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THE FIRST LADY PHENOMENON IN JORDAN

Assessing the Effect of Queen Rania's NGOs
on Jordanian Civil Society



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Summary

This paper assesses the so-called 'first lady phenomenon' in (semi) authoritarian context. The main question to be answered is to what extent organizations in which Queen Rania is involved affect the development of a truly independent organizational life in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Three regime strategies with respect to civil society control come to the fore, of which the third, 'civil society infiltration', is especially relevant to the case. First Lady Organizations (FLANGOs), can be perceived as a type of Governmental Non-Governmental Organization (GONGO); a relatively new concept in the field. An in-dept study on the relatively new notion of the GONGO is given, whereby new concepts (in relation to China) are hinting at an application in other (semi) authoritarian contexts. The verdict on the effect of Queen Rania's NGOs on Jordan's civil society strongly depends on which role one assigns to a civil society, but negative remarks were more common, pointing at the lack of internal democracy in FLANGOs, the issue of funding, and the fundamental point that Hashemite humanitarianism must be judged differently in a country like Jordan, where the royal family is indeed the regime; more powerful than the government.

Introduction

In the beginning of 2009, Suzanne Mubarak and Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa delivered a speech at an international conference in Bahrain, warning an audience of “robed and mostly bearded men”¹ of the blights of sexual slavery, human trafficking, child exploitation, prostitution and rape. When they had finished, a standing ovation reflected yet another door opened to discuss new taboos in the Middle East. The wife of the Egyptian President and the Shaikha of Bahrain are two examples of prominent Arab first ladies who in a way mirror a recent headway women have made in the region, where increasingly they get the right to vote, go to university and attain high ranking jobs.

In 1932, the first elected president of Syria, Mohammad Ali al-Abid had told his wife that she could not attend a state function: “It’s impossible Zahra; what do you want people to say?”² However, Zahra did not take no for an answer and in the following years she started playing a significant role in public affairs; resembling to the present-day role of Asma al-Assad, wife of the current Syrian President. In the last decades of the twentieth century, Arab first ladies emancipated themselves and their people by being active in charity, intellectual forums and official ceremonies. After the year 2000, this role only expanded further, by making its way into more contentious areas such as the feminist agenda or topics related to human rights. With Suzanne Mubarak as the “doyenne of the first ladies”,³ and women such as Asma al-Asad, Suzanne Mubarak, Princess Lalla Salma of Morocco or Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned from Qatar, the situation is now increasingly denoted by diplomats as ‘the first lady phenomenon’.⁴

This study is focusing on one first lady, who is noteworthy for her extensive list of public activities. In fact, she is no first lady in the strict meaning of the word,⁵ she is the Queen of Jordan: Rania al Abdullah. She is founder of several Jordanian organizations, ‘NGOs’ in the Kingdom’s terminology, as well as an active lobbyist and member of several large international organizations. However, although the track list of Queen Rania and the other abovementioned ladies looks very impressive and can easily be regarded as a clear positive development, the picture is obviously not that simple. In the case of Queen Rania, one has only to consider the fact that the Hashemite dynasty by no means has a purely ceremonial function like other royal families have. The Jordanian royal family is in fact not that different from the ‘Jordanian regime’, which makes the first lady phenomenon ambiguous at least.

By being active in the organizational sphere of Jordan, Queen Rania places herself in the midst of civil society, while pronouncing that she strives for an empowered, independent community life. The

¹ Helena Smith in *The Observer*, ‘The first ladies of the Arab world blaze a trail for women’s rights’, Sunday 8 March 2009, accessed December 30, 2010, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/08/gender-equality-middle-east> .

² Quoted in: Sami Moubayed, ‘A Sheikha, a queen and a first lady’, *Asia Times Online*, March 28, 2008, accessed December 30, 2010, at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/JC28Ak01.html .

³ Suzanne Mubarak set up the Arab Women Organization

⁴ Smith, ‘The first ladies of the Arab world blaze a trail for women’s rights’. *The Observer*. Sunday 8 March 2009, accessed December 30, 2010,

⁵ Strictly speaking, ‘first ladies’ is a quite narrow concept, not including Queens, and even not always President’s wives (in the case of Syria, the mother of the President is officially still the First Lady, *not* the current wife of the President). However, in order to avoid confusion and a labyrinth of different concepts, this paper places wives of *all types of primary rulers* in the MENA region in the category of ‘first ladies’. The term ‘first lady NGOs’ will be used for organizations headed by the wife of the country’s leader, whether he be President, King, Sheikh or Sultan.

development of civil society has indeed been linked to the creation of a more 'open' society, even ending in processes of democratization. Since the Middle East is said to have a 'democracy deficit',⁶ foreign NGOs and western governments have invested a great deal of money in grassroots organizations in the MENA region – everything under the banner of democratization and social development.

However, more recently, the presumed inherent positive effects of a flourishing civil society have become theoretically and empirically contested, specifically with regards to its relationship with democratization.⁷ And with increasing criticism on this supposed link, the picture of controversy surrounding these notions is not yet full. Although there hardly have been any publications on it, these last years the term Governmental Non-governmental Organization (GONGO) has entered the field. By this, organizations are meant who appear to be NGOs, therefore appear to be non-profit and appear to work independently from the government), but in fact they are actually controlled by officials. In (semi)authoritarian regimes, this new type of organization has been identified as a facet of 'authoritarian upgrading'. By authoritarian upgrading a process is meant in which authoritarian regimes are using different mechanisms to adapt to new changes and demands by the public. They seemingly democratize or liberalize certain facets of society, but in fact these measures are actually strengthening the regime.

The main topic of this research fits precisely within this recent academic discussion on the actual effect of a civil society on democratization processes in non-democratic regimes: first ladies in the MENA region, who seem to be involved in a trend where they take in prominent positions as headers of all kinds of NGOs – the term 'NGO' being somewhat controversial here. To the outside world, these ladies pretend their organizations belong to the realm of NGOs but in fact they can be regarded as GONGOs, 'quasi non-governmental organizations' (QUANGOs), 'royal non-governmental organizations' (RONGOs), or 'first lady organizations' (FLANGOs).⁸

Although very relevant in the present political landscape of the region, almost no research seems to be done on these new concepts. Therefore, this research started from the observation there was actually not much to observe in terms of literature on the subject. The case of Jordan was chosen to shed light on this important phenomenon since Queen Rania is one of the most active state figures of her kind, with national, regional and even global publicity surrounding her. The main context of her activities, Jordan, proves an interesting example of a country involved in processes of authoritarian upgrading, in which from 1989 onwards a process of reform took off, which made the regime 'earn'

⁶ See, for example: Marsha Pripstein Posusney, 'The Middle East's Democracy Deficit in Comparative Perspective', in: Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michele Penner Angrist (ed.), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East. Regimes and Resistance* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005).

⁷ See, for example: Thomas Carothers, 'Civil Society: Think Again', *Foreign Policy*, no. 117 (Winter 1999-2000), pp. 18-24 + 26-29; Omar Encarnacion, 'Civil Society Reconsidered', *Comparative Politics*, vol. 38, no. 3 (2006), pp. 357-376; Nicola Pratt, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World* (CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007); Amaney Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy: The Other Side of Social Capital in Palestine and the Arab World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Francesco Cavatorta and Vincent Durac, 'Western Democracy Promotion in the Middle East and the War on Terror: The Case of Tunisia', *British Journal Of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 36, no.1 (2009), pp. 3-19 and Francesco Cavatorta and Vincent Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: The Dynamics of Activism*. London: Routledge, 2010.

⁸ Other terms encountered are: *BINGOs* ('business interest NGOs') and *FLAMINGOs* ('flavour of the month NGOs') – and there are probably much more. Marlies Glasius, 'Dissecting Global Civil Society: Values, Actors, Organizational Forms', *Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia; Working Paper 14*, University of Amsterdam and Hivos, 2010, on <http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Civil-Society-in-West-Asia/Publications/Working-Papers/Dissecting-Global-Civil-Society-Values-Actors-Organisational-Forms>.

its classification as a (semi)authoritarian state, a 'liberalized autocracy'⁹ or a 'less worse dictatorship'.¹⁰

In the organizational field, the regime started to create limited opportunities for the existence of civil society organizations. However, several 'regime strategies' such as the embedding of organizations in a web of bureaucratic practices and legal codes, or the infiltration of the activist field by RONGOs, have made Jordan's organizational field far from independent. In the light of a certain state dependency and lack of agency, it may actually be problematic to apply the term 'civil society', 'independent organization', or 'NGO' in this respective national context. Therefore, when speaking of 'independent NGOs' or 'independent CSOs (civil society organizations)', a situation is meant in which the organization is at least aiming to be independent from the regime in which it operates. In reality however, this is not always possible.

The aim of this study is to unravel the dense and complex network of civil society organizations in Jordan in relation to a handful of Queen Rania's organizations, and to establish the effect of her work on independent Jordanian organizations. Therefore, the main question this research tries to answer is how organizations in which Queen Rania is involved affect the development of a truly independent organizational life in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Before doing this, it is important to be clear on the meaning of civil society and how it will be used in this research: the conclusion of this research strongly depends on how we define 'civil society' and what functions we ascribe to it. The concept is "plagued by definitional ambiguity";¹¹ therefore it is decided to take a rather broad definition of civil society, perceiving it as "the constellation of associational forms that occupy the terrain between individuals and the state".¹²

Next to an exploration of available literature on theory and a difficult quest for literature on the specific subject, research was done in Jordan itself. An array of organizations was visited; some of them independent, some of them headed by Queen Rania; and all of them working in different types of fields, such as development, law and human rights, women's issues or documentation and research centers. Jordanian individuals not directly involved in organizational life and independent foreign activist have also been interviewed.

First, the political context in Jordan will be discussed, together with the development of civil society and the existing political and judicial restraints on its freedom. Then I will focus on the theory of

⁹ Jillian Schwedler prefers to describe Jordan as a 'liberalized autocracy'. Jillian Schwedler, 'Jordan's Risky Business as Usual', *Middle East Report Online*, June 30, 2010, accessed August 2, 2010, on <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero063010.html>.

¹⁰ Since the abolishment of martial law in 1989, a process of political liberalization has set in Jordan. This was mainly as a response to domestic riots and political unrest, triggered by IMF austerity measures. However, liberalization has not gone to the extent that the country would qualify for an 'open' or fully democratic country. The country has elections for the lower house, but the upper house is royally appointed, as is the prime minister and the Council of Ministers (the cabinet). Also in terms of other 'freedoms', such as freedom of press or freedom of expression, Jordan is lacking. In the Freedom House yearly survey, Jordan's status is 'Not Free' and the country scores a '6' on Political Rights and a '5' on civil rights; on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest and 7 the lowest level of freedom. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2010 Survey (Jordan)*, accessed on September 3, 2010, on <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2010&country=7849>.

¹¹ Wiktorowicz, Quintan, 'Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan' in: *Comparative Politics*, vol. 33, no. 1 (October 2000), 43.

¹² Wiktorowicz, 'Civil Society as Social Control', 43.

authoritarian upgrading and on 'civil society's dangerous impostors'¹³, GONGOs. In the case of a regime where the monarchy has such an outstanding role in politics, like we see in Jordan, RONGOs can be seen as the equivalent, or a type of, GONGOs. This is most surely the case in Jordan: the most common regime-controlled type of NGO is the Royal Non-Governmental Organization. Afterwards, we will look at organizations chaired by Queen Rania and the effect their workings have on independent organizations in the Kingdom. And at last we will take a closer look at the GONGO concept and do recommendations for further research.

¹³ Inferred from the title of an article from Moisés Naim: 'Democracy's Dangerous Impostors', *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2007, accessed August 24, 2010, on <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/20/AR2007042001594.html> .

Civil Society in Jordan

Jordan State-building and 'the State of the Society'

With the breakup of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the 'British Mandate of Palestine and Transjordan' came into being. In 1921, the 'Emirate of Transjordan', a former Ottoman province, was excised from Palestine and was recognized by Britain as a fully independent state in 1946. In 1950, with the union of the East and West Banks, it became the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, a constitutional monarchy. Harmsen summarizes Jordanian state-building as such: "[A] dynasty was imposed by a foreign power on an area where there existed no modern society, in the framework of a nation state, but rather an amalgam of traditional tribal communities".¹⁴ The traditional Transjordan tribal communities were held loyal by the new state by means of patronage and cooptation, surrounded by a discourse of allegiance to the Hashemite family in general and the King in particular. This relationship between regime and the largely tribal population was characterized by bottom-up patterns of loyalty and allegiance and the top-down offering of benefits and protection – a pattern which, to a certain extent, has remained highly influential in terms of state-society relationships to the present day.¹⁵

However, this relationship was influenced by a profound change in Jordanian society when in the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967, and in 1950 with the annexation of the West Bank, hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees arrived in Jordan, fundamentally outnumbering Transjordan's native population. Relations between Palestinians and Transjordanians¹⁶ have been problematic ever since. This was exacerbated on the one hand by a regime policy in which Jordanian identity was imposed upon the new citizens of Palestinian descent¹⁷ and on the other hand a rise in Palestinian nationalism which resulted in Palestinian insurgency groups using Jordan as their main base in the struggle versus Israel. In bloody confrontations with the Jordanian army in 1970-1971, these groups were evicted from the Kingdom, which only reinforced the regime's discriminating policy, supplemented by a (though unwritten) policy of preferential recruitment of Transjordanians in the public sector.¹⁸ The Jordanian Palestinians however dominate the private economic sector, being very present in the business and banking sector. Their economic strength, and the fact that they constitute a demographic threat to the Transjordanians, is a source of heightened inter-communal tensions.¹⁹ According to Harmsen, "[s]uch mutual feelings of disparity and discrimination between both ethnic communities has complicated the development of a strong and unified civil society vis-à-

¹⁴ Egbert Harmsen, *Islam, Civil Society and Social Work. Muslim Voluntary Welfare Associations in Jordan Between Patronage and Empowerment*, dissertation at ISIM, University of Leiden, The Netherlands (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 82.

¹⁵ Harmsen, *Islam, Civil Society and Social Work*, idem.

¹⁶ By 'Transjordanians' the inhabitants of the former Emirate of Transjordan and their direct descendants are meant, excluding the Palestinians who became incorporated into the Hashemite Kingdom.

¹⁷ Palestinian identity was suppressed or erased; all kinds of societies were forced to label themselves Jordanian; Palestinian symbols and traditional expressions of art were claimed to belong to Jordan's heritage, etc.

¹⁸ Lauri A. Brand, 'In the Beginning was the State... The Quest for Civil Society in Jordan' in Augustus Richard Norton ed., *Civil Society in the Middle East* (Leiden, New York and Köln: E.J. Brill, 1995), 155.

¹⁹ Yitzhak Reiter, 'The Palestinian-Transjordanian Rift: Economic Might and Political Power in Jordan', *The Middle East Journal*, 58 (1), 2004, 91.

vis the state (...).²⁰

However, while socio-economically divided, as well as divided in terms of control over the state apparatus, this does not imply two straightforward and different regime policies towards both communities. Official Jordanian state discourse speaks of 'a single Hashemite family' and to a greater extent, late King Hussein's stand in regional policy has encouraged a greater sense of loyalty to the Hashemite Kingdom among Palestinians, particularly those of the younger generation.²¹ The fact that the current King, Abdallah II (since February 1999) is married to a lady from Palestinian descent can only have a further positive effect on this. Harmsen states that "[t]ension and rivalry between Transjordanians and citizens of Palestinian descent, although a real and serious phenomenon, should not be generalized and overstated."²²

Indeed, many citizens of both origins cooperate in civil society organizations, political parties, professional associations and voluntary associations. Representatives of the government as well as the voluntary sector have both emphasized the legal requirements of NGOs to serve all citizens without discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion or sex.²³

More is less?

Historically, civil society organizations in Jordan originally solely focused on charitable and aid activities. This changed once Jordan became party to a range of international human rights conventions, such as the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The 1990s saw new NGOs appearing particularly related to human rights, civil rights and democracy. Jordan's civil society started raising public awareness on these issues and new research and documentation centers started covering topics related to political and legislative development and women participation.²⁴

Next to broadening the scope of their activities these last decades, the amount of CSOs in Jordan also dramatically increased. This process took off from 1989 onwards, when the government started its process of political liberalization and as a part of that abolished martial law, which had been in force since the Arab-Israeli War of 1967.²⁵ In 2002, Wiktorowicz stated that the number of CSOs

²⁰ Harmsen, *Islam, Civil Society and Social Work*, 84.

²¹ Examples of this are King Hussein's cutting of legal and administrative ties with the West Bank in 1988, his firm anti-war position during the Kuwait crisis, and a significantly improved relationship between Jordan and the PLO during peace negotiations with Israel in the 1990s. Brand, 'In the Beginning was the State...The Quest for Civil Society in Jordan', 159.

²² Harmsen, *Islam, Civil Society and Social Work*, 85. On this 'divide', see also: Curtis R. Ryan, 'Civil Society and Democratization in Jordan', *Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia; Working Paper 7*, University of Amsterdam and Hivos, 2010, accessed September 15th, 2010, on <http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Civil-Society-in-West-Asia/Publications/Working-Papers/Civil-Society-and-Democratization-in-Jordan>.

²³ Harmsen, *Islam, Civil Society and Social Work*, 86.

²⁴ Hani Hourani (supervisor) and Hisham Kassim (ed.), *Directory of Civil Society Organizations in Jordan / 2006*, Al-Urdun Al-Jadid Research Center (Sindbad Publishing House: Amman, 2006), 15.

²⁵ Processes of political liberalization were interchanged with processes of deliberalization, especially in 1994, after the government signed its peace treaty with Israel. With the coming to the throne of the current King Abdallah II in 1999, reforms resumed again. Ryan, *Civil Society and Democratization in Jordan*.

since 1989 had nearly doubled.²⁶ According to more recent estimates, Jordan currently houses approximately two thousand Jordanian CSOs and fifty foreign NGOs.²⁷

However, Max Weber once noted that “the quantitative spread of organizational life does not always go hand in hand with its qualitative significance”,²⁸ and indeed in Jordan, an increase in their number didn’t necessarily mean an increase in freedom of organizations, political openness or processes of democratization. There has been considerable improvement in the organizational field but unfortunately many restraints still remain in place: fundamental rights and freedoms are subject to government interference, “due to the Government’s claims of fighting terrorism and protecting national security.”²⁹ The regime utilizes different strategies and mechanisms designed to make sure no independent power centers come into existence. Furthermore, by doing this, the result is a well-organized civil society, which facilitates the social control of the regime.³⁰ Three strategies of NGO control can be distinguished: a combination of legal codes and bureaucratic strategies, centralization, and civil society infiltration (by means of GONGOs, RONGOs and FLANGOs).³¹ The first two strategies will be dealt with in the coming paragraphs; the last strategy will make up entire chapter 2.

Legal Codes and Bureaucratic Strategies

Legally, the Law on Societies (no. 81 of 2008) and the Law on Public Assembly (2004) complement each other in offering the government instruments to contain civil society. The Law on Societies targets humanitarian NGOs involved in advocacy for human rights, democracy and transparency issues, while the Law on Public Assembly is mainly targeting Islamic organizations, professional organizations, political parties and student unions. It restricts their rights to free demonstrations and the holding of meetings.³²

Before 2008, CSOs were governed by the Law on Societies No. 33 of 1966, but due to criticism – this law provided for extensive state interference in the country’s organizational sphere – the government issued a new law nearly forty years later. However, this new law was still fond of governmental restrictions and again caused protest in Jordan as well as internationally. As a result, the law was amended in 2009, when King Abdallah II signed the Law Amending the Law on Societies (no. 22 of 2009). These amendments liberalized the law to a certain extent, but are still criticized by activists for not going far enough. It is interesting to note that in the voting on these amendments, the government proposal was more flexible than the final version; MPs appeared to be more restrictive.³³

²⁶ Quintan Wiktorowicz, ‘The Political Limits to Nongovernmental Organizations in Jordan’, *World Development*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2002), 77.

²⁷ The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, *Jordan* (report), July 30, 2010, accessed August 31, 2010, on <http://www.icnl.org/knowledge/ngolawmonitor/jordan.htm> With a slightly different conception of ‘civil society organizations’, in 2006 the Jordanian Al-Urdun Al-Jadid Research Center counted around eighteen hundred domestic CSOs and thirty foreign NGOs in Jordan (Hourani and Kassim, *Directory of Civil Society Organizations in Jordan / 2006*, 10).

²⁸ Quoted in: Sheri Berman, ‘Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic’ in: *World Politics*, 49 (April 1997), 407.

²⁹ The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, *Jordan* (report).

³⁰ Wiktorowicz, ‘Civil Society as Social Control’, 54.

³¹ Wiktorowicz, ‘The Political Limits to Nongovernmental Organizations in Jordan’, 77-93.

³² Arab Archives Institute, *Against Corruption. The Role of Arab Civil Society in Fighting Corruption* (Arab Archives Institute: Amman, 2007), 55-56.

³³ ICNL News and Information, ‘Jordanian “Law on Societies” Amended’, September 16, 2009, accessed August 31, 2010, on <http://www.icnl.org/knowledge/news/2009/09-16.htm>.

The most significant legal and bureaucratic barriers to the free operation of CSOs in Jordan are the following. Firstly, in order to be able to operate, all societies are obliged to register at the Ministry of Social Development and in this procedure, the Ministry can reject an application without stating a justification. Criteria to gain permission to operate include that founding members need to be Jordanian citizens of at least eighteen years old, that they need to be “in full capacity” and “to have a good character and to not have been previously convicted of any felony or dishonoring crime”.³⁴ For certain types of organizations, an additional approval by the Council of Ministers is also necessary.³⁵

Since no justification is needed when the Ministry rejects applications, it is to be expected that clientelism is common in this process. An activist illustrated this by suspiciously referring to how an independent research centre came into existence. In the past, the director of that centre had been associated with a Marxist faction within the PLO. The organization was expelled by the Jordanian army and the director fled into exile. However, later on the magazine of this faction was transformed into the current research centre and the same person returned to become director of the centre. According to the activist a spoke to, if you infer this story with logic, there must have been a green light from the *muhkabar* in order for this strange switch to occur.³⁶ Whether the story is completely accurate remains to be seen, but it does demonstrate that clientelism is part of the discourse, expectations and culture of Jordanian civil society. Next to this, it illustrates a level of competitiveness and suspicion amongst activists. This phenomenon of competitiveness is especially prominent with regards to funding, on which will be elaborated further below.

Secondly, organizations are not allowed to have any political objectives and cannot seek to achieve any political goals that are governed by yet another law, the Political Parties Law. And to make things more confusing, neither the Political Parties Law, nor the Law on Societies define the term ‘political’ which “invites government discretion and potentially subjects societies to a chilling effect in their expressive activity”.³⁷ Next to that, libel of government officials is prohibited under the Penal Code. This is all closely controlled by the government, since the law requires that all organizations submit their general assembly resolutions, annual plans and annual reports. Organizations have to inform the Ministry of Social Development on their general assembly meetings two weeks in advance for the meetings to be legal. This way, the government can send delegates to the meetings.³⁸

Thirdly, according to the law, Jordanian CSOs need to get permission from the full Council of Ministers before accepting funding from abroad. In the process of amending the 2008 Law on Societies, it was argued this measure was necessary to control the activities of foreign organizations in Jordan.³⁹

Fourthly, these rules and restrictions often carry a lack of clear definitions and determinations where exactly the so-called ‘red lines’ are. This makes Jordanian civil society very complex. According to an

³⁴ 2008 Law on Societies, as approved by the National Assembly of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, accessed on August 30, 2010, on http://www.ngoregnet.org/country_information_by_region/Middle_East_and_North_Africa/Jordan.asp.

³⁵ For more details on the three ‘types of societies’ distinguished by the Jordanian government, see: The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, *Jordan* (report).

³⁶ Interview by the author, Amman, August 2010.

³⁷ The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, *Jordan* (report).

³⁸ *Idem*.

³⁹ Quoted in: ICNL News and Information, ‘Jordanian “Law on Societies” Amended’.

employee of a foreign NGO in Amman, “the main problem is [that] the difference between the state and NGOs is not clear.”⁴⁰ She experienced a very powerful control of the state over civil society organizations. This image didn’t come true in conversations with all organizations however, some of them saying that once they have the approval of the government to operate, they are free. This was said by two women organizations, one of them being a very large one and to a certain extent working in cooperation with the government. The other NGO, also a women’s organization, has Princess Basma, the sister of late King Hussein, as chairperson of their organization, so they might also be cautious in criticizing the government. The fact that Basma headed the organization clearly annoyed another activist I spoke to. The organization itself however assured me her role was purely symbolical; it was said she did not intervene in the organization’s activities in any way. They were very pragmatic about it: the first year of their existence they had a very hard time surviving, but with Basma as official chairperson it was easier for them to get funding and to keep their organization alive. When confronting them with the abovementioned critique on this move, they dismissed it by saying these were “typical comments coming from frustrated organizations who have a hard time collecting enough funding” – again illustrative of the competitiveness amongst Jordanian CSOs.⁴¹ In the conversation it wasn’t denied survival for independent organizations is tough in Jordan, and perhaps it basically comes down to either choosing the idealistic (more difficult) way, or the pragmatic way. Whether that last road is easier, however, remains to be seen. Having a member of the royal family in your board, the red lines for criticism are thicker.

Centralization of Civil Society

The second strategy to control the organizational sphere is a governmental policy of centralization, which overlaps to a certain extent with the previous strategy. Centralization of the civil society happens through the General Union of Voluntary Societies (GUVS).⁴² In official circles and on several CSO directories on the Internet, the GUVS is presented as an NGO, not as an official government body. The Jordanian Embassy in Washington DC lists the GUVS as a ‘local NGO’, having offices in directorates throughout the country.⁴³ The organization serves as an umbrella for all developmental NGOs in the Kingdom and collects data of every organization; it comprises of more than two thousand societies.

However, in strict terms, the GUVS cannot be considered an NGO. Wiktorowicz regards it as a “corporatist creation of the state.”⁴⁴ The GUVS was created in 1959, officially placed outside the governmental realm, in the middle of the NGO community. Its task was to function as an umbrella organization for all governate unions and charitable NGOs in Jordan: it coordinates all NGO activities, since every CSO in the kingdom is obliged to register at the GUVS. Over the years, slowly the government has unofficially taken control over it,⁴⁵ making it an instrument of corporatism, “an organizational link between grass-roots organizations and the state”.⁴⁶ All data are passed on to the Ministry of Social Affairs: the GUVS has become an indirect mechanism of governmental control. The

⁴⁰ Interview by the author, Amman, August 2010.

⁴¹ Idem.

⁴² Website of the General Union of Voluntary Societies, accessed August 24, 2010, on <http://www.guvs-jordan.com/en/>.

⁴³ <http://www.jordanembassyus.org/ref/localngo.htm>, accessed September 15, 2010.

⁴⁴ Wiktorowicz, ‘Civil Society as Social Control’, 55.

⁴⁵ Ryan, ‘Civil Society and Democratization in Jordan’, 23.

⁴⁶ Wiktorowicz, ‘Civil Society as Social Control’, 55.

organization is administered by an elected body of representatives from all of these unions in the various governorates.

The GUVS probably qualifies best as a GONGO, but then perhaps as a ‘GONGO against its own will’. The former President of the organization, Abdallah Khatib, once used the term GONGO to describe his *own* organization, while denouncing the government’s control over it.⁴⁷ Being close to the regime, it is remarkable that Mr. Khatib dared to criticize to this extent. On the other hand, it has been said that people who are closer to the regime sometimes criticize this regime more easily, since they feel more or less secure in their position. In line of this, research in China has shown that GONGOs actually have a noteworthy degree of autonomy and precisely due to the fact that they are close to the regime, are often trusted and given a free hand. In China too, “[s]ome big GONGOs with powerful patrons have not even shied away from direct confrontation with central government agencies, [while] such bold acts are unthinkable for small grassroots NGOs”.⁴⁸

However, perhaps Khatib’s critical stance has not left him without consequences after all, since he has been accused of financial and administrative violations: “embezzlement and misuse of office.”⁴⁹ In July 2010, four years after the government had filed the case, the Amman Criminal Court declared him not guilty of these charges. Sixteen GUVS Board members were also cleared of charges of exploitation of public office, job negligence and abuse of trust.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Interview with Egbert Harmsen, October 5, 2010, Leiden.

⁴⁸ Lu Yiyi, ‘NGO-State Relations in Contemporary China: The Rise of Dependent Autonomy’ in: *DevISSues*, accessed September 15, 2010, on <http://www.iss.nl/DevISSues/Articles/NGO-State-Relations-in-Contemporary-China-The-Rise-of-Dependent-Autonomy> .

⁴⁹ *The Jordan Times*, ‘Khatib, GUVS board members cleared of charges’, accessed October 5th, 2010, on <http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=28675> .

⁵⁰ *The Jordan Times*, ‘Khatib, GUVS board members cleared of charges’.

Infiltration of Civil Society

GONGOs and RONGOs: Domination from within

In this paper, we use the concept of civil society in relation to its prescribed effects on progressive change – more specific in authoritarian settings: as a counterweight versus the state and as a vehicle for social development. This associates the concept of ‘civil society’ with a range of normative expectations. However, these expectations have recently been criticized and undermined in several ways.

A first line of criticism focuses on the prescribed potential to set in motion processes of democratization. Authors such as Nicole Pratt or Amaney Jamal have argued that, for several reasons, civil society in authoritarian regimes can actually have the paradoxical effect of *strengthening* the regime.⁵¹ Partly underlying their arguments are relatively new findings posing that civil society organizations are not always autonomous from the market⁵² or the state as some idealistic voices might hold. A second stream of criticism focuses on the internal structure of CSOs, demonstrating that voluntary citizen organizations are not, by definition, democracy-friendly in their structure, values and goals.⁵³ And the third stream of thought counters egalitarian interpretations of civil society, focusing on how a civil society can actually reflect socio-economic inequalities. CSOs representing more powerful and wealthy groups usually have greater economic, social and political influence than the organizations representing the more underprivileged sections of society.⁵⁴ All these streams of criticism will appear to be applicable to the case of Jordan.

When theorizing about possible constraints a (semi)authoritarian government can put on CSOs, the most relevant strategy here concerns when the government sets up its own NGOs and in this way ‘infiltrates’ civil society. Part of the debate amongst scholars who problematize the democratizing role of civil society in authoritarian settings is exactly about this phenomenon: GONGOs, RONGOs, or FLANGOs in the case of organizations headed by Queen Rania.

Several ‘functions’ are ascribed to GONGOs and RONGOs. Some suggest they act as the “thuggish arm of repressive governments”.⁵⁵ Also, it is posed they are part of a strategy to mislead foreign aid that is intended to bypass the state and go to independent NGOs. Abroad, RONGOs can actively lobby organs such as the United Nations while acting as the representative of citizen groups.

⁵¹ Pratt, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, and: Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy*.

⁵² This critique is only relevant when the market is included in the definition of civil society, perceiving this a separate realm in contrast to the private, the state and the organizational sphere.

⁵³ For example, Hitler’s nazi party started as a voluntary organization and the same can apply to a terrorist organization like Al Qaida or the Ku Klux Klan. On the NSDAP and theorizing of civil society, see for example: Sheri Berman, ‘Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic’ in: *World Politics*, vol. 49, no. 3, April 1997. It is important to note however, that this critique is not applicable to all civil society theorists, since some scholars prefer to leave out the normative dimension of ‘civility’ in the definition of civil society. Berthold Kuhn argues it is problematic to confine the concept of civil society to non-violent and democratic-friendly actors, since such criteria cannot be accurately measured. Because when we do this, how should we consider Greenpeace then? Berthold Kuhn, *Entwicklungspolitik zwischen Markt und Staat. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen Zivillgesellschaftlicher Organisationen* (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus, 2005, 82, quoted in: Harmsen, ‘Islam, Civil Society and Social Work’, 41.

⁵⁴ Jude Howell and Jenny Pearce, *Civil Society and Development, a Critical Exploration*, (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001).

⁵⁵ Naim, ‘Democracy’s Dangerous Impostors’.

According to Naim, “governments embed their GONGOs deep in the societies of other countries and use them to advance their interests abroad.”⁵⁶

This is harmful to ‘real’ NGOs in many respects, since those governmental or royal organizations often have a larger network and better resources than smaller, independent organizations have. In this way, GONGOs attract NGO funding, therefore leaving less to the other NGOs. As a possible result, independent organizations can never obtain sufficient resources to actively counter the power and control of the regime. Wiktorowicz goes as far as noting that “[they] slowly establish hegemony over the direction of NGO activities” and “[here] the state gets the best of both worlds – it continues to receive international aid (through NGOs controlled by the regime) while reducing formal state expenditures, thus fulfilling neoliberal requirements of structural adjustment and privatization.”⁵⁷ Like we see in Jordan, this also has the paradoxical effect that more NGOs get formed, but they become weaker because of limited resources.

Next to serving a role in the distribution of resources, GONGOs also play a role in allowing the government to reinforce an ideological apparatus to enhance consent and address discontent. In this way, they secretly serve as a tool of a non-democratic government to manage their politics at home, while appearing democratic. In this sense they are part of processes of authoritarian upgrading. ‘Authoritarian upgrading’ was coined by Steven Heydemann in 2007, describing a process wherein authoritarian governments use all kinds of instruments to resist the pressing demands of globalization, political, economic and social change. Regimes remain in power not simply by repression, but instead accommodate to certain popular demands while closely managing and directing the unavoidable changes – something we will see below in the case of organizations headed by Queen Rania. Heydemann calls this “a hybrid form of authoritarianism”: “It combines tried-and-true strategies of the past—coercion, surveillance, patronage, corruption, and personalism—with innovations that reflect the determination of authoritarian élites to respond aggressively to the triple threat of globalization, markets, and democratization.”⁵⁸ Heydemann also mentions the role of several Arab first ladies in these processes of authoritarian upgrading.

‘Authoritarian upgrading’ consists of at least five features: appropriating and containing civil societies, managing political contestation, capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms, controlling new communications technologies and diversifying international linkages.⁵⁹ In the former sections we have already discussed two ways in which the Jordanian regime tries to contain civil society. The third way, as said, is ‘the infiltration of civil society’, which can be done by GONGOs, RONGOs or FLANGOs. They serve a number of useful functions in providing services to citizens (to the poor, for example), whereby they get partly accepted by citizens, as is the case in Jordan.⁶⁰

Next to providing often much-needed services to citizens, semi-governmental organizations place themselves directly into political debates, whereby they can actually overrule the voice of truly independent civil society organizations or even crowd them out. For governments, this is most useful

⁵⁶ Idem.

⁵⁷ Wiktorowicz, ‘The political limits of nongovernmental organizations in Jordan’, 86.

⁵⁸ Steven Heydemann, ‘Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World’, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, Analysis Paper, October 2007, 3.

⁵⁹ Heydemann, ‘Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World’, 5.

⁶⁰ Interviews by the author, Amman, August 2010.

in politically sensitive areas, like human rights issues.⁶¹ In Jordan, the National Center for Human Rights is a clear example of this, although it cannot be considered a GONGO; it is an actual governmental institution. The National Center for Human Rights allows the government to control the human rights situation through official canals; it functions as a sort of 'internal watchdog'. Hereby the Center functions as a mechanism for the government to control the agenda for human rights: a perfect example of authoritarian upgrading.

An organization like this points at the inconsistencies of the system. On the one hand, the regime needs repression to stay in power and is a frequent human rights violator in this sense. On the other hand, the Jordanian state stands in very close relation to the international community, specifically the West, resulting in the set-up of official human rights institutions, like the National Center for Human Rights in 1991, on American request. Adding to that, the official royal discourse is extremely inclusive with regards to all groups living in Jordan and therefore has to be cautious to keep on pleasing them and not direct too much pressure on one specific group. By openly supporting an institution like the National Center for Human Rights, the regime tries to obscure the less flattering elements of its rule.⁶²

RONGOs: a familiar/'family' Trend in Jordan

In Jordan, the most common regime-controlled NGOs are RONGOs – stemming from the large influence the royal family has on the country's ruling. Jordanian RONGOs cover a wide range of topics, from charity, to development, to advocacy, to sports and education. In doing this, they "create regime-grassroots linkages that symbolize the Hashemites' commitment to bettering the lives of the Jordanian people."⁶³ They are registered with the state as NGOs, but enjoy a list of special privileges and have better access to resources compared with other organizations in Jordan.

The Jordanian royal family is strikingly active in the NGO field – a tradition that goes back for decades. The Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development (JOHUD) and the Noor al-Hussein Foundation (NHF) are two very large and well-known RONGOs, respectively headed by Princess Basma and by Queen Noor, the fourth and last wife of late King Hussein. While all independent NGOs in Jordan are legally required to hold internal elections for executive committees, the Board of Trustees of the JOHUD and the NHF are appointed by royal decree.

As said previously, the egalitarian perspective on civil society is severely challenged, since CSOs headed by more powerful people are often concerned with a specific group they perceive as being instrumental to their support. In the case of the JOHUD, it is obvious that their choice of projects – they fund local NGOs – indirectly perpetuates the regime's powerbase. This royal NGO mainly focuses on projects in the countryside, covering villages with Transjordan populations, often Bedouins. Not coincidentally, these are the regime's main pillars of support.⁶⁴

Like other Jordanian RONGOs, the ones headed by Queen Rania included, these organizations have succeeded in building up a large network of international donors. This is not only due to the fact

⁶¹ Heydemann, 'Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World', 9.

⁶² Interview with Egbert Harmsen, October 5th, 2010, Leiden.

⁶³ Wiktorowicz, 'The Political Limits to Nongovernmental Organizations in Jordan', 86.

⁶⁴ Interview with Egbert Harmsen, October 5th, 2010, Leiden.

they belong to the Hashemite family however; in the case of Queen Noor it is clearly attributed to her own profile, having worked at the World Bank and the UN before joining the royal Jordanian family as King Hussein's fourth wife.

The amount of (international) donor money RONGOs absorb is enormous: in 2002, Wiktorowicz writes that 85% of all aid to JOHUD and NHF comes from foreign donors and that these two NGOs together receive 21.65% of all NGO revenues (domestic *and* foreign) in Jordan. And this number doesn't even include the large group of other RONGOs such as the Jordan River Foundation of Queen Rania, the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies and the Arab Thought Forum of Prince Hassan, or the King Hussein Foundation of Queen Noor – to name just a few.⁶⁵

Through these NGOs the regime can direct influence on a number of issues, pursuing its policy of civil society infiltration. This is most clearly visible in how Jordanian RONGOs have captured women's issues, through a policy of 'state feminism'.⁶⁶ Through a range of organizations, the regime has pursued a policy to empower women while at the same time containing radical feminist pressure and preventing any destabilization forces to gain ground. Royal women organizations are involved in awareness raising projects and are even lobbying the government, while independent women NGOs have less access to these platforms, less resources and, importantly, less or no permission to do this. Pressure from the *muhkabarāt* on certain women committees has been reported, following pressure from Princess Basma's office. In this way, RONGOs can – as an extension of Hashemite policy – influence the feminist agenda, leaving independent women NGOs far behind.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Wiktorowicz, 'The Political Limits to Nongovernmental Organizations in Jordan', 86-87.

⁶⁶ Sherry R. Lowrance, 'After Beijing: Political Liberalization and the Women's Movement in Jordan', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3 (July 1998), 83-102.

⁶⁷ Wiktorowicz, 'The Political Limits to Nongovernmental Organizations in Jordan', 87.

Queen Rania's NGOs

Description

With the death of former King Hussein in 1999, his son Abdallah II ascended to the throne, making Rania al-Abdullah the current queen of Jordan. Queen Rania was born as Rania al-Yassin in 1970 in Kuwait, as a daughter to Palestinian parents. She studied Business Administration at the American University of Cairo and worked at Citibank and Apple in Amman. After meeting her current husband and marrying in 1993, she gave up her career in banking and started to become active in the organizational charity field. In 1995, she established the Jordan River Foundation, which is by far the largest of her organizations and regionally well known. The organization has two main pillars: protecting the rights and needs of children (through the Jordan River Children Program) and empowering individuals and communities (through the Community Empowerment Program). Other important initiatives of the Queen are Madrasati ('My School') and the Queen Rania Teacher Academy.⁶⁸ Until recently, Queen Rania was involved in much more domestic organizations, but in order to focus her attention, she cut down her organizational involvement, commitments and tasks to a limited number. In these organizations, Queen Rania is not involved in specific small cases; she sets the official line.⁶⁹

The focus of her domestic charity and advocacy work lies on children, education, disadvantaged people and community empowerment. In her projects she works closely with the Jordanian private sector, which provides a great amount of funding. On her personal website it reads: "She believes that the power of partnerships between the public, private, and non-profit sectors is a source of great potential for change in Jordan's education system."⁷⁰

Internationally, she is actively promoting intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, reconciliation and global education. While especially trying to reach young people, she makes use of modern fora such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (where she has more than 1.4 million followers).⁷¹ As an advocate for UNICEF and UNGEI she campaigns for children and next to that she is a common guest at several international gatherings like the World Economic Forum. Over the years, she has won many prizes and enjoys popularity amongst the global public, illustrated in two visits to the famous Oprah Winfrey Show and a place on the *Forbes Magazine* top 100 list of Most Powerful Women in the World.⁷² She holds a range of honorary titles and even wrote a *New York Times* bestseller children's book.

However, in her own country (and the region) she is also criticized by many for being too modern and westernized. It was not possible to find a poll of what Jordanian citizens think of their queen, and surely there *is* none, since criticizing a member of the Royal family is forbidden in Jordan. When

⁶⁸ The Jordan River Foundation: www.jordanriver.jo; Madrasati: www.madrasati.jo; The Queen Rania Teacher Academy: <http://www.qrta.edu.jo/> .

⁶⁹ Interview with employees from the Jordan River Foundation, Amman, August 2010.

⁷⁰ Rania al-Abdullah's personal website: <http://www.queenrania.jo/rania/bio> .

⁷¹ Precisely 1.410.923 at the time of editing, January 3, 2010. <http://twitter.com/queenrania> .

⁷² Queen Rania ranked number 76 (in 2009). http://www.forbes.com/lists/2009/11/power-women-09_Queen-Rania_VZPS.html .

interviewing organizations, activists and other Jordanians, overall it seemed people liked their queen, although opinions differed widely on the effects and overall judgment of her work. Speaking to civil society organizations, it was common people criticized the way her organizations had a certain privileged position in several ways, but I never encountered anyone severely disliking her. One Syrian activist partly explained this by linking it to the fact that in Jordan the royal family, instead of its autocratic way of ruling, enjoys a considerable amount of popularity. Compared to a country like Syria, in Jordan there are still people who believe in progress and good will of their leaders. In Syria, people are cynical and “all is very hypocrite”.⁷³

Through the years, figures of the royal Hashemite family have always been most popular among the original Transjordan population, which has been patronaged by the regime from the start. Amongst the Palestinian population, the royal family has been less popular, but, as said in the previous, this has changed in a positive way due to the foreign policy of the late King Hussein. In refugee camps, the royal family's popularity will probably still be low (considering the living conditions in these camps), but in the Palestinian middle class people tend to be positive. It has probably ‘helped’ that King Abdallah II married a lady from Palestinian origin, but speculations whether this was a tactical marriage seem useless in this sense. As Egbert Harmsen correctly noted: “In royal families, the background of the coming bride is always taken into account and evaluated in certain [perhaps tactical, or otherwise pragmatic] ways, but this doesn't dismiss the fact that royal marriages can still be the result of sincere love.”⁷⁴

Motivation

A question that is probably impossible to answer, but open for guessing and very widely varying opinions, is *why* Queen Rania is pursuing her charity work. The first person I asked was a Jordanian writer, and his answer was that he would not tell me yet what he thought about it; “Let's speak after a week and see what you've found, and then I will tell you.”⁷⁵ His mysterious answer seemed to imply there was an answer to it, and with research I would be able to find it, so he would not want to spoil the surprise yet.

However, when I dropped the question again, after finishing my fieldwork, his answer turned out to be again a different outlook on the issue, part of all the different explanations people had given me. Of course, before starting my fieldwork I did not expect to find one answer; the only one who knows *why* she does it, is the queen herself. And perhaps she got so caught up in it by now that she cannot even remember her initial incentives to spend her royal life in complete devotion to charity and developmental work.

Although the Jordanian writer didn't give me the *one* answer, he did gave me yet another view on this pressing question, showing the social researcher again that the truth is often hard to uncover, and that this is most surely even more true in a (semi)authoritarian state like Jordan. This writer was of the opinion that Queen Rania's activities are driven by a desire to counter Queen Noor's popularity. As an example, he named a well-known music festival in Amman, originally set up by Queen Noor.

⁷³ Interview by the author, October 2010, Amsterdam.

⁷⁴ Interview with Egbert Harmsen, October 5th, 2010, Leiden.

⁷⁵ Interview by the author, Amman, August 2010.

Last year, Queen Rania stopped the festival from operating, for no clear reason. Since the festival was immensely popular and had always attracted people from all over the country, my interviewee thought this was illustrating a pure power struggle, referring to the popularity of Queen Noor during her husband's reign.⁷⁶

Other persons were of the opinion Queen Rania is acting out of sincere devotion, while others said she is simply part of a typical Hashemite tradition, being forced into this role automatically. Yet others mentioned her work is mostly driven by a motivation to win the hearts and minds of the people. Since ascending to the throne, the King spent a lot of money on national campaigns, one of them having the slogan "Jordan first" (on large banners throughout the country), trying to unite the people under his reign. This unlucky slogan evoked extensive criticism for being a 'western style marketing slogan'⁷⁷ and (inadvertently) excluding people from different ethnicity. It turned out to be a failure and was quickly followed by another campaign, but left the image – according to an editor of a well-known Jordan magazine – of a royal family wasting money that could better be spent on other things.⁷⁸

Probably safest to conclude is that her motivation is a mix of the abovementioned answers, most importantly perhaps that this is something she is 'forced' to do (although not unwillingly as it seems) by existing structures. The overview of Hashemite organizations above strongly illustrates this is a real family tradition and indeed, if we look at countries around the world, kings and (especially) queens and first ladies, are often involved in this kind of work. It is also important to keep in mind that all members of the Jordanian royal family, including Queen Rania, are 'modern people', meaning: they are educated in the west and therefore have a clear sense of concepts like development, human rights and such. Princess Basma even wrote a 250 page book about developmental work in Jordan (specifically the work of JOHUD), showing her deep knowledge and devotion to the subject. In this book, she states that "[King Hussein was] one of the greatest humanitarians of our time (...) and has inspired and guided our work",⁷⁹ reflecting how humanitarianism is considered to be strongly connected to the Jordanian Hashemite tradition.

When trying to uncover the motivation of royal family members, a comparison with Islamic charity organizations might be in place here, since they are also accused from working out of a 'wrong' drive: to win hearts and minds. The question with both RONGOs and Islamic organizations would be whether they do it to win souls and gain legitimacy, or whether they are driven by a sincere (activist, generous or religious) devotion. According to Harmsen, in the Islamic organizational sphere, feelings of true devotion and the sincere wish to help the underprivileged obviously exist. But of course, at the same time these organizations function as an instrument to build up a large network.⁸⁰ Conviction to charity and the wish to build a broad constituency are not mutually exclusive – both in the case of religious charity organizations and RONGOs.

⁷⁶ Idem.

⁷⁷ Ryan, 'Civil Society and Democratization in Jordan', 25-26.

⁷⁸ Interview by the author, Amman, August 2010.

⁷⁹ Basma Bint al-Talal, *Rethinking an Ngo: Development, Donors and Civil Society in Jordan* (I.B. Tauris, 2004), 222.

⁸⁰ Interview with Egbert Harmsen, October 5th, 2010, Leiden.

Measuring the Effect

Let's return now to the main research question: "How do Queen Rania's NGOs affect the 'real civil society' of Jordan?" Since it is not allowed to criticize the royal family in Jordan, interviewees were never critical of Queen Rania in person. And even when they were asked about the *role* she performed, or about the *content* and *result* of her activities, only two activists were outspokenly negative. In every interview it was possible to quite openly discuss the results of Rania's work; to ask for the main achievements; what people would suggest she should do different; and in what ways Jordanian RONGOs affect their own work.

Criticism on the government turned out to be much easier for the interviewees. Unexpectedly, an employee of the Jordan River Foundation let it slip that the Ministry of Social Affairs "is crap", when talking about the government's handling of abused children.⁸¹ Because of this, the JRF started establishing shelters throughout Jordan and currently the police refers cases to them. The same situation occurred at the Jordanian Women Union (JWU), currently the oldest Jordanian NGO on women's issues, established in 1945. They told me they opened the first shelter for abused women in the Arab world in 1999. After this, extensive lobbying was pursued at the Jordanian government to follow suit on this issue, since the problem seemed to be enormous. However, authorities refused to take on the issue for a long time, although they did start to refer cases to them through the police. Only recently the government has opened shelters, but only women of Jordanian nationality are welcome here, while the Jordanian Women Union is sheltering foreigners as well. While interviewing representatives from the JWU, they were very open in sharing their opinion on the authorities' workings, thereby, importantly, legitimizing their own role in Jordanian society.⁸²

Idealism versus pragmatism

In order to give a judgment on how organizations headed by Queen Rania 'affect' civil society organizations trying to operate independently from the state, it is necessary to shortly refer back to the concept of civil society. When civil society is defined as being the sphere between the family and the state, it is mostly seen as the institutional and associational expression of society *vis-à-vis* the state, where it has the potential to directly oppose state institutions and policies. In this reading CSOs contribute to "an institutionalized societal and cultural domain that is, to a greater or lesser extent, autonomous of the state".⁸³

However, in the newer notion of civil society, the concept attained additional values. When, after the end of the Cold War, the term came back into usage this was not only a result of the role people perceived it had played in successful grassroots opposition versus a range of oppressive regimes. The revival of the term also came forth from criticism on the idea of state-led modernization in the "Third World" countries, which had dominated developmental since the 1950s. In the 1980s and 1990s the state was increasingly criticized for its lack of competence, corruption, distortion of market forces, accountability and degree of oppressiveness – to name just a few. The idea of strengthening and empowering NGOs to fulfil developmental tasks was embraced by Western governments and

⁸¹ Interview by the author, Amman, August 2010.

⁸² Interview by the author, Amman, August 2010. The Jordanian Women Union: <http://jordanianwomenunion.org/en/default.aspx>.

⁸³ Harmsen, 'Islam, Civil Society and Social Work', 38.

eventually the World Bank. Civil society was now part of the partnership between the state and the market. Next to that, it retained its reputation of being a 'natural haven' for positive human values in the realm of democracy, equality, freedom and human rights.⁸⁴

To a certain extent, these two different conceptions can be simplified as a more 'ideological' and a more 'pragmatic' stance towards civil society; the former being politically loaded (envisioning progressive change, seeing civil society as a counterweight to the (oppressing) state, correcting it when rights of the population are at stake); and the latter being more a-political (referring to the developmental potential of CSOs). The verdict on the 'first lady phenomenon' strongly depends on which role one assigns to a civil society. This was clearly visible in reactions of the interviewees.

When talking about Queen Rania's organizations, reactions on the results of her work are very diverse. Verdicts varied from very negative, to quite neutral or unresponsive, to quite positive. Starting with the people who regarded Queen Rania's work positively: this partly seemed a logical position since we have a situation where part of the population is in need and powerful, wealthy people are stepping in providing (part of) the necessary action. In general, when talking to organizations who worked with people in need of help and who were concerned with quite a-political issues, they were not too negative on her work, since the burden to help all underprivileged in Jordan society is too heavy for them to cover by themselves. These people conceived civil society merely from a 'pragmatic' stand.

Those who held a more neutral standpoint perhaps didn't want to talk about it, or personally didn't notice groundbreaking results coming from it, but they did not reject her work *per se*. People who were outspokenly negative did this for varying reasons, idealistic *and* pragmatic in nature.

The issue of funding: the pragmatic argument

An independent, non-profit making organization exists by the virtue of funding. In literally all interviews, this issue was expressed as a grave concern versus the intermingling of Queen Rania's NGOs – and RONGOs in general – in the organizational field. Instead of being conducive for a 'healthy' organizational environment, the Hashemite organizations have created a field of unnecessary and, most importantly, uneven competition. One activist noted that in certain areas of services they provide, they work like a cartel. Having the benefits of easily collaborating with the authorities, the logical result is the exclusion of independent CSOs working in the same field.

According to Hani Hourani, director of the Al Urdun Al Jadid Research Center (having a large database and research program on civil society in Jordan), competing interests between different civil society groups have hindered the development of the field since the 1920s. Next to the different ethnic, religious or national origins of the group's members who seek to maintain their identity, funding is by far the most important source of competition.⁸⁵

Many CSOs in Jordan are only active for a short period of time and after that they cease to exist due to a lack of financial resources.⁸⁶ This makes competition over funds a very serious business.

⁸⁴ Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge and Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992), x.

⁸⁵ Hourani and Kassim, *Directory of Civil Society Organizations in Jordan*, 17.

⁸⁶ *Idem*, 19.

Foreign donor organizations (obviously) do not have enough funds to allocate to all Jordanian NGOs, and since the state has to give permission to all Jordanian organizations to receive foreign funds, and since NGOs headed by Queen Rania *do not* need this permission, it is easy math to see who receives more money from abroad.

Domestic funds also seem to favor the powerful Jordanian NGOs, like Queen Rania's or other royal ones. Here clientelism is clearly at play, being confirmed by many activists, adding that "[this practice] doesn't promote a free society and citizenship".⁸⁷ And clearly, a free society and citizenship are needed for an open political system. In this climate of clientelism all NGOs try to be friends with the royal family, instead of behaving critically towards their public activities. This chosen strategy is both useful for getting through the obligatory registration process and for the attainment of funding.

Importantly, both the Jordan River Foundation and the Queen Rania Centre for Entrepreneurship didn't portray themselves as 'royal NGOs'. They clearly stated (and could not repeat that enough!) they were *non-governmental, non-profit* organizations. The Queen Rania Centre for Entrepreneurship – yet another NGO carrying Queen Rania's name – is strictly speaking not one of 'her' NGOs. The organization was established in 1991, as the Princess Sumaya University for Technology, falling under the heading of another family member. In 2003, after a comprehensive development and expansion plan, they decided to name the centre "after a prominent Arab dignitary known for his/her distinguished role in supporting economic growth and entrepreneurship".⁸⁸ Queen Rania. When talking to an employee of the organization, he acknowledged that having the name 'Queen Rania' in their heading made the attainment of funding indeed easier. At the Jordan River Foundation, which also receives extensive funding from organizations like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), employees told me their name *and* reputation helped in getting the funding. Also when raising domestic funds from private companies, it helps being a royal NGO – due to a climate of clientelism according to the critics; due to a steady and trustworthy image according to those involved.

However, while the funding issue seemed an important factor to all activists, it depended on the organization how furious they were on the issue. One activist angrily told me "they take funds away",⁸⁹ while completely dismissing the existence of RONGOs. But an organization like the Mizan Law Group for Human Rights didn't suffer from Royal NGOs taking away foreign or domestic funding and they were therefore hesitant in fulminating a strong opinion on it. Mizan has its own donors, mainly international ones. This is probably due to their working field: human rights law is considered more of a concern by international donors. Furthermore, human rights cases often range across borders, in contrast to, for example, the condition of a country's educational system.

One might wonder why these international donors, often being NGOs themselves, so easily bypass independent CSOs to give their funds to RONGOs. As part of the explanation of this, a foreign activist who had worked for the American NGO Save the Children, told me how she experienced that

⁸⁷ Interview by the author, Amman, August 2010.

⁸⁸ The Queen Rania Centre for Entrepreneurship, 'About the Centre', <http://www.qrce.org/?q=node/3>.

⁸⁹ Interview by the author, Amman, August 2010.

American NGOs were not transparent either. Perhaps not coincidentally, in Amman you see much more American than European NGOs.⁹⁰ This is an issue to be explored in further research.

As an important side-step however, it is crucial to ask questions about the desirability of foreign funding. When a local organization receives funding from western NGOs, it might affect its legitimacy among Jordanian citizens and create a distance for people to approach the NGO for help. Also, foreign donors (international organizations and governments alike) often have a large package of demands and conditions attached to giving out money. This can constrain and diminish the independence of the receiving organization.

To conclude on funding: in a 'decent' CSO climate, access to funding should not carry such big differences between the organizations. The fact that organizations headed by Queen Rania have this clear benefit – due to fewer restrictions and due to their reputation – can be considered problematic. The negative effect of this is threefold: firstly, since funds bypass CSOs to go to RONGOs, many organizations cease to exist. Secondly, clientelism increases because CSOs cannot afford to behave antagonistic towards the Hashemites. And thirdly, and most importantly, struggle over funding leads to a highly competitive civil society, which is identified as one of the explanations of the resilient authoritarianism in the MENA region. According to Cavatorta and Elanza, civil society in the region can be considered as quite strong in some countries, “but it is too divided to be effective” as a counterweight *vis-à-vis* the state.⁹¹

Internal democracy and expertise: the idealistic argument

Another important problem clinging to Queen Rania's NGOs and being subject of criticism, is how the internal structure of the organization lacks democracy and good governance. RONGOs are not obliged to hold elections for their executive committee, while all other NGOs are. However, despite of these rules, a lack of internal democracy is unfortunately also a problem in these independent NGOs or professional associations. When they hold elections, some of these organizations simply choose to nominate the name of the leader to be elected.⁹² This was done by the Jordanian Women Union for example: this fact came up spontaneously and was being criticized in two separate interviews.⁹³ Apart from the fact that this practice is intrinsically undemocratic, it can also be criticized because this non-renewal of leadership has a negative effect on membership rates of CSOs.⁹⁴

Even the most critical activist I spoke to didn't hold a hostile stand against Queen Rania personally, but her critique was still fundamental. Firstly, no matter whether Queen Rania has all the best intentions, in her advocacy and lobbying work she made very harmful mistakes whereby she undermined years of careful preparation by independent activists. One example mentioned was when Rania lobbied the Parliament for a law versus honour crimes. Due to bad preparation of her team, she mixed up legal articles and mistakenly showed dozens of very conservative MPs the legal article dealing with crimes of passion – a crucial difference. The proposal to abolish this article, which

⁹⁰ Interview with a foreign activist, Amman, August 2010.

⁹¹ Francesco Cavatorta and Azzam Elanza, 'Political Opposition in Civil Society', in: Holger Albrecht (ed.), *Political Opposition in the Middle East: Contentious Politics, Authoritarianism, and State-Society Relations* (University of Florida Press, 2010), pp 75-93

⁹² Hourani and Kassim, *Directory of Civil Society Organizations in Jordan*, 18.

⁹³ Interviews with a foreign and a Jordanian activist, both living in Amman. Amman, August 2010.

⁹⁴ Hourani and Kassim, *Directory of Civil Society Organizations in Jordan*, 19. Professional associations have much higher membership rates, due to mandatory membership laws in their case.

was being light on the punishment of it, got voted down due to the mix-up and hasty preparation. In the process, the queen was warned of using the wrong article by my interviewee – who had been carefully lobbying on the issue for years – but her message was ignored. She could have known and should have known issues like this need extensive preparation, considering the fact that Jordan's Parliament is full of very conservative, tribal men. But in the process she did not seek collaboration with CSOs already working on the issue and her action ruined a law change for at least the coming years.⁹⁵

As said, Queen Rania's intentions are probably good, but on complicated issues like the abovementioned, one needs more than mere intentions. The fact that she is the queen affected the whole process, since no one would have dared to criticize her or her idea. And this is something that is intrinsically wrong with the RONGO phenomenon: civil organizations should be held accountable at all times and their members should be elected and possibly criticized when necessary.

Secondly, in the Jordanian Constitution it says that members of the royal family are not allowed to vote. The underlying principle of this is that they cannot interfere in politics and influence the political process. So does this make the existence of RONGOs illegal and reprehensible? For a royal family to do charity work is not a bad thing *per se*. It is doubtful that the Dutch queen, for example, would get severely criticized for having a charity organization in the Netherlands. The difference however lies in both practice and context. The obvious lack of the RONGOs is their undemocratic way of internal functioning; their absence of transparency towards the outside world; their advantage in access to funding; and the way in which they maintain clientelistic networks. In a fully democratic context, checks and balances exist to make sure this is not the case. In (semi) authoritarian settings however, the situation is completely different, which makes Jordan a problematic case.

⁹⁵ Interview with the author, Amman, August 2010.

Embedded Activism and Dependent Autonomy

As a final section, to complicate the matter even further and strongly hint at the need for future research, we have to problematize the notion of GONGOs somewhat more. The wide selection of concepts describing 'NGOs in disguise' (GONGOs, RONGOs, FLANGOs, QUANGOs, et cetera) points at the variety of possibilities and contexts, as well as the definitional ambiguity at play, and the strong perception of the activist or researcher at work. If we take Jordan as an example, we will see that the term GONGO can be problematic since the government in Jordan is not identical to the Jordanese regime. 'RENGOs'; would that be a good term for a phenomenon of 'regime NGOs'?

Secondly, not only these new concepts are ambiguous; the concept of 'CSO' is also vague in a sense. Because what does it tell us? If we go back to the example of Jordan again, many CSOs are in fact 'leftist recyclers' – in the words of an interviewee –, containing political activists striving for much more than the 'universal human rights' they proclaim. Also, many CSOs lack a great deal of internal democracy, they are corrupt, et cetera. Is it all black and white; NGOs versus GONGOs; good versus bad?

From this research it came to the fore it is impossible to give a single judgment on the effect of FLANGOs on independent Jordanian CSOs, because among other things, this judgment depends on one's conception of 'civil society'. Furthermore, it has to be concluded that the boundaries between 'independent NGOs' and 'governmental NGOs' are vague as well, which hinders a strong judgment of the actual effects of both on processes of social change. In the scanty literature on GONGOs, two new terms have arisen in the context of China, who have a potential to fill this gap.

Embedded Activism

Peter Ho and Richard Louis Edmonds came up with the term *embedded activism* to contribute to the debate whether civil society in China can be effective in bringing social change. The authors pose that the Chinese NGO sector in its relation to the state constitutes a form of 'embedded activism'. Hereby they mean that the relationship between the two realms is neither a 'full penetration' or control of the state over NGOs, nor a direct confrontational dichotomy between the two. The boundaries between the two are blurred, but by consciously depoliticizing their activism and slowly mobilizing support within various governmental agencies, society and in the media, NGOs can incrementally work towards social change. The authors see the 'promise of China' in the politics of small steps, regarding embedded activism better than no activism at all.⁹⁶ The theoretical framework of this model invites to be applied to other (semi)authoritarian countries, like Jordan, and underlines again the assumption that the situation is not hopeless when state and civil society are intertwined to a certain extent.

⁹⁶ Peter Ho and Richard Louis Edmonds (ed.), *China's Embedded Activism: Opportunities and Constraints of a Social Movement* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

Dependent Autonomy

Another source, again related to China, works with a second term to describe the relationship between NGOs and the state. Just as 'embedded activism', this term carries both an enabling, and a constraining feature in it. Lu Yiyi speaks of *dependent autonomy*, meaning that Chinese NGOs are in a sense heavily dependent on the state, but at the same time enjoy an enormous amount of *de facto* autonomy. Just as in Jordan, in order to exist, CSOs "need to cultivate official patronage in order to gain access to bureaucratically-allocated resources and political protection",⁹⁷ but at the same time, for over thirty years, the Chinese state has weakened social control mechanisms, which gives NGOs greater autonomy in this new system of 'fragmented authoritarianism'.

China is very familiar with the GONGO phenomenon, and Yiyi makes an interesting remark regarding these organizations. In contrast to what most people would assume, Chinese GONGOs actually enjoy a greater amount of autonomy from the state than regular NGOs. An important reason for this is the fact that GONGOs are created by the same state agencies that now supervise them, therefore they enjoy strong bureaucratic connections and have great knowledge of how the state machinery works. It is not despite, but *because* they enjoy great ties with the government, that GONGOs enjoy more autonomy than regular NGOs and that there have in fact been instances when a powerful GONGO patron sought direct confrontation with the government.

Being a GONGO does not automatically lead to mirroring and blindly following the government. Empirical evidence in China shows that GONGOs can also be a powerful source of resistance; due to their connections perhaps even more so than independent NGOs. This is not to say that this is always the case however, and obviously it depends a great deal whether the people leading the GONGO are reform minded. Again, this concept can be of great value when transmitted to research on other (semi) authoritarian states.

⁹⁷ Yiyi, 'NGO-State Relations in Contemporary China'.

Conclusion

These last years, the term ‘first lady phenomenon’ has entered analyses on authoritarian regimes in the MENA region. In the scarce academic literature one can find on it, it is mostly looked at with suspicion, but in-depth research on this phenomenon and its effects on a nation’s civil society has not been done yet. At first sight, one could argue that a central state figure playing an active role in promoting citizen empowerment and working with a wide range of organizations and projects creates a positive atmosphere for a flourishing civil society. However, obviously in Jordan the story appeared to be not that simple.

This research placed First Lady NGOs under the regime strategy of ‘civil society infiltration’, although it is perhaps not always consciously employed as such, but embedded in a long Hashemite tradition of involvement in the organizational sphere. The verdict on the effect of Queen Rania’s NGOs on Jordan’s civil society strongly depends on which role one assigns to a civil society, which was clearly visible in the interviews. However, when striking a balance, it is probably safest to say that the verdict was overall negative. Some people who perceive civil society mainly from a pragmatic point of view (people who work in charity or development, for example) were quite positive on her work, since she does help out many people in need. However, negative remarks were more common, pointing at the lack of internal democracy in FLANGOs, the issue of funding, and the fundamental point that Hashemite humanitarianism must be judged differently in a country like Jordan, where the royal family *is* indeed the regime; more powerful than the government. For this reason, outcomes in research like this can never be used to judge the GONGO phenomenon *an sich*, since context is everything.

An effort is made to give an overview of the relatively new GONGO concept, belonging to one of the streams in the critical debate on the effects of a civil society in authoritarian regimes. The role of GONGOs can roughly be divided into serving a role in the distribution of resources; and playing a role in processes of authoritarian upgrading. Unhealthy and uneven competition over funding and fortification of clientelism are probably most harmful to independent (or at least wannabe independent!) CSOs.

China is the case on which most is written on GONGOs so far, and research on this brought forward the interesting concepts of ‘embedded activism’ and ‘dependent autonomy’ – inviting strongly to apply on new cases such as Jordan. Next to this, recommendations for further research are on the issue of funding and on the effect Queen Rania’s work has on the legitimacy of the Hashemite regime.

Having said this, it is not likely that the ‘first lady phenomenon’ will disappear in the short term. Is this a reason for despair? Although a strong civil society *vis-à-vis* the state is absent in Jordan, the civil society realm is far from depressing. Many organizations are inspiring and vital, and dare to be outspokenly critical towards RONGOs, and FLANGOs more in general. However, it is important this criticism will not extinguish. Jordanian CSOs cannot accomplish true change by themselves; as a first way of at least trying to improve the situation, it is to be hoped CSOs can work together more closely

to push for laws making the organizational field more equal and fair. Next to this – although perhaps a utopian thought? – they need strong and progressive personalities in the Hashemite dynasty understanding their cause, and understanding that giving support and freedom to Jordanian CSOs does not necessarily mean the regime gets undermined. It might even increase appreciation and legitimacy of the regime, and increase the results of their projects. Some way or another it has to be shown to the queen that no matter how sincere her motivations, by doing her work, she is undermining processes she might actually support by heart.

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The paper is produced in the framework of the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia. This is a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on the roles and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. This programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Syria and Iran can contribute to various processes of democratization and how international actors can support this.

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