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Knowledge for All

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### Workshop 9

## *Potential and Limits of Civil Society in the Gulf Region*

### Workshop Directors

**Dr. Paul Aarts**  
Department of Political Science  
University of Amsterdam

**Prof. Baqer al-Najjar**  
Department of Social Sciences  
University of Bahrain

### Abstract

When looking at the Arab oil monarchies of the Gulf region, it is striking that the incumbent 'liberalised autocracies' seem not just adopting a temporary survival strategy. Rather, they are a (more or less) stable *regime type* in and of themselves. Political liberalization is used to garner legitimacy from domestic and international audiences. Iran and Iraq clearly are in a different category, though each one on different grounds.<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to the oil monarchies, historically power has been held firmly by the elites and their control over societal forces in effect means that top-down reform looks to be the only viable course. Elites hold power so tightly that change will come only if those in power choose to implement it. Nevertheless, the Gulf autocrats – like regimes elsewhere – also practice strategies of inclusion and exclusion, often simultaneously, thereby giving room to civil society actors (CSAs).<sup>2</sup> What they will try to prevent at all costs is the swinging of the pendulum to these bottom-up forces. So far, they seem to be quite successful in doing that.

Indeed, when speaking about the (Arab) Middle East in general, civil society has until now not made a real dent in the region's surprisingly resilient authoritarianism. The question thus arises why it has been so ineffective with respect to opening up of the closed political systems? The reason for that looks quite simple: the majority of civil

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<sup>1</sup> In this workshop proposal, the main emphasis will be on the GCC states, but for the workshop itself comparative studies on Iran, Iraq and Yemen will be strongly stimulated.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'civil society actors' seems much more appropriate than the more limited term 'civil society organisation'. In the following, however, the term 'CSOs' will still be used when applicable.

society organisations and movements support the status quo, are single-issue oriented with small constituencies, largely dependent on foreign largesse (though this is different in the affluent Gulf monarchies), advocating conservative reforms and are in most cases simply apolitical. In other words, they are less well-equipped to lead a process of 'opening up' than is often assumed.

Recently, some insightful research has been done on the issue.<sup>3</sup> A general – though tentative and controversial – conclusion from this research is that we should let go of the myth that civil society itself is a sufficiently democratising force, and that by (only) supporting CSOs things will change. Correspondingly, traditional conceptions of civil society are being redefined, offering a more neutral definition of the concept stripped of its normative liberal value (imbued with notions that civic activism is synonymous with democratic political change). In addition, it offers the possibility that within this 'enlarged' field of activism, for instance a number of non-traditional actors such as individual blogger-activists could be included. This means that civil society activism has to go beyond the work of non-governmental organisations working for human rights and democratisation to include 'unusual suspects', such as business associations and social groups with economic grievances or demands, civil society structures created by the state or GONGOs, and single individuals who see themselves as fully active citizens attempting to provide a voice that is alternative to the one of the state and use new technologies to 'activate' other citizens. All this contributes to separate the notion civil society activism from democratisation, as the two might actually not be related or linked as previously assumed.<sup>4</sup>

Based on some preliminary research findings,<sup>5</sup> the hypothesis has been developed that the state – at least under the rule of the incumbent kings, emirs, and sultans – needs civil society organizations as a 'counterweight' to the old, conservative regime pillars, i.e. the tribes and the religious establishment. This process seems, for instance, clearly to be underway in Saudi Arabia. Although Wahhabis lost control over policy and politics to royalty and state bureaucrats, and *wahhabiya* itself produced the seeds of mutation leading to interpretations that challenged the discourse of control, the state is still officially based on it. No longer a hegemonic force, but the conservatives can

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<sup>3</sup> Here we mainly refer to several (shorter and more extensive) studies being done under the aegis of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), most prominently by Amy Hawthorne, Thomas Carothers, and Marina Ottaway. We also profited from ongoing research, like Francesco Cavatorta and Vincent Durac, *Civil Society and Democratisation in the Arab World: The Dynamics of Activism* (London: Routledge, 2010 forthcoming); Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders (eds.), *Comparing Authoritarianism: Reconfiguring Power and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran* (2011, forthcoming); and Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta (eds.), *Unusual Suspects and the Changing Nature of Civic Activism in Syria and Iran* (2011, forthcoming). The last two volumes are being produced within the framework of the Hivos-ASSR 'Knowledge Programme' on 'Civil Society in West Asia' in which the Islamic Republic of Iran and Syria are the focus countries – but wherein comparative case studies have been done on Yemen, Jordan and Morocco.

<sup>4</sup> At the same time, there are research findings that come to less pessimistic conclusions. For a nuanced debate on this, see the wide variety of casestudies in Sarah ben Néfissa (ed.), *NGOs and Governance in the Arab World* (Cairo and New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Montagu, "Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia," *The Middle East Journal* 64, 1, Winter: 67-83; Paul Aarts, "Maintaining Authoritarianism: The Jerky Path of Political Reform in Saudi Arabia" (conference paper, September 2010); Roel Meijer, "The Gender Segregation (*ikhtilat*) Debate in Saudi Arabia: Reform and the Clash between Ulama and Liberals," *Middle East Policy*, forthcoming; and Baqer Salman Al-Najjar, *Al-demuqratiya al-'asiyya fi al-khalij al-'arabi* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2008) [*The inaccessible democracy in the Arab Gulf*].

resist any attempt at reform and call the government's bluff. It is in this context that civil society might act as a 'partner'. As Montagu demonstrates, the old unity of *umara'* and *'ulama'* breaks down, the Al Sa'ud's need to forge national identity increases and thus their reliance on the voluntary sector's good offices (Montagu 2010: 72). An interesting question could be: can similar phenomena be witnessed elsewhere in the Gulf region?

## Workshop Description and Rationale

Making use of earlier research<sup>6</sup>, this workshop starts from the overarching research question is: *To what extent has civil society a socio-political transformative potential?*

Related sub-questions will be:

- What are the main developments of political and social reform in the last two decades?
- What are the differences and similarities between civil society in the Gulf monarchies and the rest of the Arab world (and Iran)? (Is there a '*khaliji* exceptionalism'?).
- What are the main drivers of change?
- Is the 'rentier state' paradigm still useful to understand processes of liberalisation and deliberalisation?
- How do processes of inclusion and exclusion take place (and what are the key contextual factors)?
- How do the actors themselves envisage their role within civil society?
- Is there a spin-off from societal to political changes?
- Do 'male' and 'female' CSAs interact?
- Can political attitudes be inferred from social attitudes (i.e. is there a simple linear movement from religious conservatism to social conservatism to political conservatism — or even support for political authoritarianism?).
- What is the relation, if any, between civil and political society?
- What is the impact of the regional and the global environment?
- How to evaluate the strength/weakness of civil society?
- The former question, in its turn, can be divided in following four sub-questions, based on the CIVICUS model (see note 6): What is the structural makeup of civil society with regard to the main characteristics of individual citizen participation and associational life?; What kind of values are being promoted and practiced by civil society?; What is civil society's impact in general?; How does the political, legal, socioeconomic, and sociocultural context, as well as the relationship between civil society and the state look?
- To what extent is the debate on the role of civil society related to the debate on citizenship (making use here of the distinction between *jinsiyya* and *muwatana*, the first one defined as 'passport citizenship' and the second one as 'democratic citizenship'; obviously, the *bidun* category will also have to deal with in this context).

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<sup>6</sup> Among which Al-Najjar's *Al-demuqratiya al-'asiyya fi al-khalij al-'arabi*; Club de Madrid, *Strengthening Dialogue and Democratic Discourse through Freedom and Association in the Mediterranean and the Middle East Region* (2009), CIVICUS Civil Society Index Team, *CIVICUS Civil Society Index: Preliminary Findings Phase 2003-2006* (2006).

- Is there a role for Western governments and non-governmental organisations?

The workshop encourages submissions not only as empirical studies (both individual case studies and comparative studies) but also more conceptually-oriented contributions. The workshop aims to have a multidisciplinary character.

## **Workshop Director Profiles**

**Dr. Paul Aarts** is a lecturer in International Relations at the Department of Political Science (University of Amsterdam). He is member of the editorial board of *ZemZem*, a journal on Islam and the Middle East and North Africa. He has undertaken consultancy work on the Middle East for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European Commission and other institutions. Aarts regularly contributes to public debates on matters related to the Middle East.

**Prof. Baqer Salman Al-Najjar** is Professor of Sociology at University of Bahrain. He received his Ph.D. from Durham University, UK. In 2009, he received the Shaikh Zayed Book Award for his work on civil society in the Gulf. His other main publications are *NGOs in the Arabian Gulf* (1988); *Productivity in Industrial Sector in Bahrain* (1993); *Sociology of the Arabian Gulf* (1999); *Women and Modernity in the Gulf* (2000); *Dream to Migrate to Wealth: Foreign Labour in the Gulf* (2001); *Society and Education in the Arabian Gulf* (2003); *Gender, Citizenship and Non-Governmental Organizations* (2003); *The Religious Movements in the GCC Countries* (2007); *Social Policies in Bahrain* (2008); and *The Strenuous Democracy in the Arabian Gulf* (2008).