ASSESSING THE COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE POTENTIAL OF FOREIGN SUPPORT OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS IN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN REGION

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Many, in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, view NGOs with distinct distrust and a reflection of geo-political dynamics.

The answers to the question "Do you consider that the support of civil society by foreign actors/donors can be counter-productive in your country?" in the 10th Euromed Survey showed a significant difference in opinions between respondents in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean and their European Union counterparts. This paper argues that the neoliberal NGOization of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in political discourse has resulted in many in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean viewing the organisations with distinct distrust and a reflection of geo-political dynamics.

Graph 1: Do you consider that the support of civil society by foreign actors/donors can be counter-productive in your country?
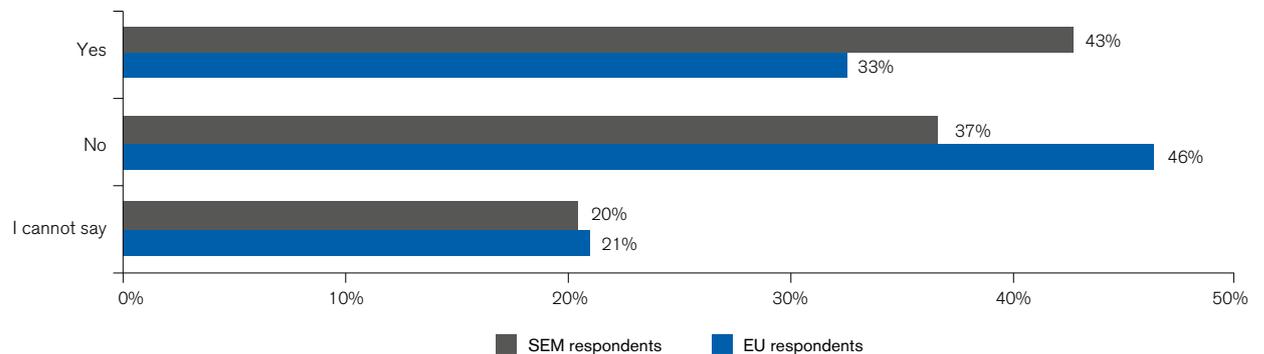
Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

This article first evaluates the nomenclature of "civil society" to understand the malevolent perception of foreign support for civil society in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region. Modern proliferations of the term "civil society" can be traced back to the 1980s and the post-Cold War period in an attempt to create civility in society, responding to global trends of despotism (Mohan, 2002, p. 193). Initially conceived as the creation of a space in which groups striving for a plural and diverse society can exist, the utopian and even magical formula for "civil society" and "CSOs" would soon be clouded in the complex realities of public policy. The notion of civil society establishes both a "social value and a set of social institutions" (Hall, 1995, p. 1), interacting with three basic actors, poetically described by Korten as: "the prince, who represents governmental power; the

merchant, representing economic power; and the citizens, who embodies the people's power" (Korten, 1990, p. 96).

At least superficially, CSOs are institutionally defined by their voluntary composition govern- ance and direction comes from citizens, without major government involvement (UNDP, 2013, p. 123). However, the term CSO is an incredibly broad one and reflects a diverse set of organi- sational structures, varying from small, community-centred organisations to high-profile inter- national NGOs. According to organisations such as the UN, they, by nature, are independent of direct government control and management (UNDP, 2013, p. 125). This definition of CSOs does not reveal the whole picture.

This paper uses the Gramscian theory on "civil society" in its attempt to understand the criti- cal views regarding the perceived interference of foreign actors. Briefly, civil society is a set of organisations through which society organised and represented itself autonomously from the state (Kurtz, 1999). However, for Gramsci, civil society functions as a direct consequence and expression of hegemony (articulated as a pattern of "established power relations among social groups in a given historical political situation" [Brighenti, 2016, p. 1]). Within a hegemonic superstructure, civil society is the object, battleground and outcome of different social and political groups in a specific historical context. It is a site that implicitly and explicitly involves itself in the production, circulation and consumption of discourse and, as such, is ideological. CSOs act as the practical embodiment of civil society. However, this framework should also appreciate the shift of civil society in the latter half of the 20th century with the proliferation of global social movements and NGOs that has led to the transformation from national to global civil society. One can therefore assume that these forces and imbalances have been amplified to a global level.

The structure of this paper consists of two parts: a literature review that theoretically tackles some of the underlying reasons why foreign actors/donors could be counter-productive, and a thematic driven analysis of the reasons given in the Survey.

The "NGOisation" of CSOs

When the people demanded civil society, what they received instead were NGOs (Chandhoke, 2003, p. 9). The growth of NGOs has coincided with the trends of neoliberalism throughout the West, with Petras arguing that NGOs have in reality become part of a devolved state sec- tor, as the community face of neo-liberalism (Petras, 1997). It can be argued that NGOs, as the predominant subset of CSOs, are symptomatic of "shadow states" that function through contacts with governments and are increasingly used as channels for and "direct beneficiaries of development aid provided by national and foreign governments" (Unguschaval, 2016, p. 3). In relation to their governance, their interwoven relationship with state practices often results in an intense pull towards professionalism and being "colonized by governmental ways of doing business" (Harwood & Creighton, 2009. p. 19).

Lang therefore argues that the "NGOization" of civil society is the shift from loosely organ- ised and broadly mobilising social movements to more professionalised, vertically structured NGOs (Lang, 1997; 2013). This has a largely detrimental effect on both the nature and role of CSOs, with the professionalisation displacing more socially-orientated groups with *better run* organisations that in turn creates preconceived notions of how civil society should operate (Edwards, 2014).

Geo-political funding has compounded this issue, with CSOs needing to ally themselves with the interests of their government, rather than a more localised emphasis. As long as these aims do not overtly collide with issues such as democratisation and good governance, CSOs should be seen to mirror these interests (Mohanty, 2002, p. 215).

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IEMed.

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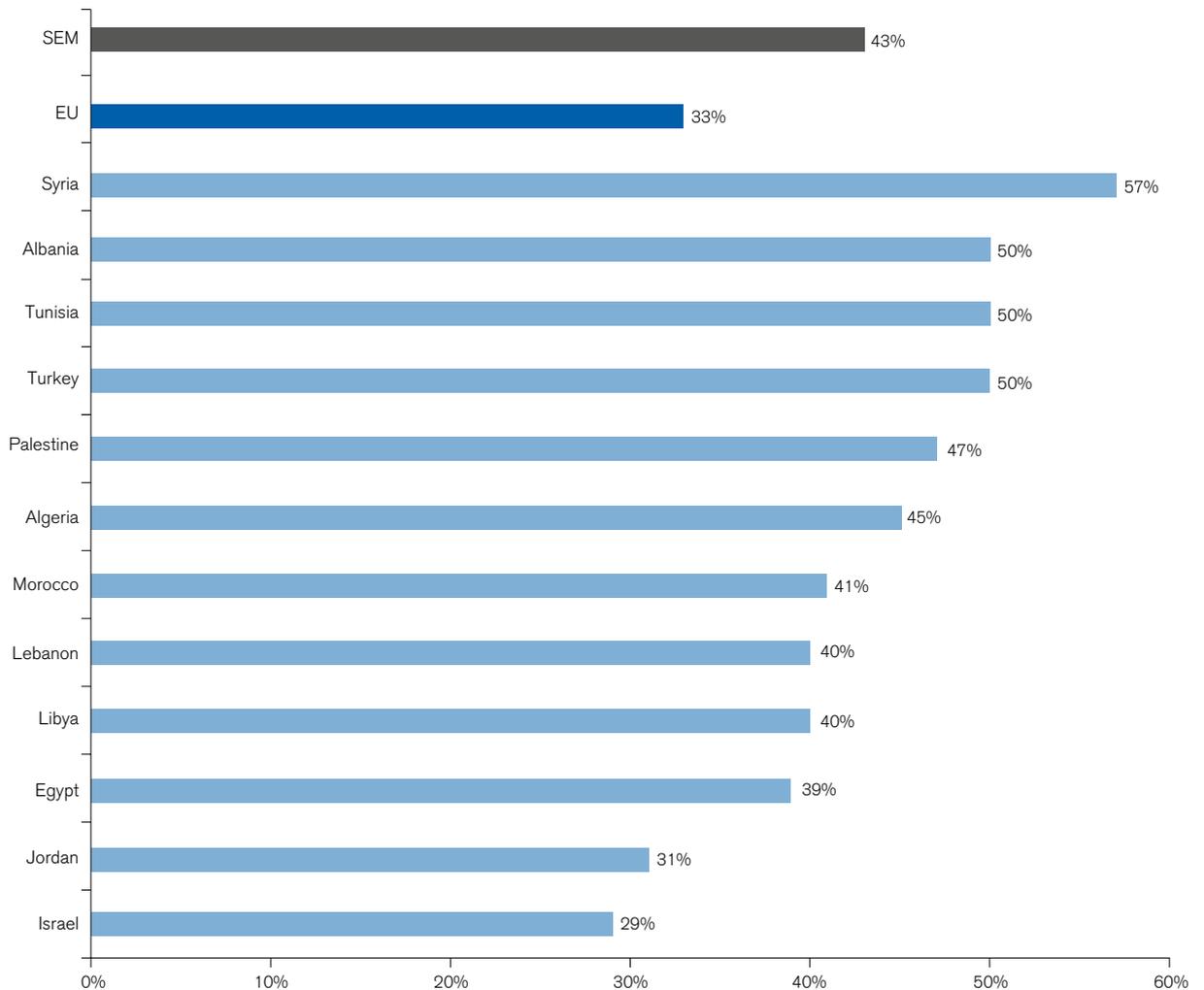
As such, the growth of NGOs as the main strand of CSOs ends up legitimising a version of civil society that loses its ability to criticise the state and in doing so forgets its purpose to enact social change (Mohanty, 2002. p. 230). All of the above reinforces oppressive and hegemonic states, allowing them to wield their coercive power to further their own interests.

Data Analysis

The data provided by the 10th Euromed Survey shows divergent perceptions between Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries with their EU counterparts, observed by a gap of 10 percentage points when answering the question of whether they viewed the support of civil society by foreign actors/donors as counter-productive. About 43% of respondents from Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries answered yes, whereas about 33% of EU countries responded yes. The graph below illustrates this difference and focuses in particular on the respondents from Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries.

Graph 2: Do you consider that the support of civil society by foreign actors/donors can be counter-productive in your country?
(% of YES answer)

Country	%
SEM	43%
EU	33%
Syria	57%
Albania	50%
Tunisia	50%
Turkey	50%
Palestine	47%
Algeria	45%
Morocco	41%
Lebanon	40%
Libya	40%
Egypt	39%
Jordan	31%
Israel	29%

Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

In their open comments, some of those respondents argue that foreign actors/donors are functioning as a destabilising force, acting as a democratic front for hidden agendas, maintaining a destructive status quo, and using a one-size-fits-all approach. Others focus in particular on the West, seen as ineffective at dealing with issues and concerned instead with reinforcing its own interests. This is most notably exemplified in the case of Palestine, with entries lamenting the ineffectuality of Western powers and their participation being conditioned by neo-liberal methods that support the occupation and the status quo.

> Their funds are based and conditioned on political consideration and serve to endorse the occupation structure in the occupied Palestine, they do not support projects that challenge the occupation but instead adapt to it.
>
> Palestinian respondent

> US/EU/UK – Serving political agendas that mainly focus on neo-liberal methods that exclude the political context of the country (one tool fits all).
>
> Palestinian respondent

These comments are to some extent symptomatic of feelings throughout the Global South that criticise the interventionist nature of the West, not only in supporting civil society but more generally in its foreign policy. The offset of the Global War on Terror has disproportionately affected the Muslim world, with many of the nations involved in this Survey characterising themselves as such. This is most potently identified by a Syrian civil society organisation which, whilst polemical, is reflective of the neorealist/liberal policies adopted in the aftermath of a vicious civil war, partly birthed by a power vacuum partly birthed by Western involvement in the region and sustained by interventionist methods:

> […] Take Syria for example. Everybody interfered in the affairs in this country: governments, civil society groups, Jihadists, warmongers… Humans are mere beasts. They never help each other. They think first of themselves.
>
> Syrian respondent

Some respondents, including from the Maghreb, also expressed their suspicions regarding support for civil society coming from Gulf countries, echoing what Hamdi wrote regarding the "logic of hegemony and dependency that Saudi Arabia and the UAE" seeks to impose in working with other states (Hamdi, 2017, p. 1).

> Les pays du Golfe sont de grands déstabilisateurs.
>
> Algerian respondent

> Pays de Golfe – À cause du risque à l'atteinte à la souveraineté, et de la manipulation intentionnée.
>
> Algerian respondent

> Les pays du Golfe – Une grande partie des ressources est mobilisée dans l'appui technique de cadres extra nationaux.
>
> Moroccan respondent

In summary, it is interesting to note that some respondents from EU countries subscribe to a lazily prescribed view of the Muslim world that bears a distinct resemblance to Samuel Huntingdon's infamous article "The Clash of Civilisations". The text imagines a cataclysmic coming together of the two major global forces in the aftermath of the Cold War: Western

democracy and Islam. There is, in most instances, a cognitive dissonance of European political forces that ignores their implicit role in the spread of what they criticise: the spread of Islamism. This feeling has transcended specific policies and entered into general discourse that can be said to mirror and fuel the growth of anti-Islamic sentiment in Europe. This is observed in the following examples:

> Muslim countries and donor organisations.
>
> Dutch respondent

> The influence of radical interpretation of Wahhabi's religious trend that originates [sic] in Saudi Arabia.
>
> Spanish respondent

> … il y a une crainte avérée d'une influence néfaste de par la diffusion d'un Islam wahabite rétrograde.
>
> Belgian respondent

Recommendations

Given the rather critical framework this essay has chosen to adopt, it is difficult to make recommendations that will disrupt the growing trend of NGOization that exists in CSOs. Nonetheless, in analysing the data, the following recommendations might go a little way in changing the balance of power and, in doing so, reduce the perception of "counter-productivity" of foreign actors/donors.

• Increase monitoring of the political orientation of civil societies, free from "troublesome" ideological concerns.

• Targeted funding to small, local social movements as opposed to global CSOs that will likely implement an ineffectively broad strategy marshalled by economic concerns.

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