

# **SOCIAL, HUMANITARIAN, AND CULTURAL COMMITTEE**

## **THE ARAB SPRING**

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## 1. History of the Committee

The Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM), the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, has operated since the UN's founding in 1945. It is responsible for addressing issues related to human rights, social development, humanitarian affairs, and the protection of vulnerable populations. SOCHUM plays a central role in advancing international norms concerning civil liberties, minority rights, refugee protection, and humanitarian assistance.

Although SOCHUM lacks enforcement authority, its resolutions significantly influence international standards and guide the work of specialized UN agencies, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNICEF, UN Women, and UNESCO. Through agenda-setting and normative leadership, SOCHUM shapes global responses to humanitarian crises and emerging social challenges.

In the context of the Arab Spring, SOCHUM's mandate centers on addressing widespread human-rights violations, protecting civilians, ensuring access to humanitarian assistance, and examining the long-term social, cultural, and minority-rights impacts of political upheaval across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

## 2. Introduction

Beginning in late 2010, the Arab Spring triggered a wave of protests, uprisings, and

political transformations across the Middle East and North Africa. Initially driven by demands for dignity, economic opportunity, accountability, and political freedom, these movements rapidly escalated into regime change, civil conflict, mass displacement, and severe humanitarian crises.

More than a decade later, the social and humanitarian consequences remain profound. Millions of individuals have been displaced internally or across borders, state institutions have weakened or collapsed, and vulnerable populations—including women, children, minorities, and refugees—continue to face systemic insecurity. For SOCHUM, the Arab Spring represents not only a political turning point, but a sustained humanitarian emergency.

Delegates are tasked with examining the human cost of the Arab Spring beyond political outcomes and developing solutions that protect human dignity, strengthen humanitarian protections, and contribute to long-term social recovery and stability.

### 3. Historical Context

The roots of the Arab Spring lie in decades of political repression, limited civil liberties, high youth unemployment, economic inequality, and entrenched corruption throughout the region. These structural conditions created widespread social frustration and eroded trust in governing institutions.

Key developments include:

- **Tunisia (2010–2011):** The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi sparked nationwide protests, leading to the resignation of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

- **Egypt (2011):** Mass mobilization resulted in the removal of President Hosni Mubarak after three decades in power.
- **Libya (2011):** Protests escalated into armed conflict and international intervention, culminating in the fall of Muammar Gaddafi.
- **Syria (2011–present):** State repression evolved into a prolonged civil war with catastrophic humanitarian consequences.
- **Yemen (2011–present):** Political instability deteriorated into one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises.
- **Other States:** Bahrain, Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, and Oman experienced protests of varying intensity, followed by a mix of reforms, repression, or political stagnation.

Across the region, the fragmentation of state authority, sectarian divisions, and prolonged conflict have contributed to enduring instability and humanitarian need.

#### 4. Current Issue

More than ten years after the initial uprisings, the humanitarian situation in many Arab Spring–affected states remains critical:

- Over 20 million refugees and internally displaced persons across Syria, Yemen, and Libya
- Continued human-rights violations, including arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture, and restrictions on expression
- Collapse of healthcare systems, limiting access to medical care, clean water, and sanitation

- Heightened vulnerability of women and children, including gender-based violence, child labor, and early marriage
- Destruction of cultural heritage and historical sites
- Persistent barriers to humanitarian access due to insecurity, political restrictions, and aid politicization

Beyond the region, the crisis has fueled refugee flows into Europe, strained international humanitarian systems, and intensified geopolitical competition. SOCHUM must consider how humanitarian protections can be strengthened amid prolonged instability.

## 5. Past International Actions

The international community has adopted multiple responses to the Arab Spring and its aftermath:

- UN General Assembly resolutions condemning human-rights violations in Syria, Libya, and Yemen
- Human Rights Council Commissions of Inquiry documenting violations and crimes against civilians
- Security Council actions, including sanctions, civilian-protection mandates, humanitarian ceasefire calls, and authorization of humanitarian corridors
- UNHCR emergency operations supporting refugees and internally displaced persons
- UNICEF and WHO interventions addressing child protection, vaccination, nutrition, and essential health services

- Regional initiatives led by the Arab League, European Union, and African Union

Despite these efforts, implementation gaps, political divisions, and limited access have constrained humanitarian effectiveness.

## 6. Subtopics

- Protection of civilians and documentation of human-rights violations
- Humanitarian access and safety of aid workers
- Long-term solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons
- Youth unemployment, inequality, and structural causes of unrest
- Protection of women and girls in conflict settings
- Preservation of cultural heritage
- Post-conflict reconstruction, reconciliation, and institution-building

## 7. Positions

### **Human-Rights Accountability and Protection Bloc**

Primarily composed of Western and allied states, this bloc emphasizes accountability for violations, documentation of war crimes, protection of civilians, and expanded humanitarian access. These states often support sanctions, investigative mechanisms, and international monitoring.

### **Sovereignty, Stability, and Non-Interference Bloc**

Includes major global powers and several regional actors that prioritize state sovereignty,

territorial integrity, and political stability. This bloc generally opposes external intervention, regime-change efforts, and broad sanctions, favoring dialogue and nationally driven solutions.

### **Regional Power and Strategic Interest Bloc**

Composed of influential Middle Eastern and regional states whose positions are shaped by security concerns, regional rivalries, and strategic interests. These states often balance humanitarian commitments with geopolitical priorities such as counterterrorism and regional influence.

### **Transition-Affected and Conflict States Bloc**

Includes countries directly impacted by the Arab Spring, ranging from those undergoing political reform to those experiencing prolonged conflict. Common priorities include reconstruction, economic recovery, institutional rebuilding, and resistance to external pressure.

### **Refugee-Hosting and Frontline States Bloc**

Consists of neighboring and transit states hosting large refugee populations. These countries emphasize international burden-sharing, development assistance, and sustainable solutions for displacement.

### **Humanitarian and Civil Society Advocacy Bloc**

Includes UN agencies, international humanitarian organizations, and NGOs advocating for neutral humanitarian access, civilian protection, documentation of abuses, and compliance with international humanitarian and human-rights law.

## **8. Guiding Questions**

1. How can the UN strengthen protections for civilians during political uprisings and conflicts?
2. What mechanisms ensure safe, neutral, and impartial humanitarian access?
3. How should long-term support for refugees and IDPs be structured?
4. What role does accountability play in preventing future abuses?
5. How can unemployment, inequality, and marginalization be addressed to prevent renewed unrest?
6. What protections are necessary for women and children in conflict zones?
7. How can reconciliation be promoted while respecting state sovereignty?
8. How can humanitarian aid be depoliticized?
9. Should cultural heritage protection be prioritized in humanitarian responses?

## 9. Suggested Sources

- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) — Global Trends Reports
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) — Commissions of Inquiry
- International Crisis Group — MENA Conflict Analysis
- UNICEF — Children in Armed Conflict Reports
- World Health Organization — Regional Health Crisis Assessments

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