthropy, given the size of the youth demographic, may not be in more foundations but instead may appear in the form of a youth population with a sense of social purpose and the ability to create their own businesses that are both financially viable and able to resolve a social challenge at scale.
- The advent of Arab foundations adopting more progressive and high-impact models than the traditional, simply "cheque writing" grant-making foundations means there is potential to catalyse the professionalisation of the sector and instigate a paradigm shift.

Threats

- The majority of the burgeoning youth bulge in the region is disenfranchised. This has manifested in an increased sense of frustration and further inclination towards radicalisation.
- Regional governments are unreliable and inconsistent in terms of the laws and policies that govern the sector, which means that the environment is unpredictable and doesn't allow for any meaningful long-term planning and strategic development.
- The growing restrictions in the region vis-à-vis the philanthropic sector have forced many international NGOs to close down and leave. This has left many local NGOs and implementing partners on the ground with unfinished and unfunded interventions that are necessary, but have been abandoned.
- Increasingly, there is growing mistrust among regional governments, as well as growing mistrust globally vis-à-vis the region, that has halted intra-regional giving, if not rendered much of it forbidden altogether.

- Without question, the continuing threat of war and general instability in the region – Syria, Yemen, Libya, Egypt, to name a few – poses seemingly insurmountable challenges to the philanthropic sector in at least two ways:
 - Development and aid funding are being continuously diverted from long-term and sustainable programmes and activities and are going towards emergency and humanitarian relief.
 - The constant state of instability and war make it difficult for any philanthropic and development funding to move with ease across borders.

The trifecta of obstacles

When we examine the philanthropy landscape from the vantage point of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, we may find that the picture is somewhat bleak and leaves much to be desired. While that may be the case in some areas, there are several reasons why that may be the case, as well as some reasons for hope and a more encouraging future to strive toward.

On the whole, much of Arab philanthropy is deeply rooted in a religious tradition of giving. Whether it is the Islamic model of charitable giving, *waqf* (loosely translated as endowment); *zakat* (alms or charitable giving, which is the third pillar in Islam and is obligatory for believers); *sadaqa* (benevolence and voluntary giving, which differs from Islam in that it is not obligatory); or the Coptic Christian *oshour* (non-obligatory giving to the Church of up to 10% of wages) and *bokour* (non-obligatory donation to the Church of one's first full month salary), a high proportion of giving in the region is motivated by religion. To that end, there is also a model of anonymity as regards the giving – the more anonymous the giving, the higher the value placed on that giving. Beyond God, there is little to incentivise the average citizen to give.

The general lack of a metrics for accountability and transparency across all sectors in the region has created a culture where no expectation of either exists. Some would argue that the concepts of accountability and transparency in the context of Arab philanthropy need to be reviewed through the lens of the region and culture, rather than imposing a taxonomy that is foreign and, therefore, inapplicable. Regardless, the fact remains that, to date, we have yet to define a metrics through which these values can be applied, and this means that in many ways Arab philanthropy has struggled to measure up against a global scale because it has remained opaque.

Adding to the obfuscation of accountability and transparency in the region is the lack of data on the sector. While there are a number of reputable and well-resourced institutions across the region with the capability to collect, aggregate, analyse, and share data, we have yet to find the model by which these institutions are funded and supported in a meaningful way.

Accountability and transparency: the case for creating an Arab taxonomy

It would not be an exaggeration to say there is a lack of accountability and transparency in the Arab region overall. For the purposes of this discussion, we will focus on the philanthropic sector. There tends to be an assumption, especially in today's geo-political climate, that Arab philanthropists and NGOs are opaque because they have something to hide. And this isn't necessarily an assumption that is only being made from outside of the region looking in – by most accounts, the degree of scrutiny which non-profit entities, grantors and grantees alike, are being subjected to is indicative of a level of mistrust aimed at this sector that is quite disturbing. It all leads to that assumption that “philanthropy and terrorism” are somehow linked. The truth is this is very far from the reality. In most cases, the reasons why the philanthropic sector in the Arab region does not practise accountability and transparency with any consistency can be explained by far less sinister reasons.

Namely, there are three key reasons: (1) there is no expectation for transparency and/or accountability at any official level (government or otherwise). Unless an organisation has a requirement for

this in their own internal governance, there are no defined metrics by which accountability and transparency are defined; (2) there is no incentive – and, in fact, there are many disincentives – for non-profit and philanthropic entities to be fully transparent in any official capacity; and (3) in many cases, for players in the sector – particularly if they are visible and well-regarded – it is safer to fund and invest in the spaces that are condoned by the government in question rather than risk the consequences of trying to invest in spaces that may be deemed “threatening” or undesirable by the regime.

When we consider the case for creating a more contextualised taxonomy for the values of accountability and transparency, it bears noting that the rejection of those concepts is not mutually exclusive to the rejection of their value – it only indicates a need to present them in a way that is more applicable to the region’s context in which they will serve their function. Whatever metrics will be designed need to take into account the various environmental factors of the region – the institutions and government infrastructures that govern the policies of practice around giving, the incentives (or lack thereof) that giving is channelled within, and the paradigms through which giving is perceived.

It does bear noting, however, that in certain pockets throughout the region – the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region (comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), specifically – there is a move towards re-examining the parameters of accountability and transparency, and we are witnessing a slowly emerging trend in the acknowledgment of applying metrics to these values. In the rest of the region, many corporate foundations, as well as some of the larger entities – for example, PalTel and Welfare Association in Palestine, the Hani Qaddumi Scholarship Foundation in Jordan (serving Palestinian students), the Sawiris Foundation and the CIB Foundation in Egypt, to name a few – inasmuch as they are able, without confronting penalties, have a desire and a concerted effort to publish consistent annual reports and to be more transparent about finances than in the past. However, we have yet to see the kind of transparency and openness in the sector within the region where details concerning the distribution of finances are shared. For example, while annual reports may outline overall grant-making and programme support, we are hard-pressed to find an organisation that discloses its spending on overheads and direct operational costs. The gap in this information, while making it easier to estimate giving in the aggregate, does not reveal the full picture as it does not show how that giving compares to the overall spending of an organisation: in short, how much does it cost for a foundation to do what it does and give what it gives?

Data – the big black hole

In the most basic sense, there is no data-point in the region where one can find a comprehensive view of the sector. When we think of the data we need in order to be better informed, we think in terms of the “5 Ws and the H” – the “*who, what, where, when, why and how?*” of the sector. Who is doing what? Where are they doing it? When? Why are they doing it, and with whom? And, lastly, how are they doing it? While we have some access to that information, we certainly don’t have the comprehensive picture. Our position is that, in order for the sector to be formalised and informed, we should be able to at least have the answers to the “5 Ws and the H”.

The data are simply not available and haven’t been collected in any coordinated way by regional entities. However, the data are being gathered by external, foreign entities and it is also being analysed and reported by non-regional players. This poses a threat to the region and here’s why: when we don’t own our own data, we also do not own the narrative. And, in turn we do not own nor can we tell our own story. But when these data are owned by someone else, *they* are the owners of the narrative, and the message and the results are skewed and biased – unintentionally in most cases, but the fact remains that the nuances, local contexts, and local views are ultimately not accurately represented and the results of that can be less than desirable, at the very minimum.

It is worth noting, however, that there are examples more recently of local, reputable, and very capable entities and institutions taking on the issue of data and examining it, as well as contributing to it, in an impactful and meaningful way. For instance, the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy

and Civic Engagement at the American University in Cairo has undertaken a multi-country, regional research scan of the philanthropy landscape in three countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates). The final results of that research are expected to be available by the end of 2016 or beginning of 2017 and will add important data to locally sourced information and knowledge on the sector in the region by the sector in the region.

Similarly, the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation in the UAE places great value on education and research, and serves as a bridge between the research and policy-making communities – bringing attention to the public policy issues that are important to Ras Al Khaima (an Emirate of the UAE) and, in turn, disseminating research findings in order to promote innovative policy tools and models that will impact positive social change and can be replicated across the region.

Another example of a regional entity leading the charge on the conversation around data and their values is the Emirates Foundation for Youth Development in Abu Dhabi. Emirates Foundation hosts an annual conference on youth and, for 2016, the theme of the conference will focus on big data, offering the opportunity for Arab regional foundations, academic institutions, and policymakers to convene around the issue and share information and knowledge that is likely to prove to be of immense value to the sector.

These are but a few examples of the trajectory of the region's recognition of the value inherent in sound and scientific research and data, but more emphasis needs to be placed on the overall value of long-term investment in these institutions and the purposeful funding and deployment of capital toward the sustainability of the regional entities that can deliver such research and data. In some cases, the focus of organisations and governments when collecting data has been more on quantitative rather than qualitative data. While the quantitative data are useful, they do not present a comprehensive view and therefore the narrative is half-complete.

One of the ways in which locally sourced data and knowledge can be more beneficial is for there to be less of a disconnect between the producers of the knowledge and those for whom and about whom the knowledge is produced. If we agree that data are not only useful in and of themselves, but that they also help towards producing a narrative that can be made accessible to the public beyond simply those who are "in the sector", then finding ways to address this disconnect will undoubtedly increase the chances for more sustainable and impactful outcomes for the philanthropic sector.

Government – where is our enabling environment?

In the 1990s, the trend in Western foreign policy was to support civil society organisations by way of providing significant foreign aid in an attempt to promote the gradual move toward democratic change across the Arab region. Some may argue that this was naïve, particularly when viewed from the vantage point of hindsight, when we know that democratic transitions have failed to materialise in the Arab region in any meaningful way (Langohr 2005; Yom 2005).

Over time, many regional observers have all but lost faith in civil society and its importance and potential impact. Fair or not, this has brought to bear certain outcomes that leave much to be desired in the way of progress. For one thing, it has allowed governments in the region to essentially marginalise civil society and, in some cases, to go so far as to criminalise it.

More recently, the processes for receiving foreign funds and making cross-border grants in the Arab region have become increasingly challenging, leaving many non-profit entities unable to find ways to navigate these obstacles in order to get down to the business of getting things done. Many Arab foundations, for instance, are set up with headquarters in the US or Europe, with branch (or, secondary) offices based in the region. But with the growing restrictions being placed by regional, as well as global, banks it is becoming more and more difficult to receive grant funding and to make grants – in some cases, even within the country itself.

There is a growing narrative that boils down to the assumption that "philanthropy leads to terrorism". Not only is this a dangerous premise to consider, it also has dire consequences for the region's

civil society and philanthropy sectors, leaving them vulnerable and exposed to threats that are difficult to reign in.

An examination of the FATF (Financial Action Task Force) recommendations as they pertain to the non-profit sector is reason enough to pay close attention to this pervasive narrative and to develop ways to counter it. FATF is “an inter-governmental body established in Paris in 1989 by the Group of 7 (G7). It seeks to combat money laundering, terrorist financing and other threats to the international financial system. It is both a policy-making and enforcement body.”

The Task Force was initially set up to tackle the issues of money laundering and misuse of financial institutions resulting from drug trafficking in the 1990s. Initially, FAFT laid out 40 detailed recommendations on ways to mitigate this threat. In the period post-9/11, an additional eight special recommendations were added and the FATF’s mandate grew to include the fight against terrorist financing. Finally, in 2004, a ninth recommendation was added (The Non-Profit Platform on the FAFT n.d.a).

Among the 40 recommendations, the one that is the most worrisome for the non-profit, NGO, and foundation sector is Recommendation 8. It states that:

“Countries should review the adequacy of laws and regulations that relate to entities that can be abused for the financing of terrorism. Non-profit organizations are particularly vulnerable, and countries should ensure that they cannot be misused:

- (a) by terrorist organizations posing as legitimate entities;
- (b) to exploit legitimate entities as conduits for terrorist financing, including for the purpose of escaping asset-freezing measures; and
- (c) to conceal or obscure the clandestine diversion of funds intended for legitimate purposes to terrorist organizations.” (The Non-Profit Platform on the FAFT n.d.b)

Essentially, Recommendation 8 and its Interpretative Note require countries to review the activities, size, and any other relevant features of the NGO and NPO sector within their purview, as well as the adequacy of applicable laws and regulations. It also requires countries to gather pertinent information from the NGO and NPO sectors by reaching out to them and to subsequently take appropriate action by instigating investigations where abuse is suspected.

More recently, 123 diverse NGOs, peace builders, and other donor organisations from 46 countries have signed a letter asking FATF to revise Recommendation 8 due to some of the negative consequences and impact the recommendation has had on the charitable and development sectors.

For one thing, there is no evidence that NGOs are particularly vulnerable to financial misuse compared to other sectors and very little evidence that points to actual misuse among the NGO sector worldwide of funds – for that reason alone, the stipulations of the recommendation need to be reviewed and clarified. For another, the argument is that Recommendation 8 “*misleads governments to apply heightened measures to the entire NPO [NGO] sector that result in over-regulation of the sector and various restrictions*” (Global NPO Coalition on FATF 2016).

The implications of such sweeping generalisations about the sector – and particularly with the complete lack of any credible evidence to support them – are many. The growing restrictions across the Arab region in making or receiving any amount of grant money are jarring and, in many cases, bring about insurmountable challenges that have caused the complete paralysis of some organisations. Ask any Arab philanthropic entity how they would rate their experience – particularly in the past two years – vis-à-vis their banking and financial transaction process, and you will hear a very familiar and oft-repeated lament. Furthermore, over-regulation of the sector means that progress for many activities and programme-based foundations is impeded, and often with negative consequences.

What is next for Arab philanthropy?

The Arab region is undeniably at a crossroads. There are winds of change across all aspects of the region’s societies and, on the whole, this presents a unique opportunity for the philanthropic and

civil society sectors to play a role in galvanising and advocating for change. In some cases, the more aggressive and confrontational changes will have to give way to subtler and more benign approaches to achieve systemic change, but this should not deter the sector from taking the initial steps towards implementing more short-term interventions with a view towards long-term paradigm shifts. It can be argued that for any real paradigm shift to occur, one must expect to be patient to the tune of two generations, or 50 years. That may seem like a cumbersome feat, but the reality is that no change occurs in a vacuum, nor does it occur overnight. The time is now, and what follows are some of the ways in which we can instigate that change.

We need to *professionalise* the sector by putting in place some of the best practices necessary for creating a standard by which we can be measured and held accountable. If this necessitates the creation of a more culturally contextualised metric of transparency and accountability that borrows from, but does not necessarily duplicate, a non-Arab taxonomy, then so be it, but it needs to be done. We also need to raise the standards of practice for the sector and find ways in which to attract the talent and resource of the region to the sector – the argument can be made that the more professional, resource rich, and formalised the sector is, the more attractive it is to those who can contribute to it.

Advocacy can be an immensely useful tool for making the case for change and the Arab region is in no shortage of causes to advocate for. As it pertains to the sector, we need to advocate for incentives that target the average citizen beyond the high net-worth individual and the corporate/private sector. Initiatives such as signing the letter petitioning FATF to revise Recommendation 8 in order to ease some of the more cumbersome restrictions on the laws and policies governing the sector are one way to do that. Collaborating with global entities on initiatives that address global issues on a government level, such as the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) or UN agencies prevalent in the field, and providing context for some of the advocacy initiatives is another mechanism to be leveraged and an effective way to advocate for change in a collective and visible way, and not addressing the challenges in isolation. At the Arab Foundations Forum, for example, we are always seeking ways in which we can bring forward the different conversations that need to be had around the issues that face our sector, but we attempt to always remain mindful of the context in which we have those discussions. We've found that by creating the space for the players in the sector to convene and discuss the pressing and pertinent issues offers the opportunity for the collective to worry less about being perceived as dissenting or as the "lone voice," and more as unified and cohesive about their concerns and recommended approaches for change.

Understanding and appreciating the value of sound *research and data*, investing in the institutions that can provide that data and research, and investing in an approach that allows for a more forensic accounting of our region's challenges, will go a long way in providing a better documented, and therefore accountable, sector. This approach will lend credibility to the sector and will allow it to measure its impact and sustainability against a framework that is more global, ultimately garnering a level of respect and gravitas for the sector in the region and beyond.

Finally, and this cannot be stressed more urgently, an engagement of the region's most precious and abundant resource – its *youth* – is possibly the single most effective way in which Arab philanthropy and civil society can effect long-term change. We need to introduce policies and programmes that help encourage entrepreneurship in the social impact sphere and facilitate the process by which the region's youth can participate in this space.

At the Arab Foundations Forum we have acknowledged this opportunity and the riches it can bestow on the region and, to that end, we are partnering with a number of our youth-focused member foundations, in collaboration with the OECD's Net Forward Accelerating Impact 2030 (AI2030) campaign, to create a coalition that will address the issues of youth engagement and the creation of substantive opportunities for the region's youth with a view towards long-term impact and contribution to the sector.

The initiative, which consists of a platform where foundations and other development actors can learn, dialogue, and take action together, will enable foundations to engage together in order to

achieve mutual development objectives faster and with greater impact, while helping them make resource allocation decisions into key areas that are critical to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The initiative is based on three key pillars, knowledge, dialogue, and partnerships, and seeks to complement existing advocacy and data-gathering efforts by creating bridges between different sets of development actors and allowing them to learn, dialogue, and implement innovative partnerships that are based on enhanced impact at scale (netFWD 2015).

Ultimately, it is the congruence of all these interventions that will help pave the way toward a more systemic shift in the ecosystem of philanthropy and civil society. With a more purposeful approach to the mitigation of our region's challenges, and particularly as they pertain to the sector, we are likely to find points and flashes of hope and success springing up along the way. The hope is that we will begin to lay the foundation for a more cohesive, informed, impactful, and sustainable sector – one that will not only aspire to effect significant change, but will achieve it.

Notes on contributor

Naila Farouky is CEO of the Arab Foundations Forum (AFF), a virtual network with presence in Amman, Jordan; Cairo, Egypt; and Tunis, Tunisia. Naila Farouky is currently based in Cairo, Egypt.

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