Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Global Civil Society Across the Mediterranean: The Case of Human Rights

LAURA FELIU

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT *The concept of global civil society began to be used regularly just a decade ago. Its formulation results from the application of the civil society concept to transnational political processes. This article reviews the networks created in recent years in the field of human rights in the Mediterranean and investigates to what extent these are exponents of the emergence of an alleged global civil society. Links and exchanges between very diverse human rights advocacy groups have multiplied in recent years and transnational constituencies have been forged. But the existence of this 'global civil society' can hardly be identified as if it were a global player. It would be more appropriate to speak of the existence of parcels of an international (and internationalized) civil society.*

Introduction

This essay applies the concept of global civil society to the Mediterranean and, more specifically, to everything to do with pro-human rights activism. To this end, as a first step, global civil society and other related concepts are analysed, while as a second step the networks created in recent years in the field of human rights in the Mediterranean are reviewed. What are these networks, and what are their main features? To what extent are these networks exponents of the emergence of an alleged global civil society? Alongside analysis of these aspects, the essay includes a number of reflections on the capacity of groups and associations in civil society which seek the democratization of political systems and respect for human rights to produce substantive changes in their respective countries. It then goes on to assess the contribution of networking on the promotion of a culture of dialogue and its limitations in the Mediterranean region.

Correspondence Address: Dr Laura Feliu, Lecturer in International Relations, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), Facultat de Ciències Polítiques, Edifici B, 08193 Bellaterra (Barcelona), Spain. Email: laura.feliu@uab.es

The study analyses the general theoretical and practical framework without analysing specific cases. A subsequent task of verifying or refuting some of the general arguments presented in this article is yet to be performed.

Democracy and Liberalization in the Mediterranean

The problem of democratization of the countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean has rarely been approached by democratic theory or by studies related to comparative politics.[1] Works that have had the greatest influence on the theory of democratization have totally overlooked this group of countries.[2] In fact, up to the mid-1990s, the scant studies on this matter from a comparative perspective distinguished 'the exceptional nature of the Arab world'; the Arab world does not fit into analysis models designed primarily for Europe or the Americas. American armed intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the U.S. administration has used the argument of the need for democratization in the Middle East, together with others, to justify actions lacking all legitimacy, and legality, in Iraq, have sparked greater interest in the matter among academic circles. These questions, as we will see, are directly related to the possibility of the existence of an active transnational network advocating the defence of human rights in the Mediterranean.

Application of Concepts to the Region

More than a decade ago, the publication in 1991 of S.P. Huntington's work, *The Third Wave,* spurred the search by different authors for proof of the expansion of democratic values around the globe, with a view to confirming the neo-liberal theses that reformulate the principles of the democratic peace rooted in the Kantian doctrine. Democratization is understood in general to mean the spread and extension of political participation, as well as the fact that broader sectors of the respective societies can exert a certain control over public policy. But the concept of democracy, like the grand concepts of Social Sciences, is used with a wide variety of meanings. The holding of elections lies at the core of most definitions. This minimum Schumpeterian definition focuses the concept around calling transparent elections with a wide voting base. The definitions are broadened from this initial electoralism to include the enjoyment of public liberties and the effective capability of the government that is elected to govern. The increase in the requisites, from the more procedural definitions, continues with the list of specificities of industrial democracies and their political, economic and social characteristics, before finally reaching maximalist views that aspire to social and economic equality or the people's participation at all decision-making levels (Collier and Levitsky, 1997).

Applying the concept of political participation to the Arab world involves certain difficulties. Political systems based on traditional structures, where different groups exert a certain influence over political decision-makers through very diverse means, have been little studied by contemporary political scientists. The dominant model of the democratic system, the model whose export is being attempted, is associated

with the forming of modern, stable political parties, the regular holding of elections, and the peaceful transfer of government power.

The use of the term democracy is usually associated with respect for human rights and public liberties. This field of liberalization can be understood to mean the spreading and extension of the public space. Liberalization is related to a greater freedom of speech and of organization which are at the core of public liberties. It is important to note that liberalization by no means equals democratization. Though a clear link exists between freedom and democracy, there is no mechanical relationship between the two concepts.

The authors involved in addressing the question of democratization wonder whether western-style concepts can be applied to societies with such different traditions (Salamé, 1994). Faced with these major methodological dilemmas, most of the still scant literature that analyses this matter in the region prefers to describe the main features of Arab societies, their traditional power structures linked to tribalism, their religious beliefs (where Islam occupies a central place), and then goes on to assess their compatibility with the democratic ideal. As was already indicated, in general most studies on the subject find numerous arguments to justify this lack of will – and even the impossibility – to democratize. The studies by Salamé (Salamé, 1994), Khader (Khader, 1997), or Brynen, Korany and Noble (Brynen, Korany and Noble (eds.), 1997) thoroughly review the arguments (and key authors). Two stand out among them: cultural aspects, sometimes analysed from a simplistic and reductionist perspective, and the economic field.

Transitions that Never Arrive

Although the arguments concerning the 'Arab exception' continue to have a strong presence (and the events of 9/11 triggered a surge in references to the matter), in recent years a number of authors have underscored the existence of timid liberalization processes in these countries, even to the point of talking of a 'mini-wave' of democratization (Ibrahim, 1995: 27). The American position, that identifies the promotion of democracy as one of the objectives of its foreign policy in the Middle East, has also contributed to the search for evidence that progress is indeed taking place.[3] This liberalization appears to be the effect of a series of factors that have coincided. These can be seen primarily as: greater presence and effectiveness of socio-economic formations, a clearly expanding civil society (both elements linked to the mass education drive and the appearance of new middle classes) and an external action driven both by large intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as well as by some western states.

Be that as it may, although the late-1980s were identified as the period when the definitive shift in the Arab world toward the democratic option should have occurred (not coincidentally, corresponding with the end of the Cold War), subsequent events put a dampener on such hopes. Regrettably, by the mid-1990s, democracy continued to be absent from the region, and liberalization processes had shown their limitations, with some notable reversals, the clearest case in the 1990s being Algeria.

At present, although some signs of liberalization can be identified in specific countries, power structures remain essentially unaltered. In a recent study, Daniel Brumberg (2003) reviews the political systems in the Arab world and groups them into dictatorships or full autocracies and liberalized autocracies. In the latter, although a minority controls the country's economic resources by rule of force, a 'partial inclusion' of broader sectors of the population has occurred. According to the author, the former group includes countries like Syria, Tunisia, Libya, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and the latter includes Morocco, Kuwait, Jordan, Yemen, Algeria or Egypt (Brumberg, 2003: 3).

Civil Society in the Mediterranean

Civil society is, without doubt, one of the concepts that has attracted the greatest research efforts in recent years. Dozens of books have been devoted to analysing, above all, the emergence of all kinds of associations, particularly those most closely related to politics and devoted to 'just causes.[4] As the global civil society concept constitutes a continuation and extension of the civil society concept on a transnational scale, it is necessary to analyse some of the circumstances surrounding its construction.

Within various political spheres it has been suggested that the path towards democratization by authoritarian regimes is inevitably linked to the existence of a strong civil society. This has led western countries to seek and identify potential major players, on whom most of the hopes (and burdens) of becoming key players in future democratization processes are placed. This exercise most often results from a lack of will to exert direct pressure on regimes with which close ties have been built, as it is less risky to rely on gradual, long-term transformations through a 'change of mentality' (political culture) towards which civil society plays a crucial role.

The Concept

The concept of civil society has evolved significantly in the last few decades. Its initial links to the State were diluted by the strong influence of the political experiences of the 1960s when a series of political and social players confronted an omnipresent and dictatorial state, particularly in Latin America. These experiences, in which certain groups demanded greater public freedom through demonstrations, strikes and other forms of mobilization, led to an intensification of its prescriptive and ideologized side, and contributed to presenting those movements as the panacea of democratization.

The view of civil society as a third sector that is opposed primarily to a first sector comprised by the State and its administration, is reinforced by the rise of the neo-liberal ideology, which grants central value to the actions of the individual and natural market laws.[5] The experiences of Czechoslovakia or Poland in the 1990s had a decisive influence on papers that were written on the subject too,[6] and introduced certain biases into the analysis of civil society. Consequently, it is necessary to

recover a conceptualization focusing on the classic distinction between the citizen, the prince and the merchant. Civil society falls within the sphere of the citizens – individuals who, grouped freely, associate to further their interests and objectives. It is a matter of the private versus the public. Civil society, in its modern sense, should be linked to the problems deriving from industrialization processes and the effects of the expansion of capitalism and an increasingly omnipresent state.

The term civil society is highly informative with regard to the creation of social networks, the addition and visibility of interests, the complexity of flows between official agents and interest groups. The concept, therefore, should be used above all from an organizational and relational approach. Civil society is a form of organization and, at the same time, of relationship between political and social players; it is more a dynamic relationship than an intermediate space.

The Human Rights Movement in the Mediterranean

In keeping with the greater interest on the part of academic studies in democratic issues lying outside the western-centric outlook, in the 1990s authors from both within and outside the Arab world took an interest in analysing the 'health' of civil society in these countries. As was already mentioned, the study of civil society is interpreted as an important indicator of the stage at which the respective political system stands with regard to its 'progress toward democracy'.

Both Arab and western literature coincide in highlighting the weakness of civil society in countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean. The main problems found include the difficulty that groups have in terms of creating structures beyond the most essential links, on the one hand, and the control exerted by the state, on the other hand. After reading Arab texts, M.K. Al-Sayyid (1995: 134) deduces that most authors reach the conclusion that there is no 'genuine' civil society as such. That is, there are signs of an activity of this kind, but the 'abnormalities' are so prevalent that certain social players could hardly be qualified as exponents of civil society. But most of the works point to the formation of civil society institutions, driven primarily by socio-economic changes (Norton, 1995: 22).

The characteristics of civil society in different Arab countries differ significantly, but their vigour can be measured on the basis of common elements. Based on different indicators, studies on the matter distinguish between groups of states depending on the vigour of their societies in direct relation to the degree of political liberalization.[7]

The presence and characteristics of human-rights advocacy groups vary greatly depending on whether the country has a liberalized or a full autocracy. This is logical, given the absence of space for organization and criticism in the case of the latter. In this way, a large number of the self-proclaimed human rights associations in full autocracies are controlled (and in some cases even created) by the regimes in power, which use them both to improve their image abroad and to control certain political sectors inside the country. The few activists and groups who seek action free from the authorities are doomed to a fate of prison, exile or even physical elimination.

Only in liberalized autocracies can human rights associations with stable structure, continued activity and a certain independence be found. However, they must overcome tremendous obstacles. It is in these countries where three different phases (or 'generations') in the understanding of pro-human rights activism and its insertion in the socio-political context exist. Yet, while in cases such as Morocco or Turkey it is possible to find all three generations, in others one or more of these phases are missing. In general, the three moments are more developed in countries that have gone further down the road toward liberalization. These three conceptions occur rapidly over time and operate like communicating vessels that provide fuel for the experiences which follow.

In the first generation, the associations are linked to political parties and depend on them. In the second, the associations break away from the mother parties and seek to transcend them, taking the fight to the state with a universalized human rights discourse. In the third, the associations are highly professionalized and specialized; they exert influence over the definition and application of public policy; their work follows its own cycle, which is almost independent from the political context and has important connections abroad. Nowadays, these three models subsist and overlap.

In the first generation, the concept of human rights used by the association faces numerous obstacles that strip it of its universal nature. With the appearance of the second generation of organizations (in general in the late-1980s), the demand for civil and political rights, linked to the democratic ideal, became the centre of the discourse. Ideological positions could no longer disregard the defence of human dignity, or convert rights into the exclusive property of specific sectors. This emergence of the individual and the citizen evidences the profound transformations that are taking place in the midst of society. The third generation confirms the acquisition and assimilation of a new, highly legalized and technical language, a somewhat aseptic jargon that moves away from the political side of the action to equate it to reality in many other parts of the world.

In the first generation, associations live in almost virtual isolation in their own milieu, with little funds and very limited actions, basically circumscribed to the most pressing problems of militancy in the ranks of the opposition, fulfilling a highly rudimentary task of denouncement.

The second generation involves the development of 'independent' sectors, citizens with a developed political and social conscience who work with the associations on an individual basis. The objective of independent action, whether real or not, and whether achieved or not, becomes the *Leitmotiv* of the discourse of many organizations. The professionalization of the human rights movement which evolved throughout the 1990s implies a number of decisive changes in the management of resources and in their transformation. In addition to more human resources, the associations receive increasing sums from external donors and materialize their equity.

The third generation has been able to emerge thanks to increased liberalization in the political field, and is driven by factors as diverse as the accumulation of

knowledge, the new tasks which these associations had to deal with, and the influence of international organizations that fund projects. The third generation is, therefore, more a trend than a given, and its characteristics were not fully developed; rather, they began to emerge as the 1990s came to a close, albeit imperfectly. The blocking of the democratization process surely played a fundamental circumstantial role in the difficulty in confirming this, but the lack of material and human resources, as well as the slowness of the transformation process of the political culture, also played a significant role.

The profile of the third generation has a number of distinguishing features, one of which is the desire to go beyond the work that, until then, had been the top priority – namely denunciation – and contributes more 'constructively' to the creation of a new democratic and modern state. Associations begin to design policies and, if necessary, contribute to their management. The state, the administration and certain elites are the privileged interlocutors, not only as the passive recipients of a vision, but also as allies in the introduction of reforms. Action is geared toward influencing institutions and elites. Though broader strata of the population can be recipients of the movement's action, these are conceived more as indirect beneficiaries than as agents of transformation. The mass action that appears in the bylaws of some of these associations is more a formula than a programme. In practice, there is a transformation of the priorities, and these are dictated by strategic matters and by the search for resources.

Inevitably, the bridges built through these practices moderate the discourse of the players. Lobbying is especially important, and overlaps with (and in some cases takes precedence over) the more traditional methods of denouncing, raising awareness or education. Associations are in direct contact with ministries of, for example, Education, Justice or Human Rights, participate in their Committees, and propose and monitor their policies.

In addition, associations specialize in specific areas of civil and political rights. This process takes place in parallel with the creation of a large group of NGOs that deals with development and socio-economic issues in general, particularly in the rural milieu.

External inflows are determining factors in this process. The bridge was, basically, the arrival of a major contingent of foreign aid from the European Union (e.g. the MEDA-Democracy programs), western states through direct bilateral aid, or private or semi-public foundations from Germany, the U.S. or Canada.[8] Many of these associations also participate in international networks and forums, and their members have benefited from attending courses abroad. Perhaps even more important than the economic injection that these ties represent (an important contribution, as it reaches associations that have basically worked on a voluntary basis and through the contributions of private individuals) are the indirect effects on the activities of the associations: projects must meet objectives set abroad; the most-consolidated associations are bolstered to the detriment of smaller-scale initiatives, or a more 'mercantilist' mentality is fostered, associating 'resources' with 'visible results'. The bureaucratization of the movement is a reality, and so is, in a more positive vein, its professionalization.

All of these elements develop imperfectly – they start to blossom, but have yet to achieve consolidation. The blocking of liberalization processes and of the transition to democracy situates the pro-human rights movement predominantly within the phase of denunciation of authoritarian rules of play. Hence, the human rights movement cannot 'escape politics'.

A Global Civil Society in the Mediterranean?

This section briefly introduces the concept of global civil society, and then goes on to describe some general features of the pro-human rights militancy networks that span the Mediterranean, both in the form of regular (but not formalized) contacts between NGOs from the North and South, and the large transnational NGOs that include members from both sides of the sea. A third section will examine to what extent this network has an impact on the field of human rights and the issue of democratization in general.

The Global Civil Society Concept

The concept of global civil society began to be used regularly just a decade ago, from different perspectives. Mary Kaldor (2003) indicates its use, first, through the theory of new social movements, second, via international institutions and governments that use it as a 'new political agenda', and third, in post-modern theory.

Its formulation results from the application of the concept of civil society to transnational political processes, though the debate focuses on whether such organizations constitute a new realm or whether they are merely artifacts of western liberal society (Keane, 2003). As a continuation of the mother-concept, global civil society consists of a heterogeneous composition, made up of social movements, interest groups, cultural groups or global citizens, with cross-border ties. Most studies approach it more as a space than as a player, and speak of the existence of multiple global civil societies around a wide diversity of issues. These same studies question its existence (one just has to take a look at the numerous question marks in the titles) and provide different replies. Advocates of the use of the concept refer above all to its usefulness in identifying a set of phenomena, although recognizing that it is a process in progress.

Like in the case of the concept of origin (civil society), the normative weight of the concept is very high and its academic use therefore poses the same problems. Its association with the promotion of certain values, and even of democratic structures, introduces a dimension that was barely analysed in studies on the transnational phenomenon in the 1970s and 1980s. As noted by Richard Falk (2003), global civil society is the 'ensemble of transnational efforts to achieve human solidarity on behalf of a tormented and endangered planet – those movements, citizens' associations, and informal networks that are virtually oblivious to the boundaries of sovereign states'.

Another important aspect of the theory is the consideration that global civil society is capable of reshaping the political architecture of international relations. This theme is directly related to that of the 'globalization of democracy' in the

debate that puts the liberal view against the rejection of certain liberal capitalist conceptions. It is also linked to the discussion on the transformation of the state (Pasha, and Blaney, 1998). The existence of a global civil society implies the rise of a 'global citizenship' and an emerging process of global governance.

According to Falk (2002: 5), in its most normative version, the concept is related to reconstructive postmodernism (as opposed to critical postmodernism), which speaks of the formation of a citizenry that places loyalty to a time (the construction of a future normative order) before loyalty to a space (a state or territory). Falk also notes that the formation of such a society implies a tension between globalization-from-above (market, state, institutions, the momentum of techno-capital) and globalization-from-below (social movements, citizens' associations, informal networks, the momentum of normative and spiritual energies). This corresponds with a normative duality (with significant exceptions), that is, players who primarily seek to expand industrial civilization vs grassroots' normative initiatives concerned with well-being and with spiritually engaged politics.

Existing Networks

For some time now, there have been regular contacts between human rights activists from the southern and eastern Mediterranean (whether organized into associations or not) and activists and associations from the northern shore in informal networks. Thus, for example, French territory has been important as an area for encounters with human rights activists from former French colonies, particularly from the Maghreb. In addition to the individual ties that were established during the colonial period, there is an important presence of political exiles who maintain their interest in the situation of their countries of origin. By way of example, in the case of Morocco, the Association of Committees in the Fight against Repression in Morocco (CLCRM) was created in the early 1970s, followed a decade later by the Association for the Defense of Human Rights in Morocco (ASDHOM), the Association of Relatives and Friends of Disappeared Persons in Morocco (APADM), and other less active groups like the Committee for Action for the Liberation of Prisoners of Opinion in Morocco (CALPOM). The presence of Moroccan political activists in associations like Amnesty International in London also doubtless contributes to focusing attention on the situation within Morocco.

French territory also hosts the main networks for contact with activists and associations from the rest of the countries of the Maghreb. In the case of Tunisia, given the grave situation with regards to personal liberties, contacts with activists inside the country are difficult and risky to establish, and there is a real problem in terms of identifying the proper representatives.

Similar networks were created during these years in other countries, as in Germany with respect to Turkey and the Kurdish issue, in Spain with respect to the Saharawi cause, or in the UK with respect to Palestine.

Although this contacts, in the decades following the respective declarations of independence one cannot speak exactly of the existence of consolidated transnational networks; rather, one can only speak of the creation of sporadic and

precarious communications channels that are highly dependent on a small number of personalities.

With the passing of time, and particularly as the 1990s came to a close, these networks underwent major transformations in the context of an increased interest from different European players in consolidating civil society on the southern fringe of the Mediterranean. Pre-existing contacts would be decisive in the shaping of these new networks. Another contributing factor to the consolidation of the networks was the easing of repression in some countries, with the attending consolidation of human rights associations. Contacts are now more regular and formalized.

This consolidation of networks can be seen, both in the participation of NGOs from the South in major international human rights NGOs, and in the creation of specific networks in the Mediterranean for contact and exchanges between human rights associations.

In the first case, this participation has increased in major international NGOs such as the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), whose 141 members include associations from virtually all Arab countries (although some of them are organizations operating in exile), and of the 22 countries at present members of its international bureau, there are representatives from Mauritania, Tunisia, Palestine, Turkey and Morocco.

In the second case, that of specific regional networks, there are three notable initiatives. Two of them are closely linked to the reformulation of the EU's Mediterranean policy in the mid-1990s: the Euro-Mediterranean Civil Forum and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN). The third case is a recent one: the Mediterranean Social Forum. These three cases are very different and require a certain degree of attention. While the Network has a permanent, and independent structure, the Civil Forum is a space for encounters and exchanges, where the participants change from one encounter to the next, and the way it is run has been diverse and highly dependent on the organizing governments; and the Mediterranean Social Forum seeks the participation of all kinds of little associations without intermediaries and according to the alternative and assembly spirit of Porto Alegre.

On further analysis, the Euromed Civil Forum emerges as an important opportunity for certain players in civil society to get together, especially for those associations that address issues related to democracy, human rights, governance and development, albeit with a fairly concrete profile (in general, for instance, Islamist associations are not included). Although in theory it is the associations themselves who organize the successive Forums, there is a strong intervention from individual states and by the European Commission. The Forum takes place in parallel with the meetings of the Euro-Mediterranean foreign ministers, though it is not clear whether its activity has a major impact on the work of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), due, among other reasons, to the lack of an organic link.

Two models of encounter were in competition at the 1995 Barcelona Civil Forum an 'alternative' model, entirely self-run by the associations, and another model linked to (though not dependent on) official authorities. As the latter model has

prevailed in subsequent encounters (Reinhardt, 2002), the Forum is not entirely independent (its main source of funding is the European Commission), nor has it been included in the structures of the Barcelona Process.

As a result of the lack of permanent structures, participating associations are not the same from one Forum to the next (although a core group of associations has remained in place throughout its first decade of existence), and the agenda is not cumulative in nature, as everything depends, to a great extent, on the national organizers of the event.[9] After the Marseilles summit in 2000, and as a result of the criticism of its current format, a period of reflection, on how to proceed with reform, was opened and the decision to launch a Euromed non-governmental platform, a common platform designed to reform the Civil Forum, was made.

The Civil Forum is doubtless an important space for encounters, exchanges and discussion, although it is far from bringing together the most representative aspects of civil society in the Mediterranean. In all its meetings thus far, the theme of respect for human rights has been very present with a large proportion of associations promoting human rights, to the extent that at the Stuttgart Forum in 1999 special attention was given to the matter.

For its part, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network was created in 1997 as a transnational umbrella organization that brings together over 60 associations, plus individual members, from more than 20 countries. The Network goes beyond an experience of exchange and encounter; it monitors the European Union's agenda and acts as a bridge between European governments and institutions and the countries where human rights violations take place (Jünemann, 2000).

Lastly, the first Mediterranean Social Forum was held in Barcelona on 16–18 June 2005. This event fits in with the proposal of the World Social Forum (WSF) of 2001 to approximate the process to local realities. Some Catalan organizations from the international council of the WSF proposed the celebration of a Social Forum linking Mediterranean groups and an initial group of 20 people started organizing the event, but the organizing committee remained relatively small only some of the militant sectors were involved in the process. Six international assemblies prepared the main axis (denunciation of the process of economic liberalization in the Mediterranean; defence of human rights and democracy; and rejection of military occupation and imperialist strategy in the region), and decided on seven thematic issues for the meeting (one of them, the most well attended, being on human rights). The objective was to look for the 'small civil society' not represented in other Mediterranean events. However, the representation was not very different from other Mediterranean transnational meetings. In spite of the alternative approach, the organization received important public financing from local and regional administrations (approximately 70 per cent of the final budget, that is, €1m).

Main Features

The following points can be gleaned from an observation of these networks:

(1) The transnational links created by human rights associations on the north and south shores of the Mediterranean are still weak if compared with those existing in

other regions like Latin America. It is symptomatic that (in 2005!) the organizers of the Social Forum still have problems to find interlocutors from the South: as a result of this, the Social Forum had to be postponed three times. This situation is understandable given the difficulties in creating independent associations within authoritarian political contexts (Jünemann, 2002: 98). But this problem also shows the lack of coordination between Mediterranean social movements, with little experience of common work. Surprisingly, after the huge effort of the Social Forum organizers to bring together associations from the southern shore, there was low attendance of Catalonian and Spanish participants (the arrival of the Spanish Socialist party to the government coincides with some demobilization); if the initial expectations were of 10–15,000 participants, the final, overall number was only 5,000! The number of seminars (200) was too ambitious, and sometimes the participants from the South did not find the right interlocutors.

(2) As a result of this weakness, there is only a small presence of Mediterranean NGOs and transnational networks within international forums, resulting in a scant contribution to broader, global networks. In comparison with Latin American or Asian NGOs and associations, those from the southern and eastern Mediterranean have taken longer to become active vis-á-vis major intergovernmental organizations, such as the United Nations, which are key in promoting the issue.

(3) The European Union's launch of the EMP in Barcelona in 1995 has significantly boosted the reinforcement and creation of new transnational human rights networks. Other dimensions have been developed around the project of creating a free-trade zone; particularly, the strengthening of respective civil societies has been fostered and the creation of networks linking them together has been promoted through the third basket of the Barcelona Process. This policy is directly linked to the promotion of democracy from a bottom-up perspective.

The EU has also launched regional and subregional cooperation programmes in addition to the bilateral aid programmes targeting civil societies of southern and eastern Mediterranean countries. The MEDA Democracy Program, created in 1996, was one of the main instruments for the funding of NGOs working on issues relating to democratization, conflict resolution, gender issues or human rights in general. The European Initiative for Democracy and the Protection of Human Rights (budget line B7-7050) is the main source of funding for programmes in this field.

(4) The most active southern associations in these networks are those located in liberalized autocracies, while there are still tremendous difficulties in finding valid interlocutors within the full autocracies. The participation of national delegations is therefore very different (at the Mediterranean Social Forum for example, the Moroccan, Palestinian and Algerian delegations were the most well attended).

Within the different countries, the associations that participate in these networks are those that have the greatest resources, which have achieved consolidation in recent years, and in general they reveal themselves, with some exceptions, to be fairly inefficient as poles of attraction for other local associations that are less consolidated but nevertheless do interesting work.

(5) Although a series of requisites must be met in order to belong to these transnational NGOs and networks, their members show signs of significant

heterogeneity given such different starting points (and this is not a negative point). In addition to this, some Arab members of these networks are associations headquartered in Europe, especially in the case of full autocracies. Thus, for instance, the EMHRN includes among its regular members the likes of the Libyan League for Human Rights, based in Germany, or Syrian associations with headquarters in France or Sweden. In the case of the Social Forum, one third of the South and East participants live in Europe.

(6) The high level of political conflict in the region is a tremendous hindrance to the creation of horizontal transnational networks, both in the Maghreb and in the Middle East, as well as in the southern and eastern Mediterranean regions as a whole. It is a fact that disturbs all networks. As evidenced at the meetings of the Euromed Civil Forum, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict constitutes a major obstacle, not only to the participation of Israeli associations in these forums, but to the normal development of these events, which are regularly blocked by demands for the application of international law by the international community as a prerequisite for other forms of collaboration (like the demands by some NGOs that the 2000 Marseilles Civil Forum be boycotted in protest against the situation in Palestine). The Western Sahara conflict is one of the political factors, among many others, that has blocked the setting-up of effective networks in the Maghreb and interferes with Mediterranean transnational meetings. In the Social Forum held in Barcelona, there were important tensions between the Moroccan and the Saharawi delegations; the Saharawi were concerned about their lack of a prominent space in the Forum when compared with Morocco's (Saharawi delegations even protested against known Moroccan human rights activists who defend the self-determination process), while Morocco sent its secret services to try and boycott seminars and the final demonstration.

In addition, one must consider the economic difficulties posed by the need to pay for travel and to set up sufficient infrastructure for these types of encounters.

In recent years there have been several attempts at coordination between generalist Arab human rights associations, which either have not had continuity (like the creation in the late-1980s of a Maghreb human rights union, which even managed to draft a charter) or else their activity takes place irregularly or is excessively constrained by official political considerations. An example of this last circumstance is the activity of the Arab Organization for Human Rights (AOHR), created in 1983 as a regional non-governmental organization to promote and protect human rights, with branches in eight Arab countries. This organization, with other partners, has promoted initiatives like the creation in 1989 of the Arab Institute for Human Rights in Tunisia, of an Arab Human Rights Information Network (AHRINET) in 1997, or the organization of the first International Conference of the Arab Human Rights Movement in Casablanca in April 1999. In the region, greater advances have been achieved in more specific areas, such as women's rights or militancy in favour of the Amazigh culture, in spite of the difficulties.

These difficulties highlight the importance of the contacts these associations establish abroad; in this regard, European territory is a major meeting ground for fostering greater mutual knowledge.

(7) The direction of transnational ties is basically vertical, between associations from the South and those from the North. It is hoped that through these ties the situation along the southern shore of the Mediterranean will be given greater coverage, placing issues that concern the region on national and international agendas.

These types of links pose important problems, including the domination of NGOs and associations from the North (where the headquarters are often located and where most meetings are held), which control the lion's share of the budget and set the agenda, in spite of the explicit objective most of them have of acting in a decentralized and balanced fashion. For example, in the case of the Social Fora, it was organized by an International Committee with representations from southern and eastern Mediterranean countries, and any organization could propose a seminar or a conference. But the structural constraints of the North–South divide are hard to overcome. Only 60 per cent of the 1,200 visas requested for the Social Forum in Barcelona were granted by the Spanish authorities.

Another question is that external support can hinder the acceptance of these associations by their own societies, and in certain cases trigger reprisals (although in the liberalized autocracies foreign ties mean greater protection for human rights advocates). In general, the challenges faced by associations in the North and South are very different, due to the diverse political situations, and personal experiences, of their respective members.

(8) Finally, there are distinctions with regards to the handling of problems in the "transnational agenda". The Palestinian question or the situation in Iraq, for instance, occupy a very important position.[10] Undoubtedly, the difficulties in obtaining information about the situation in full autocracies and in contacting other associations that can perform their work with a minimum of reliability contribute to this asymmetric geometry.

The Impact of Networks

The impact of human rights associations and their respective networks both on western democracies and autocratic regimes is achieved through a direct and independent form of non-governmental diplomacy, through channels of their own (Clark, 1995).

The Three Dimensions

The setting up of networks has served to amplify the impact of associations in their own countries. This impact has been notable, in particular, in the symbolic sphere (even in the case of the full autocracies), more subdued in the substantive sphere, and exceptional in the operational sphere.[11]

With respect to the symbolic dimension, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, the possession of an alternative discourse that was clearly different from the official line, and with an important critical potential, contributed to the introduction of values, the transformation of the political language, and the identification and

configuration of problems that, until then, had not constituted true policy targets. It therefore became a question of promotional work at the regional level carried out by the international human rights movement and through the dissemination of new human rights instruments. Yet, its success varies depending on the political circumstances of each country, but in general it can be said that a certain terminology is present in most official lines, even though only in response to criticism from abroad. The formal commitments of the different governments (e.g. the signing of international treaties) are directly related to the promotional effort of associations and their respective networks.

At present, the existing networks, which are more consolidated, continue to exert a major influence on cognitive frameworks, belief systems and values, with an ensuing homogenization of language and discourse at the transnational level. These networks contribute to the promotion of a culture of dialogue and tolerance based on recognition of cultural diversity but from a common and universal foundation. The existing networks promote the practice of close collaboration between different groups and associations, facilitate the exchange of expertise and pertinent information, and strengthen human relations across cultures. In addition, they have contributed to the creation of third-generation associations with a highly specialized jargon and work guidelines.

Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that the netwoks link a small elite and work within difficult contexts (for the creation of regular and wide transnational networks) as analysed above.

The substantive dimension implies access to certain decision-making centres and governance networks, so they can only materialize when minimal spaces of freedom exist. In countries like Morocco or Jordan, the regime creates institutions in which the associations take part. This 'reformist' path provides the opportunity to influence, more or less directly, the formalization of legally backed decisions, including the reforms of family codes, the abolition of legislation concerning states of exception, etc. But at the same time, this option also carries the risk of being transformed into an endorsement of a change that never materializes, while the image of the regime abroad is enhanced thanks to its putative collaboration. That is why other groups reject such forms of collaboration. Certainly, inside the networks there is a debate about the extent of this collaboration along a reformist path, but in general the option is considered positive. In more repressive autocracies, this possibility is usually not on offer.

Finally, in the operational dimension (relative to the application of policies and to complement government-provided services) the issue of the relative isolation of the members of human rights movements appears once more. Only in some cases are broad national networks created which engage in drafting public policy proposals. These are networks and platforms of varying geometries, but in which the same social players usually coincide periodically. Thus, in cases like Morocco, Jordan or Lebanon, the association movement constitutes a channel of influence on public policy and of access to certain institutions. They actively cooperate with the government in specific programmes or become their privileged interlocutors. Transnational networks (together with an important

collaboration of intergovernmental organizations) are usually involved in such initiatives.

The existence of networks helps to consolidate these three dimensions, contributing in an important way to the dissemination of information, and giving greater magnitude to the denunciation. It also lends greater strength and resources to campaigns and hence to the increasing demands.

From the viewpoint of the issue of 'promoting governments', and their policy-making agenda (although it is known that European governments have sacrificed the objective of promoting human rights and democracy in the Mediterranean in favour of preserving the status quo), the work of networks has been crucial in those cases where action has been taken. This is the case thanks to both the advantages resulting from the issue-specific specialization of associations as they face government bureaucracies, and their privileged access to information.

Conclusions: Global Civil Society in the Mediterranean

Are there signs of the existence of a global civil society when the transnational links relating to human rights in the Mediterranean (considered to be one of the most important fields by most studies) are analysed? Undoubtedly, communication and exchanges between very diverse human rights advocacy groups have multiplied in recent years and transnational constituencies have been forged. In addition, these transnational activities have had an impact locally, regionally and to a lesser degree, internationally.

These groups work on a common ground, based on a universal conception of human rights (one of the normative requisites of most studies), and contribute to the creation of an indispensable social capital that enables analysts to speak of a global civil society. The exchange of points of view, experiences and the organization of common events provide groups with opportunities for getting acquainted with other cultures and experiences thereby fostering closer relationships across the Mediterranean.

Another noteworthy aspect reached by the academic literature is the contribution of these groups in shaping international political organizations which in turn influence their activity, although this impact has been limited in the Mediterranean area (the EMP being a case in point).

But the existence of this 'global civil society' can hardly be identified as if it were a global player. It is necessary to recall here the low density of these networks, of communication and informational exchange, in the Mediterranean, and that effective results in this field are very far from reaching the objectives that have been set. This is particularly true when referring to even more ambitious objectives like contributing to the development of democratic institutions. Parts of the relevant academic literature establish a direct relationship between the presence of a strong civil society and democratization (Quigley, 1997; Carothers, 1997; Encarnación, 2000). Intuitively, one may think that a significant presence of socio-political players that mobilize and establish complex ties among themselves contributes to a greater plurality of the political system. But the relationship is far from being clear.

In spite of this, the presence of a vigorous civil society undoubtedly facilitates social and political interaction, making it possible for the objectives of vastly differing social players to surface and achieve more visibility, while also casting a spotlight on the contradictions. This can be extrapolated at the regional and international level as well. A strong civil society can mean a greater explicit and manifest level of conflict. Yet, at the same time, it appears as a necessary condition for the structuring of interests, enabling a greater continuity of social processes, establishing negotiations and consensus between different types of social players. Civil society adds to the identification of the collective thanks to the aggregation of individual interests. A greater density of social fabric contributes to the strengthening of social capital, and therefore facilitates the response to new problems that appear in all systems. Besides, a strong civil society contributes to the structuring of watchdog mechanisms over the public space, and helps contain the tendency to concentrate power at all levels, not only domestically.

In this context, it would be more appropriate to speak of the existence of parcels of an international (and internationalized) civil society (Peterson, 1992). There is a significant core that is transnational in nature, but it is still incipient and it is too early to say whether it will spread in the future or whether its actions will be more successful. It does not therefore seem appropriate to deal with global civil society as a phenomenon with such important implications as are attributed to it by some of the literature, with the persistence of significant factors such as national loyalties and state constraints.

The concept of a global civil society with its strong normative connotations owes itself more to will than to reality, and it distorts a situation of predominantly local ties with a partial international dimension. In any case, as Falk argues, a global political discourse has been established that has generated its own dynamic and created other realities. Thus, speaking of a global civil society is a political act, a description of what is and a desire for the arrival of something that has yet to exist.

Notes

[1] This section expands on some of the ideas set out in my book (Feliu, 2004).

[2] The Arab world is totally absent from works like those compiled by Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead (1988), or published by Diamond, Linz and Lipset (1988), without even an attempt to excuse such an absence.

[3] See for example the Freedom House publication *Democracy Digest*, which to a certain extent amplifies any meeting or initiative by democratic and liberal sectors in the Arab world. www.freedomhouse.org

[4] See for example Clayton, A.(Ed.) (1996). *NGOs, Civil Society: Building Democracy in Transitional Societies* (Oxford: INTRAC); Florini, A.(Ed.) *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment) or some studies on specific fields as Howell, J. and Pearce, J. (2002) *Civil Society and Development: A Critical Exploration* (Boulder: Lynne Reinner).

[5] For a critical approach see: Scholte, J. A. (2002) Civil Society and Democracy in Global Governance, *Global Governance* (8) 3.

[6] Whitehead, L. (2001) Three International Dimensions of Democratization, in L. Whitehead (ed.) *The International Dimensions of Democratization. Europe and the Americas* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 5.

[7] See Brynen, Korany and Noble (1995) or Norton (1995).

[8] Especially active in the Arab world are the german Friedrich Ebert Foundation or the American Ford Foundation.

[9] This became manifest for instance in the Valencia Civil Forum, where the organizers encountered difficulties in obtaining information about the previous edition.

[10] This is shared in general by the major human rights organizations. Thus, for instance, Human Rights Watch (2004) has analysed its activity in the 2002–2004 period, concluding that there was a 'highly excessive focus on Israel,' while serious cases like Syria or Libya were virtually overlooked.

[11] The following reflections were inspired by the interesting work by P. Ibarra, S. Martí and R. Gomà (eds.) (2003).

References

Al-Sayyid, M. K. (1995) The concept of civil society and the Arab world, in: R. Brynen, B. Korany & P. Noble (Eds) *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World. Vol. 1*, pp. 131–147 (Boulder: Lynne Rienner).

Brumberg, D. (2003) *Liberalization versus Democracy. Understanding Arab Political Reform* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace).

Brynen, R., Korany, B. & Noble, P. (Eds) (1995) *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World. Vol. 1: Theoretical Perspectives* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner).

Carothers, Th. (1997) Democratic assitance: the question of strategy, *Democratization*, 4, pp. 109–132.

Clark, A. M. (1995) Non-governmental organizations and their influence on international society?, *Journal of International Affairs*, 48(2), pp. 507–525.

Collier, D. & Levitsky, S. (1997) Democracy 'with adjectives': conceptual innovation in comparative research, *World Politics*, 49(3), pp. 430–451.

Diamond, L., Linz, J. J. & Lipset, S. M. (1988) *Democracy in Developing Countries. Vol. 2: Africa* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner).

Encarnación, O. G. (2000) Tocqueville's missionaries: civil society and the promotion of democracy, *World Policy Journal*, 17, pp. 9–18.

Falk, R. (2003) Politically engaged spirituality in an emerging global civil society, *ReVision*, 25(4), pp. 2–10.

Feliu, L. (2004) *El jardín secreto: Los defensores de los derechos humanos en Marruecos* (Madrid: La Catarata, ICEI, IPADE).

Human Rights Watch (2004) *Draft Report on Human Rights Watch: A Comparative Analysis of Activities in the Middle East 2002–2004*, http://www.ngo-monitor.org.

Ibarra, P., Martí, S. & Gomà, R. (Eds) (2003) *Creadores de democracia radical* (Barcelona: Icaria).

Ibrahim, S. E. (1995) Civil society and prospects of democratization in the Arab World, in: A. Norton (Ed.) *Civil Society in the Middle East* (London: E.J.Brill).

Jünemann, A. (2000) The forum civil Euromed: critical watchdog and intercultural mediator, in: S. Panebianco (Ed.) *The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in Social, Cultural and Human Affairs – The Human Dimension of Security as the Key to Stability and Prosperity* (Essex: Frank Cass).

Jünemann, A. (2002) From the bottom to the top: civil society and transnational non-governmental organizations in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, in: R. Gillespie & R. Youngs (Eds) *The European Union and Democracy Promotion: The Case of North Africa* (London: Frank Cass).

Kaldor, M. (2003) The idea of global civil society, *International Affairs*, 79(3), pp. 589–590.

Keane, J. (2003) *Global Civil Society?* (New York: Cambridge University Press).

Khader, B. (1997) *État, société civile et démocratie dans le monde arabomusulman* (Louvain: CERMAC).

Norton, A. R. (Ed.) (1995) *Civil Society in the Middle East* (London: E.J.Brill).

O'Donnell, G., Schmitter, Ph. C. & Whitehead, L. (1988) *Transiciones desde un Gobierno autoritario. 3. Perspectivas comparadas* (Buenos Aires: Paidós).

Pasha, M. K. & Blaney, D. L. (1998) Blaney Elusive paradise: the promise and peril of global civil society, *Alternatives: Social Transformation & Humane Governance*, 23(4).

Peterson, M. J. (1992) Transnational activity, international society and world politics, *Millennium*, 23(3), pp. 371–388.

Quigley, K. (1997) *For Democracy's Sake: Foundations and Democratic Assistance in Central Europe* (Baltimore: Hopkins University Press).

Reinhardt, U. J. (2002) Civil Society Co-operation in the EMP: from Declaration to Practice. Report by the Working Group on Good Governance, *Euromesco Paper*, 15.

Salamé, G. (Ed.) (1994) *Démocraties sans démocrates: Politiques d'ouverture dans le monde arabe et islamique* (Paris: Fayard).