

KNOWLEDGE PROGRAMME CIVIL SOCIETY IN WEST ASIA

WORKING PAPER 18

SALAM KAWAKIBI



THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF A COMMON APPROACH TO HUMAN RIGHTS



UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

people
unlimited
HIVOS

The Political Implications of a Common Approach to Human Rights was first published in French as *L'implication politique d'une approche commune des droits de l'homme* in *Ten Papers for Barcelona 2010, State and society : the Democratic Challenge*.
Publisher: European Institute of the Mediterranean & EU Institute for Security Studies (August 2010).

Colophon

First published in December 2010 by the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, a joint initiative by

Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries
P.O. Box 85565 | 2508 CG The Hague | The Netherlands
www.hivos.net



Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR), University of Amsterdam
Department of Political Science
Oudezijds Achterburgwal 237 | 1012 DL Amsterdam | The Netherlands
www.assr.nl



UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

Design: Tangerine – Design & communicatie advies, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Cover photo: Painting from the online portfolio for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) drawings & paintings by William T. Ayton

ISSN 2210-3473

© University of Amsterdam and Hivos 2010

All rights reserved

The publishers encourage fair use of this material provided proper citation is made.

The Political Implications of a Common Approach to Human Rights

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Emerging Civil Societies	2
Refuting European "Interference"	5
Human Rights: Dilemmas and Contradictions	7
The Ascent of Political Religiousness: a Challenge or an Imaginary Problem?	10
A Surge of Hope on the Long Road to Democratisation: Internal Dialogue	11
Conclusion	13
About the Author	15

The Political Implications of a Common Approach to Human Rights

Examining human rights and civil society in South Mediterranean countries seems rather complex. The difficulty lies in the risk of trivialising the two problems, rather than a fear of authoritarian repression, which is still very present in the countries concerned. Any simplification risks undermining the importance of promoting human rights and the emancipation of civil society as part of regional reconstruction. I will therefore try, in the pages that follow, to treat this subject with due care to avoid falling into the trap of 'trivialisation'.

The topics of human rights and civil society provoke a lively debate on both sides of the Mediterranean. It is important to underline the fact that in the political arena these two issues are particularly emotive. Examining this synergy will include looking at the role of external participants (in this case, Europeans) in promoting democratic values, and looking at the reception that has been given to this "interference" by official bodies of the societies in question. The debates and contradictions concerning the issue of human rights and the use to which it has been put – neutral or self-interested – explain the feelings of reticence and suspicion. It is also necessary to examine this question with reference to the religious dimension, which "invades" the public sphere and imposes itself as an essential factor in understanding what is at stake. External interference can also be positive in helping to motivate activists to establish platforms for dialogue. This experiment, which is in a crucial phase, highlights the impressive role of civil societies in the desired and expected reforms of the countries of the South.

Emerging Civil Societies

Since the creation of the modern state, Arab political authorities have nationalised the public sphere at every level. By monitoring and dominating civil-society organisations and by crushing political liberties, the freedom of expression and organisation, they have subdued mass movements. One should also point out that all politically active people, whatever their allegiance – nationalist, Marxist, Islamist – bear responsibility (if to varying degrees) for interrupting the development of civil societies in these countries. These participants have unwittingly (and despite their support for a civil society) contributed to this interruption by adopting strategies based on revolutionary legitimacy, and by privileging “social democracy” over political democracy. Thus the systematic marginalisation of civil society is due, in great part, to the populist political practices of the governing elites. This also applies to the political practices of a large part of the opposition, which only grants society a utilitarian and demonstrative role.

In certain countries of the South, the very existence of an “independent” civil society is called into question before it has played any part in the process whatsoever. The rejection of this “new” concept, “imported” for some and “imposed” for others, has become entrenched with leaders, but also in Arab society itself. For some leaders, it is important to find a “local” definition that respects the “distinctive features” of their country. Using a body of literature that heavily politicises history, they claim – and without being completely wrong – that the West is thereby trying to re-insinuate itself into their societies and cultures. The “colour revolutions” in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics have strengthened this suspicion.

Moreover, for some socio-religious activists, the independent civil society ruins collective morals, except where she conveys their own vision of public involvement. For them, civil society in its modern definition risks introducing foreign values and serving as a Trojan horse for westerners to “shake up” the established order.

Arab civil societies are not opposed to the nation-state, as the authorities would have it. On the contrary, they consider themselves the very foundation of the nation-state. For it is in the nation-state that they can find their fullest expression. Faced with the state’s monopoly of power, wealth, force, truth and patriotism, Arab civil societies define themselves by their refusal of the very principle of monopoly. They aim to prove, through their activities, that they offer a viable alternative – but without success. They demand the reproduction of a political space shared by all citizens, and by all social classes, political parties and ideological movements.

However, a structural problem forces civil society to be assimilated into the political opposition. There are three reasons for this:

- The absence of any “natural” practice of public activity in Arab countries over several decades of undemocratic regimes. In a political culture that is suspicious of any involvement beyond state circles, activists are led towards a (sometimes necessary) position that combines involvement in a given civil-society cause with opposition to the regime in place that monopolises the public sphere.

- Activists' confusion, not necessarily negative in itself, about the role of their involvement in society, an involvement which is more and more "politicised" and removed from any concrete objectives linked to a well-defined set of demands.

- The wilful confusion on the part of Western "sponsors", who often consider (perhaps with just cause) that civil-society activists are agents of political change within these countries. Their relationship tends to be based on this reductive assessment and ignore all other aspects.

In this "triangular" model, defining the ambitions and goals of civil society becomes complicated. It is perhaps too early to speak of a "natural" process of differentiation on the street between active involvement in the political arena and in the civic arena. Activists have to take care to ensure that they profit as much as possible from the opportunities and advantages that are created when these two arenas encounter each other. Thus it is crucial to bring about a structural change in the culture and in political practices, by preparing societies to make better use of civic and peaceful forms of protest, before concentrating on the actual political changes.

Civil society in Arab countries is developing along three different lines:

- Via **truly** governmental organisations, which provide a distorted appropriation of the public sphere by the state. They are not completely meaningless, because they at least create a breach through which a new culture can be introduced that has been marginalised for a long time: that of participating in the public sphere. By partially opening a door once sealed by the regimes, and by establishing new practices, these organisations will eventually contribute to the emancipation of civil society, which has been gagged for decades. A large part of the European funds for promoting civil societies in the countries of the South benefits from this kind of organisation, whose favoured area of activity is still social development and aid. The model is usually developed through sponsorship at the highest level of the state (for example, in Syria, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt). The experience remains confuse because it effectively contributes to the weakening of civil society from a global perspective. Its evolution will need to be observed with a healthy dose of scepticism.

- The second formula is the civil society of receptions, which develops around embassies and the foreign cultural centres. Although it is not representative, its look and conduct seem to please sponsor. It is with this society that European diplomats and expatriates prefer to deal in its various guises, conferring on it certain legitimacy. Without prejudice to the qualities of its individual "members", its scope is very limited and its legitimacy debatable. It has considerable support and can be co-opted by the first category in publicity and improvement projects that do not really implicate it. Its area of activity, inasmuch as there is any activity, is limited to the socio-environmental sector, which brings it closer to the first category.

- Finally, there is civil society proper, which struggles and will always struggle to assert itself in its area of activity. Its activists work in a climate of suspicion and restriction. They are expanding their scope beyond "traditional" sectors allowed by political authorities (development, heritage,

environment), by promoting civil rights and the protection of human rights. Arab states have reacted with suspicion (if to varying degrees), making it the focal point of their criticism. In certain countries, such as Morocco and Lebanon, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have a larger margin of manoeuvre whereas in others, such as Syria and Tunisia, their work is very restricted.

While most Arab countries are opening up their economies, the public sphere remains restricted and tightly controlled. Freedom of expression and association do not seem to be essential elements in the prevailing logic of governments. Public and even private media, basing themselves on the almost systematic refusal to publish and broadcast any dissent, are strictly controlled, as are all other tools of public expression. There are some audacious but unorganised attempts at an intellectual production that circumvents these unofficial red lines, which vary from country to country.

Refuting European “Interference”

For Arab governments, there is no shortage of occasions to criticise Europe’s stance on human rights. The Israeli occupation; the civilian casualties caused by America’s war in Iraq; the situation in Afghanistan, especially concerning “collateral damage”; the rejection of Palestinian election results; the war in Gaza, etc. The list is often long, depending on the “goodwill” or otherwise of the countries in question.

For example, on 13 January 2009 Syria’s foreign minister Walid Mouallem seized the opportunity of a state visit by his Spanish counterpart Miguel Angel Moratinos to criticise European policy. At the press conference, he gave a clear response to the Europeans’ refusal to vote for a resolution in the Human Rights Council in Geneva that calls for a commission of enquiry into the atrocities committed by the Israeli army in Gaza in January 2007. In short, he accused Europeans of exploiting the human rights issue “to put political pressure on our peoples”.

Mouallem declared that, “we will no longer allow any European leader to tell us about democracy while Gaza is being bled dry because Hamas was elected by its inhabitants. We will no longer allow them to tell us about human rights while in front of their eyes the Gaza massacres are taking place. Why does a country like Switzerland or France (...) abstain from voting for such a resolution? They create commissions of enquiry and tribunal for a single assassination (1), Gaza on the other hand is wiped out, and no commission... why? Is it because the population of Gaza has empty pockets and empty stomachs?”

This robust attitude towards Europe’s (lack of) position on Israeli aggression is just one example of a whole series of reactions from Arab political leaders to what they see as Northern interference in their internal affairs. Declarations of this kind are ubiquitous in the media. They emanate from official circles, then emerge in public opinion and even among the opposition, which thereby joins the ranks of the government. It has almost become the norm to counter any pro-democracy attitude or any approach “inspired” by a cross-border movement with the same arguments. Intellectuals of all allegiances are virtually unanimous about the horror of Israel’s attack on Gaza. On this subject there is no distinction between left and right, democrats and conservatives, Islamists and secular intellectuals. And for once, their positions are not dictated or orchestrated. They come from a profound feeling that the Palestinians have suffered an injustice and that Europe’s attitude is “very soft”, “fearful” and “irresponsible”.

“Foreign” involvement in promoting human rights and an independent civil society in Arab countries is often countered by the expression “double standards”. This is the authorities’ pretext every time a discussion is initiated with their European counterparts, the smokescreen that protects their practices from being “called into question”. Of course, the expression “double standards” was not invented by these regimes; it existed already. Their challenge is to foreground this “pretext”, but without making it solely responsible for the reticence of those involved.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is a genuine false pretext, one that is heavily vested by certain Arab

governments. It is also the cause of several breakdowns in regional reconstruction processes. It plays a crucial role in moulding a public conscience that is strongly attached to the issue.

The peace negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and the state of Israel appear to be a “laborious” method of passing the time and postponing the due date of a real, fair and lasting peace in the region. These negotiations, supported by the international community, are considered a permanent failure. The representatives of the Palestinian Authority seem powerless and seek to prolong the life of their own “phantom” power, which is far removed from the hopes of the Palestinian people.

Facts on the ground amply sustain such arguments: the increase in settlement construction; the increasing number of check points; the expanded construction of the separation wall; etc. No gesture, not even a symbolic one, has been made since, which strengthens the hand of those who refuse to negotiate, and shows up the failure of western efforts to provide any platform for dialogue. This situation is real, and it is being exploited by the so-called “extremists”. An alliance has therefore been created between these “extremists” and all other political forces which will not accept seeing a national cause eroded in negotiations that achieve nothing, unless it is to preserve the status quo. Europe's role in the process, seen as providing unconditional backing for Israeli negotiators, is viewed badly.

Arab governments are also accused by their own populations of being complicit in the misery endured by Palestinians. An increase in fanaticism on the one hand, and a strengthening of state repression on the other, risk shaping the immediate future of the region. Similarly, the advanced partnership between Europe and Israel, albeit momentarily “suspended”, has inflamed Arab public opinion. For some, it is almost “inadmissible” and “intolerable” that Europe, which “inundates us every day with pretty words on respecting human life and freedoms, comes to a helpless stop in front of the massacre of the Palestinian population. It is almost complicity!”

Human Rights: Dilemmas and Contradictions

A feeling of suspicion prevails concerning European policy on democracy and respecting fundamental right in the countries of the South Mediterranean. This is strengthened, among other things, by Europe's refusal to accept the democratic choice of the Palestinians. Europe's refusal to negotiate with Hamas and its rejection, under Israeli pressure, of any political overture seems to discredit the arguments put forward by the West, which call for democratic political reform in Arab countries. This opinion is shared by members of all political groups. Thus, western suspicion of the AKP, Turkey's ruling party, sustains the thesis of religious extremists, who interpret it as fear and hatred of the Muslim religion. The claim that Europe's support for human rights and democracy is only superficial, and exists merely to further its own interests grows stronger.

A "fatal" triangle is at stake here: economic relationships, political stability and regional security. It poisons the processes begun by each side to effectively promote a culture of human rights. Privileging economic prosperity can camouflage acute political regression. In its turn, the fight against terrorism, preferably religious, conceals the moral and physical repression of any political demand.

Policies that might be capable of promoting democracy, good governance and human right, on the one hand, and strengthening regional security and political stability on the other, still seem to be a fanciful idea. At most, they exist in speeches. It is almost impossible to try and promote the principles of the legally constituted state and democracy when leaders see the war against terrorism, fanaticism and menaces of all kinds as a godsend. They blame all the ills of their societies, economies and policies on this interminable war. Generally, they garner official support from the democracies of the North by means of declarations, actions and bilateral accords on security matters.

Theoretically, therefore, there is no contradiction between promoting democratic principles and practices, respecting human rights and applying the rules of good governance, and simultaneously maintaining security and stability. But it is wishful thinking because the reality on the ground is quite different. This paradox is not specific to the countries of the South, but is also a part of the contradiction at the heart of the countries of the North, which are supposed to be the guarantors of universal values in democracy and human rights.

It is very likely that some decision-makers in Europe are torn between respecting human rights and meeting security "requirements". They nevertheless manage to overcome their "humanist" sentiment without difficulty when it comes to "serious" threats. This attitude, though limited, causes damage on the societal and ethical level. On the other hand, the advantage for European countries is in their democratic institutions of control and oversight. In democracies, the parliaments, media and NGOs play a vital role in imposing respect for human rights, but even they do not enjoy total freedom in a world that is subject to the interests of the global market, the oil industry and the military-industrial complex. These same instruments of control can exercise an important and efficient influence on their political systems. But are they equally efficient when it comes to the position (or lack of position)

of their countries vis-à-vis the activities of the leaders of the South?

Security concerns on both sides of the Mediterranean undermine respect for fundamental liberties and human rights. Nevertheless, leaders on both sides seem to be unanimous in abiding by such concerns. Bilateral and multilateral meetings are increasing, without necessarily remedying the dangerous violent actions that destroy social peace. For the South, the commitment to security is an invaluable pretext. Before or after repressing peaceful political demands, its undemocratic regimes, like to take refuge in the concept of a universal fight against terrorism in all its existing and invented forms.

South Mediterranean political and security authorities imagine that by adopting this not very credible strategy they can reassure the “demanding” North on their respect for political rights. In most cases, the authorities meet their objective: criticism is increasingly timorous.

This approach despoils all citizens’ rights. Furthermore, there is the “weak” response by some countries of the North – a response that might be called “complicitous” – that have privileged relations with these regimes. One even hears some leaders of these democratic countries say that their counterparts in the South represent a specific “culture” that must be respected; that they are “admired” by millions of their own citizens, but also throughout the region; that they are the last “bulwark” against the tsunami of political Islamism, etc. The array of explanations and legitimisations is large. It is updated as political and economic relations develop between the democratic countries of the North and the authoritarian regimes of the South.

The South’s citizens are still the victims. They find themselves caught in their Northern neighbours’ “legitimised” repression. They are not fools and, despite appearances, are well-informed: their regimes are the good student in the partnerships signed with the countries of the North, whatever form they might take.

The West believes it can promote the fundamental principles of freedom in the region in several ways. How to make them converge remains a matter for debate and uncertainty: priorities and methods differs, not to say contradict each other. For civil societies in the South, the image of American democracy under former president George W. Bush has been tarnished by the Iraq affair; his unconditional support for Israeli policies; and his consistent backing of totalitarian regimes that block any attempt at political liberalisation within their societies. The change of leadership in the US and President Obama’s speech in Cairo have mollified those waiting for a palpable achievement.

Europe’s position and its version of democracy are to its advantage in this area, even though European policy is believed to follow US policy like a sheep. For some “democratic” conservatives in the South, the connection between western democracy and a loss of moral values is easily established. For extremists, western democracy has only one goal: “to dismantle the societies and populations that apply it”. Civil-society activists in the South have differing perceptions of European foreign policy in the Mediterranean. Some are tempted to denounce any initiative as an expression of “neo-colonialism” aiming “to deprive their countries of their experts and riches, and of stopping the

development of Islam in the region". Others, expressing their suspicion in the register to which they belong, even speak of "crusades".

Seen from this angle, democracy does not offer pluralism, the possibility of opting for a change in power, and the separation of powers. Authoritarian regimes profit from these "doubts" and sustain them directly or indirectly by encouraging such erroneous ideas to take root and thus protect themselves from any demands for democracy.

A common feeling is that the issue of human rights is not a top priority, or even not a priority at all. Oratorically, the situation is different, but that does not conceal reality, which is often far removed from good intentions.

The Ascent of Political Religiousness: a Challenge or an Imaginary Problem?

Is the fear of political Islam enough to push the countries of the North into accepting human-rights “offences” in the South? Is there “a real Islamist danger”? Will any sustained democratic transition necessarily lead to a fundamentalist system that will shut the door on real democracy? Nothing suggests that fundamentalist movements will dominate political systems when the latter become democratic. However, this interpretation cannot ignore a net increase in demonstrative faith practices – or a “violent” rise of religious expression in social and cultural practices. Perhaps it is this which makes Europeans anxious: the idea that the phenomenon might reach the Northern shores of the Mediterranean. In their quest for legitimacy, several rulers in the South clearly make concessions to the omnipresence of religion in everyday life. They do not, however, reduce their vigilance in security matters when it comes to political demands from all sides, Islamist or not.

An increasingly large part of the population of the South, including some Islamists, believes that Europe’s image has been blemished by its conduct, such as its reluctance to admit certain population groups using various pretexts, but in reality because they are not Christian (Turkey, for example); its refusal to recognise and back an “Islamist” government, despite the fact that it was democratically elected (for instance, Palestinian Hamas); or its lack of vigour when defending human-rights and democratic ideals despite having proclaimed them. A great democrat of the Left has declared: “It is not only despotic regimes that put forward the Islamist threat to shore up their power, but also western forces who do not want to apply efficient pressure so as to impose or inspire democracy. According to them, they risk leaving an opening for radical movements of political Islam”.

A Surge of Hope on the Long Road to Democratisation: Internal Dialogue

A mechanism is developing in countries of the Southern Mediterranean whereby “dissenting” political forces create a synergy of **critical dialogue**. Initiatives within this framework are multiplying, and the results are rather encouraging. Dialogue has been created between representatives of radically different movements (Islamists, communists, liberals, etc.). In some cases, activists have found common ground on the principal issues of social life and political practice. This is an example of an alternative to pre-prepared plans, which have been imported or imposed.

From Yemen to Morocco, Arab political activists who have no part in running their respective countries have often “managed” to establish platforms for dialogue but also (though more rarely) local-election alliances. The two movements that have distinguished themselves on these platforms are the religious parties and the leftwing parties, including the liberals. In their dialogues, they address subjects that have long been taboo: political pluralism, minority rights, the rights of women, ideological and religious references in legislation, etc.

One example is the **Common Platform** in Yemen, which gathers the socialists and the Muslim Brothers (Islah), former enemies. Along with some less significant political organisations, they have developed very advanced proposals for the shared management of Yemen’s recurrent crises. Going beyond mere goodwill and rhetoric, they have suggested solutions that have, unfortunately, been rejected by the regime. For some leaders, who are backed by the West, staying in power takes precedence over maintaining civil peace and emancipating their “subjects” economically and politically.

Syrians also managed to develop a national proposal of reformist demands in the **Damascus Declaration**. The Declaration associates political “voices” that had previously been very much at variance in elaborating a discourse of reconciliation, and in suggesting peaceful and gradual solutions that might initiate real reform in Syrian society. However, the context did not allow the project to become a reality.

A third experiment is Tunisia’s 18 October Movement, which associates leftwing political activists and members of the al-Nahda religious movement. The official response has been unyielding, preventing the initiative from reaching the wider public. Action is here seen as an attempt to destabilise the government.

In Morocco, discussions between socialists and the Justice and Development Party (PJD) have in some contexts led to limited alliances for municipal elections. This is political pragmatism, which has not managed to create a fully developed platform at the national level.

While there is hope that debate might be stimulated, and that solutions which bring people together might be found, there is also scepticism about the feasibility and permanence of such achievements, even among those who are actively involved. The structural and intellectual limits of such experiments must not hide a reality produced by debate and reflection on themes that have long

been the monopoly of the governing party. These are starting points for widening a political sphere that has been locked for a long time.

One cannot fail but notice that those who initiate these activities “accuse” westerners in general and Europeans in particular of minimising – in both thought and action – the importance of encouraging such initiatives. The “pro-democracy” position therefore becomes even less convincing. On the other hand, the expected disengagement by European governments leaves plenty of room for greater involvement by Europe’s civil societies.

Conclusion

Promoting human rights in Arab countries is a very complex undertaking. Not only do the political authorities tightly control any civil-society initiative, but local society is also opposed to the universal dimension of these rights. Deep-rooted conservative traditions, customs and literature resist universal values. Religion, rightly or wrongly, thus gives an alibi to those who refuse certain values or concepts. Furthermore, as I have emphasised, governments demonise such terms as “civil society” and “human rights”.

For intellectuals and the elite, Europe must try and regain some of its credibility in the region; although they believe in the democratic model, they are not convinced that Europe’s policy is impartial. And paradoxically, they are looking more to the new pragmatic US administration than to any “fearful” European diplomacy. The Arab-Israeli conflict remains the prevailing conflict of the region. Its fallout is manifold: occupation of land; colonisation; imprisoning an entire population behind separation walls; impoverishment; systematic destruction of habitat, such as olive trees; destruction of a society and identity; and, last but not least, terrorism. I have deliberately chosen to conclude on terrorism. Terrorism, which has still to be defined, is not innate in young people, and is not the result of any culture or religion, even if the twisting of these two contributes directly and indirectly to its development.

Eluding the real issue and trying to find incomplete and unfair solutions to this conflict only heightens the crisis and disappointment, and feeds terrorism. International summits that supposedly find a solution have failed one after the other, since Madrid in 1991. It should be remembered that there are other territories still occupied by the Israeli army in Syria and Lebanon. Millions of Palestinian refugees have been scattered to the four corners of the world without the “negotiators” really caring about their fate.

For an Arab population that is strongly attached to symbols, the Arab-Israeli conflict is liable to affect the whole region, not simply the countries directly concerned. Frustration, bitterness, rebellion, a feeling of having been betrayed by the international community, a feeling of injustice, etc. These are all elements that do not facilitate the task of decision-makers on either side of the Mediterranean in their “fight” against terrorism and in their desire to promote democracy.

The “shambles” in Iraq is yet another breeding ground for all sorts of violence, starting with the violence of the occupation, the humiliation, blunders and collateral damage. With over four million Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries and two million or more displaced within the country itself, this grave humanitarian crisis – which seems to elude the well-meaning observers – risks fuelling the machinery of violence and terrorism. Regional instability is already guaranteed.

It is important to stress that the direction of European policy in the Mediterranean is, as far as public opinion is concerned, a factor that could counter-balance the US’s biased policy in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The EU’s role in “solving” this conflict in particular, and the region’s political issues in general, has been long awaited. An idea which has weight with a number of observers is that

western support for “despotic and corrupt” regimes and for Israel will eventually incite Europe’s Muslim community to react.

To promote democracy alongside security, one must above all avoid being a pyromaniac fireman – provoking imaginary conflicts so as to impose a distorted timetable for change in the region. Thus, as we have seen in Iraq, betting on an opposition in exile does not bear fruit. It is internal forces, with all their faults, which are capable of bringing about change. Creating new monsters in the region (Iraq) merely creates new zones of tension and conflict that will not lead to the stability that is so desperately sought.

What is needed is an exchange of ideas between Arab civil-society activists and their counterparts on the other side of the Mediterranean. The objective must be to convince Europeans to stop responding with simplistic ideas whereby “democracy in Arab countries is a bonus”, or that such a “luxury product” is not immediately necessary. Exchanges between Mediterranean civil societies have played a crucial role in establishing a common and lasting Mediterranean commitment.

Arab countries are faced with the challenge of integrating a transitional process to democracy, which can only go one way: towards a legally constituted state, supported by civil-society institutions. To arrive there, global political, economic and administrative reforms seem to be the only solution.

Taking this assessment as a starting point, the role of civil society is very important, and European authorities need to show an interest, without trying to influence or direct its work. It is also imperative to distinguish between a civil society that is truly active on the ground, and the false civil society of embassy cocktail parties, which speaks our language, drinks alcohol, and whose women do not wear the veil... these are aspects that do not help to establish a relationship of trust with activists in situ. The scope has to be wider.

- (1) In this case, the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, assassinated on 14 February 2005 in Beirut.

About the Author

Salam Kawakibi is a researcher in political and social science. He is a senior researcher at the Arab Reform Initiative and at the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia at the University of Amsterdam. His main interests are media, civil societies, international relations and human rights in the Arab countries. He also has written articles on European and Arabic media. He is an appointed trainer in human rights and international human law. Furthermore, he is Associate Researcher for IREMAM (Institut de Recherches et d'études sur le Monde Arabe et Musulman) Aix-en-Provence and GREMMO (Groupe de Recherches et d'études sur la Méditerranée et le Moyen-Orient) Lyon, collaborating with IFRI (L'Institut Français des Relations Internationales) in Paris. Mr. Kawakibi is formally educated in economics, international relations, international humanitarian law, international human rights, and political science.

About the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia

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.

For more information contact:

Juliette Verhoeven
General Coordinator
Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia
University of Amsterdam
Department of Political Science
Oudezijds Achterburgwal 237
1012 DL Amsterdam The Netherlands
E-mail: J.C.Verhoeven@uva.nl

Kawa Hassan
Knowledge Officer
Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia
Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries
P.O. Box 85565
2508 CG The Hague The Netherlands
www.hivos.net
E-mail: khassan@hivos.nl

Other papers in this series are also available on www.hivos.net:

- Working paper 1: Moth or Flame: The Sunni Sphere and Regime Durability in Syria, by Teije Hidde Donker.
- Working paper 2: Civil Society Activism in Morocco: 'Much Ado About Nothing'?, by Francesco Cavatorta.
- Working paper 3: Civil Society and Democratization in Contemporary Yemen, by Laurent Bonnefoy and Marine Poirier.
- Working paper 4: The Downfall of Simplicity, by Stephan de Vries.
- Working paper 5: Democratization through the Media, by Francesco Cavatorta.
- Working paper 6: State-Business Relations in Morocco, by Farid Boussaid.
- Working paper 7: Civil Society and Democratization in Jordan, by Curtis R. Ryan.
- Working paper 8: Package Politics, by Aurora Sottimano.
- Working paper 9: East European and South American Conceptions of Civil Society, by Marlies Glasius.
- Working paper 10: Internet or Enter-Not: the Syrian Experience, by Salam Kawakibi.
- Working paper 11: The Private Media in Syria, by Salam Kawakibi.
- Working paper 12: The Uncertain Future of Democracy Promotion, by Steven Heydemann.
- Working paper 13: Non-Democratic Rule and Regime Stability: Taking a Holistic Approach, by Stephan de Vries.
- Working paper 14: Dissecting Global Civil Society: Values, Actors, Organisational Forms, by Marlies Glasius.
- Working paper 15: Re- Rethinking Prospects for Democratization: A New Toolbox, by Stephan de Vries.
- Working paper 16: Civil Society in Iran: Transition to which Direction?, by Sohrab Razzaghi.
- Working paper 17: Authoritarianism and the Judiciary in Syria, by Reinoud Leenders.
- Working paper 18: The Political Implications of a Common Approach to Human Rights, by Salam Kawakibi.