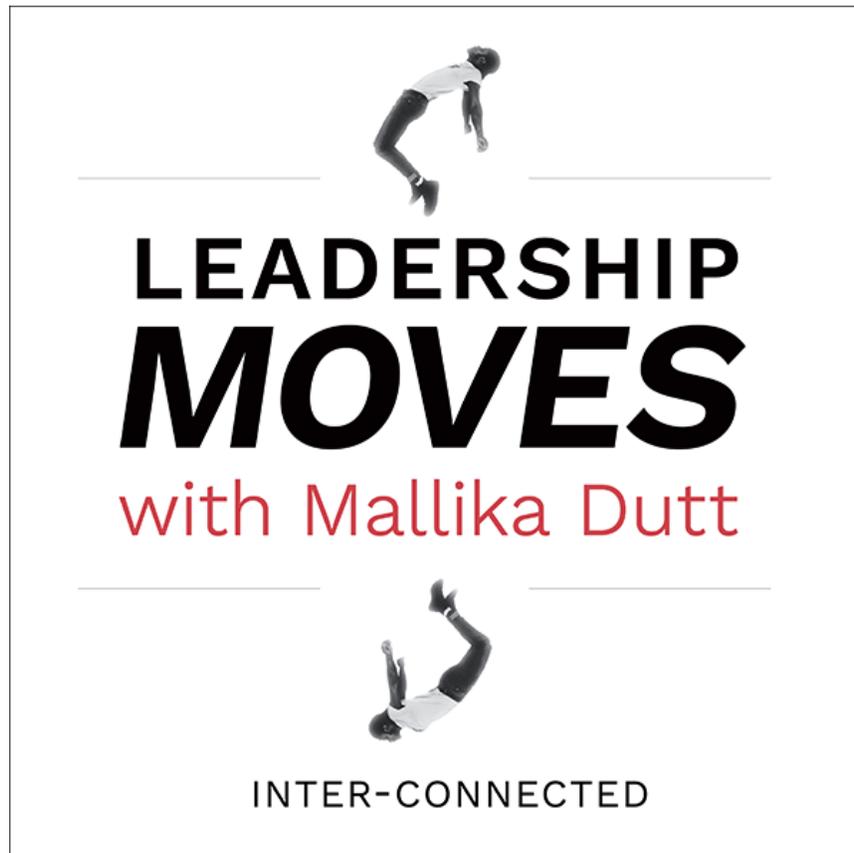


**S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities
into Public Dialogue in the Arab World
with Seteney Shami**



Full Episode Transcript

**With Your Host
Mallika Dutt**

[Leadership Moves](#) with Mallika Dutt

S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities into Public Dialogue in the Arab World with Seteney Shami

What choices would you make if your life was punctuated by a never-ending series of wars and conflicts? Would you leave a comfortable life to pursue your dream for regional peace and solidarity? Tune in for some powerful wisdom from Dr. Seteney Shami of The Arab Council for the Social Sciences as she takes us on a journey of hope and transformation in this episode of Leadership Moves.

Welcome to Leadership Moves, a podcast for visionary changemakers ready to shake up and re-envision the world. I'm your host, Mallika Dutt. Join me and my extraordinary guests as we discuss how to generate social change through leadership and the entrepreneurial, non-profit and philanthropic fields.

Mallika: Seteney, so happy to meet you.

Seteney: Thank you.

Mallika: I mean every time I talk to any one of the BUILD leaders, I'm always so honored because the work that you all are doing, the challenges that you're facing. And so I'd love to know a little bit about the work that you are doing with ACSS, what other countries that you're in? What do you do with the social sciences in terms of trying to inject these conversations into public dialog? Just give me a little bit of a sense.

Seteney: Sure. So the ACSS is headquartered in Beirut, Lebanon. And we work across the Arab region. And the Arab region means the 22 countries, states that are members of the League of Arab States. So that's all the way from some Sub-Saharan countries like Mauritania and Somalia, across North Africa, Egypt, the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean and into the Gulf states. So it's a very diverse region, very broad, very different conditions in different countries.

There is a long history of learning and intellectual circulations, and the Arabic language as a language of scholarship that does link people across

S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities into Public Dialogue in the Arab World with Seteney Shami

this geography. But there's also a lot of diversity. There are other languages besides Arabic that are also important, Kurdish, Amazigh in North Africa, many African languages in Sudan and Sub-Saharan Africa and so on are also part of this intellectual landscape. And so what we are trying to do, and we are celebrating this year our 10th anniversary. So we've been in operation for 10 years.

But there was also quite a long planning period before that. So let's say it's about 15 years in the making. And interestingly, although the planning started in the 2000s we actually got formally registered and started working in 2011, 2012. So just with what has been called the Arab Spring, the popular uprisings in several Arab countries that were calling for democracy and for more equality, and for more rights. And so there's a whole host of institutions that emerged around the same time and we're very much in contact with each other.

So there's what the ACSS is doing and I can talk more about that in a little bit. But we really feel ourselves as part of a new generation of institutions in the region that are in different spheres of activities are trying to work towards more inclusive, more democratic, more egalitarian societies. Now, looking back 10 years you would say the region is not in good shape. And in fact is moving towards more authoritarianism, more militarism, more surveillance, more outright conflicts, civil wars and actual wars and so on. And so it's a very difficult time.

It's a difficult time to be optimistic but at the same time we see all these different organizations still managing to work and still managing to have their impact and to work within their different spheres as I said. So some are human rights organizations. Some are organizations working in arts and culture. We are actually I think fairly unique in our focus on social sciences and the humanities, and on scholarship and research. Many of the other organizations also do research.

S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities into Public Dialogue in the Arab World with Seteney Shami

But we are really, our main focus is to try and improve the conditions for research and for knowledge production in the social sciences and in the humanities. And that sort of need in the region, and that niche in the region is not related only to the uprisings and to the popular discontent that is existing in the region, although it very much relates to that and speaks to that. But the needs and the challenges of supporting the social sciences and the humanities comes from decades of neglect, of omission and neglect, if not marginalization.

I mean you could say almost a policy of marginalizing these areas of intellectual pursuits which are in some ways by their very nature, I wouldn't probably say that but which carry the potential of being critical, of being critical of the realities that we're in. And so it's not a surprise that these kinds of fields and these kinds of areas were neglected and marginalized.

Mallika: Can you tell us a little bit about what got you interested in the social sciences? What is your life trajectory and why do you do what you do?

Seteney: I'm from Jordan. I'm Jordanian. I did my undergraduate studies at The American University of Beirut, so here in Beirut, which is where I discovered the social sciences. Because in our high schools we really don't – we didn't at that time, I don't know now, but at that time there were no social sciences in high school. And so I came to university not knowing what I wanted to study. And luckily with the American system you have this opportunity to experiment. You don't have to decide right away.

And I discovered anthropology and I discovered sociology. And I was immediately, the light bulb sort of went off.

Mallika: What was it about anthropology and sociology that got you so excited?

S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities into Public Dialogue in the Arab World with Seteney Shami

Seteney: Okay, so speaking personally, my background, both my parents are from an ethnic minority group in the region. My mother's from Turkey, my father from Palestine, but they're both Circassians. Circassians being peoples of the North Caucasus who were driven out of the Russian Empire and into the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century and formed communities all around the Middle East. And I grew up in Jordan. My father left Palestine in 48 and then met my mother. And she came to live with him in Jordan.

So there was always – and this is a common story among many anthropologists that you will hear that there was some quality of being an outsider, some quality of not quite fitting in, and wanting to fit in, and not being able to fit in and so on. And so I think what sociology and anthropology presented to me as, and I was 16 when I went to university so I was very young. And what it offered to me was an ability to make sense of myself and society, and the relationship between the individual and the collective.

And I hadn't thought about it that way before and our education system, although it was very good, in some ways it wasn't particularly creative or it didn't encourage self-reflection or anything like that. And so this was very exciting for me and the things that we read. And I was lucky to have good teachers, again, this is always a common story that you have one or two professors who inspire you. And so I ended up picking anthropology but I've also always been very interdisciplinary.

So I took a lot of history courses, literature courses and so on. And even in graduate school I always took courses outside the discipline. So I went from Beirut to UC Berkeley where I did my MA and PhD. And one of the things I always say about my own trajectory is that it was always shaped by wars and conflict. So the reason, I would have probably done my master's at The American University of Beirut but the civil war had started already when I was an undergraduate. So I was barely able to complete my BA. The university was closing and opening and so on.

S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities into Public Dialogue in the Arab World with Seteney Shami

And so I had no choice but to go elsewhere for graduate school. And I always think that things might have been different. I mean not better, not worse but just very different if I had been in the region as a graduate student. Instead I went to University of California, Berkeley, which of course was an amazing place to be, a very political campus, very active campus, but not Middle East politics. There were very few Arabs. There were seven Arab students in the whole UC campus. Of 30,000 students there were seven Arab students there.

Mallika: What year was this, Seteney, what year?

Seteney: So this is late 70s, early 80s, very different now. But at that time, I mean there was a huge Arab American community in San Francisco. So there were a lot of cultural events there and political events and so on that we attended. But Berkeley itself was engaged and there were a lot of Iranians on campus. And this was just after the – I mean I remember the Iranian revolution in 1978 and all that which is on campus around that as well, of course as activism around agricultural ORCAs and the California Valley.

And I mean Berkeley was an amazing campus. And when I visited other campuses in the US afterwards, I realized how unique, in many ways how unique the Berkeley campus was and how lucky I was to be there. I think I'm lucky because I never could separate political consciousness from academic study. I mean for me they were related. I was never personally really an activist in the sense of rallying, and lobbying, and doing things like that. But I always felt the political context was key, that without that academic work had very little meaning.

So I went to Berkeley and then while I was at Berkeley doing my PhD, that was in 1982, 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. And I remember this, and so Israel invaded Lebanon, occupied Lebanon for a number of months. And they occupied Beirut, the city of Beirut which is where I had studied. And

S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities into Public Dialogue in the Arab World with Seteney Shami

then they would do from Beirut but they remained in occupation of the south of Lebanon for decades. And the reason I mention this is first of all it was the event that made me decide I would go back to the region and I would not stay in the US.

Mallika: Can you say a little bit more about that? Why would that be the pivot to go back as opposed to stay here?

Seteney: I mean it's difficult to say. But I mean why I reacted that way, but I had exactly the same reaction in 1990. I was in sabbatical in Washington DC at Georgetown University. And at that time I wasn't very happy in my university in Jordan where I was teaching. And there was the first Iraq war that year. And again I felt I have to be back in the region, I cannot be in the US. I'll try to explain that reaction, but first to go back to 1982. It's very interesting. I mean there was NBBCBS and ABC. That was it. And then there were a few radio stations.

And I remember, I don't know what it was called, Pacific something station, radio station. I mean the news was so limited and the images that we were seeing. And this was a city I love that was being bombed, that was being invaded with tanks and so on. And I remember how we would watch and pause and try to figure out what's going on. And it's so different from today when you're inundated by so much images and information and so on. It was very painful. It was painful to be so far away. You felt just very far away.

I mean physically it was far away of course, on the West Coast of America. But also in terms of knowing what was going on. And I remember at that time, the San Francisco sort of community, Lebanese, and Palestinians, and so on, just sort of rushed into action, mainly collecting news on what was going on from family and friends and putting it together and issuing like a daily bulletin of what was going on in Lebanon. And then we would go around distributing it to grocery stores and so on to be picked up by.

S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities into Public Dialogue in the Arab World with Seteney Shami

So this feeling of being far and not knowing what was going on, about people and places that you cared about and so on I think is behind what made me decide this is the region I belong in. Is it Lebanon? Is it Jordan? Is it Egypt? That part of it is a secondary issue for me, but that I needed to be here. And as I said, in 1990 exactly the same reaction to the Iraq war. Of course Jordan, I mean wasn't in the war but it was deeply impacted by that war because there was Israel on one side, Saudi Arabia and Syria. And each one was on a different side of this conflict.

So Jordan was very isolated and there was a real – that war was the first war in which we saw what they're calling smart bombs and a sort of a level of military technology that we had not seen before. I mean I had lived through the civil war in Jordan in 1970, parts of the civil war in Lebanon, the 67 war in Jordan. And I mean these were short wars in a way. But the kind of military hardware that we saw in that Iraq war was just so frightening and so devastating and so on.

So for me it feels like an era of sort of military might that now we are sort of taking for granted, we're seeing them everywhere and the drone attacks and all of that. But that was the start of it. So yeah, so the feeling of wanting to be in the region because there was also a sense which now has completely disappeared from me by the way, of if you knew, if you knew enough about what was going on then somehow you could control it, not control it but control your presence in it. And now because there's so much information that it's actually a kind of loss of control.

This amount of information that we have just makes us feel there's nothing we can do about it, there's just too much and we can't comprehend everything that's going on. But at that time it sort of mattered very much that you knew where the attack had been and who was impacted, and how, and who was behind it. And the Middle East is a very political place. I mean you grow up hearing politics all the time, all the time, people in coffeehouses, people in people's homes, I mean at work.

S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities into Public Dialogue in the Arab World with Seteney Shami

I never had to buy a newspaper because people are always telling you what's in the papers, what's on the news, what's on the radio. People at my childhood was listening to people compare. I heard this on the BBC, and I heard this on the national news, and then I heard this on the Monte Carlo radio, and I heard this on the German. And people are piecing together what they think happened, whatever the event was on these diverse news sources. So you grew up political.

I mean and political in the sense doesn't mean that you're fighting necessarily for some political end. It just means that you're a political being, that politics is in the air that you breathe. And I have found sometimes in some workplaces in the US that – and there's a very sharp distinction between politics and work and that you don't discuss politics at work and so on. And yeah, so I don't know why I went into this trajectory, so UC Berkeley, PhD.

Mallika: So I want to come back to the Arab Council for the Social Sciences because now I have a much better understanding of your trajectory and why this place and this kind of work is so important to you. Where you're really weaving the academic world with the world of what is unfolding in your region and all over the world right now. And it's incredibly important. And I'm so struck by you're saying that you have been bookended by wars, that so much of your life has been shaped by that trajectory.

And the region continues to be impacted by war, it continues to be impacted by conflict. Now that's layered with the pandemic and all of these other issues. I know that the Arab Council for the Social Sciences is planning to have its next conference soon. And given the political climate that you are in, could you share a little bit more with me about how you are imagining this conference, what are the themes going to be? And what do you hope that people coming together can enable or dream about at this time of such challenge?

S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities into Public Dialogue in the Arab World with Seteney Shami

Seteney: Sure. So we started planning the conference in early 2020. So our conference is every two years and it takes us about a year and a half to plan it. So our board of trustees sort of decides on the theme and then we develop, you know, we invite a group of people to be the planning committee. And we put out a call and we receive the papers, abstracts and so on. So it takes about a year and a half. So we started in early 2020. It was supposed to be held in May 2021 which we postponed to December because of the pandemic.

So the theme we picked in 2020 because COVID had already started but also there were major uprisings in 2019 in Sudan, and Algeria, and in Iraq, and in Lebanon. So it was 10 years after the first set of uprisings in 2011, there was a second set of uprisings. And so the theme we chose or the broad title we chose for the conference is Interrogating the Social Sciences in the Vortex of Crises. And the idea was that all these crises are coming together, health, political, economic and so on but they're all interrelated, or at least they all impact one another in different ways.

And the emphasis here was clearly on understanding all of this and understanding the impact of all of this, but also interrogating the social sciences, in other words, asking ourselves as social scientists, what do we have to offer at times like these? Does our research matter? And this is a question that you hear a lot in the midst of the uprisings, especially younger researchers saying, "Do I continue to be a researcher or do I become a citizen and fight for what I believe in? Or does my research and scholarship have a role in what's going on?"

And people come up with different answers and some actually withdraw from, they say – I've had many friends whether in 2011, 2019, saying, "This is not the time for writing. I'm not going to be blogging about my experience in the square. This is the time of being a citizen and being part of it." Whereas others are saying, "No, our function is to try and put these issues in broader context, to put them in comparative context, to help understand

S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities into Public Dialogue in the Arab World with Seteney Shami

the significance of what's happening now." And so there are different reactions.

And others who say, "No, we are witnesses. We are witnesses to what's happening. And we are writers and that is our craft and so let us write." The people in medicine are doing what they know how to do. And the lawyers are doing what they know how to do. And we write and we analyze reality so let us write, let us blog. So there are many different reactions about being a researcher in a time like this. And that's what we wanted the conference to really address.

So we call it Interrogating the Social Sciences. What are the limits? What are the opportunities? How do the social sciences help us imagine different futures and so on? So that was the theme. But then as COVID, you know, we just couldn't imagine not holding this conference because it is so integral to the identity of the council. Part of what we always say, yes, we do capacity building but really what we do is community building. We're bringing people together.

This is something that is so lacking in this region, especially across borders, that people don't have forums to come together and learn about each other. And they're surprised by finding people in other countries interested in the same things. And it's such a discovery, these convenings are such a discovery for people at every level.

Mallika: Thank you for that, Seteney. I think this whole question of decentralization and how we gather and what gets precedence over the other are all big questions that the pandemic has opened up for us, and so many organizations doing that work are really revisiting the way in which they have interacted in the past. And so it's very interesting to hear how you are imagining the conference that is upcoming for you.

If I was to ask you for a learning as a leader in these times, a piece of wisdom that you would like to share with emerging leaders, with other

S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities into Public Dialogue in the Arab World with Seteney Shami

leaders who have also been navigating, all of the rupture and all of the possibility of these last couple of years, what would you say?

Seteney: I've never thought of myself as a leader. I've always thought of myself as someone who likes to work collaboratively. So all my career, I mean even when I was a university professor, which could be a very lonely sort of way of life, I was always working in groups, I was always doing team research, I was always working with my students on projects. And then I left the university and came into this sort of work. I worked in Cairo. I worked in New York at different social science organizations.

And so it was always about bringing people together, seeing what emerges. So I always thought, yes, I'm coordinating, I'm facilitating, I am enabling something, I'm part of it myself. But it's the dynamic that comes out of the groupwork, that was always important for me. So if you want to call that leadership, it could be. But it's about what emerges when you put together. And that's a skill and that's a skill you learn. You learn what works well and how you can bring people together, and how you can have the conversation happen and so on.

I have felt, with ACSS I have felt much more the need to take more decisions and to sort of have a vision, sort of prior to or alongside the collaboration that's taking place. And this is both in terms of working with staff where we've gone through very demoralizing times here in Lebanon both in terms of the failed, failed, we don't know if it's failed yet, but the revolution that started in 2019 and then ended with COVID kind of putting an end to it. And things are getting worse, economically, politically, they're all getting worse.

So the staff who are mostly Lebanese, we also have Egyptians, we also have Palestinians, but we all feel the stress, and the depression and so on. And so you feel that you have to be the motivator and you feel that you have to also give an example of – you can ask them if it's successful or not,

S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities into Public Dialogue in the Arab World with Seteney Shami

but both in being calm on the one hand and sort of carrying on and carrying on with plans, and not giving up on the bigger vision.

Now, the daily challenges have become so huge that they could just eat you up completely. How are we going to deal with this and that, and electricity cuts, and traffic, and roadblocks, and staff can't come to work and there's no internet? I mean you could let all of that just turn all your attention to everyday management. But I feel like where the leadership comes in is to keep reminding ourselves as an organization of the vision, and the mission, and the broader aims.

And even if we have to find ways of doing things differently and the conference is a good example, or the workshops have all become virtual, or even our staff meetings have become virtual and so on. You have to keep hold or to stay true to what you're trying to do beyond the everyday. So I have felt in this last couple of years and with the pandemic, having to come up with protocols, and how we're going to use the office and who comes and who doesn't come and all of those things, that every organization has dealt with.

But I have felt more the importance of yourself sort of embodying what you would like the organization to embody. And this is, so I'm talking at the level of staff, but it also stretches to the grantees, and the fellows, and the people we work with. So I'm sure they would not have been surprised if we had just closed shop. I mean at one point we couldn't do bank transfers out of Lebanon for example. And I'm sure that they are inspired by the fact that we continue to send their payments, we continue to want to receive the reports, we continue.

And we've had to work and this is really the staff and not myself but every grantee and fellow, we had to rethink their contract and they couldn't do the fieldwork they had planned to do. So there was, you know, one by one we had to sort of restructure their work. And I think the fact that we were there

S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities into Public Dialogue in the Arab World with Seteney Shami

for them, instead of saying, “We have to give up or let’s wait two years”, and so on. They saw us sort of carrying on, and continuing, and so on.

And maybe now that I am talking about this, I remember the civil war in Lebanon when I was an undergraduate at the American university. And I remember then thinking that even though the faculty became very lenient with deadlines and the semester kept stretching and stretching and so your paper which was due in December became due in March or whatever. But they never let up on the quality of what you were supposed to produce as a student. They didn’t make anything easier. And I remember being very impressed by that.

I was sitting, trying to write a paper and there are bombs falling and this and that. But the professor’s expecting the paper. So I’m just making that linkage now, that I feel like that is what you may call leadership. I mean as I said, I always see myself as part of a team and part of a group. But I do realize now that somebody has to kind of take that step of just reminding the group, why are we here and why are we doing this.

Mallika: Thank you so much, Seteney.

Seteney: How does that sound?

Mallika: Thank you so much, Seteney, I think that that reminder is so important for all of us at this point to always remember why are we here. So thank you so much for sharing that incredible life story as well as the very important work of the council with all of us.

Seteney: Thank you.

Mallika: Thanks for listening to the Leadership Moves podcast, which is made possible by the BUILD program of the Ford Foundation. If you want more information or the resources from today’s show, visit mallikadutt.com. M-A-L-L-I-K-A D-U-T-T .com. Until next time.

S2 Ep03: Bringing the Social Sciences and Humanities into Public Dialogue in the Arab World with Seteney Shami

If you enjoyed today's show do subscribe and follow Leadership Moves wherever you listen to your podcasts. Please leave a rating and review to let me know what you think and to help others find the show. Your honest feedback will help me to create a great podcast with valuable leadership stories and wisdom. Join us next time.