The predication of “civil society” in Central Asia and Greater Middle East.

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The Greater Middle East project, which was devised by the US government for the G 8 summit of June 2004, concerns not only the Arab countries, but also Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It advocates the promotion of “civil society” (1). This term is not new: since 1991 at least, it has been extensively used by the international community to promote transition in the former Communist countries, including of course Central Asia. From Casablanca to Tashkent, from Kabul to Warsaw, the same concept of civil society is used, whatever the very different anthropological and political contexts, to offer some sort of a tool to promote democracy and Human Rights in former (or present) authoritarian countries or failed states. International institutions, UN agencies and the World Bank are also making use of this concept, while it is by definition central to the NGO’s approach. Political scientists and anthropologists have already debated the relevance of such a concept (2). We will address here some of the untold dimensions (relation with traditional societies and power networks) and side-effects of the policy for promoting civil society. This does not mean that we oppose democratization and privatization. Nevertheless we consider that such policies may collapse or backfire if sufficient attention is not paid to the concrete conditions of their implementation, which of course vary from one country to the other.

Civil society as promoted by the West

What do we understand by civil society? It consists of networks of free citizens such as associations, unions, political parties and NGOs which set a political space as a pre-requisite

1 “The G-8 could:

• Encourage the region's governments to allow civil society organizations, including human rights and media NGOs, to operate freely without harassment or restrictions.
• Increase direct funding to democracy, human rights, media, women's, and other NGOs in the region.
• Increase the technical capacity of NGOs in the region by increasing funding to domestic organizations (such as the UK's Westminster Foundation or the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy) to provide training for NGOs on how to define a platform, lobby government, and develop media and grassroots strategies to garner support. These programmes could also include exchanges and the creation of regional networks.
• Fund an NGO that would bring together legal or media experts from the region to draft annual assessments of judicial reform efforts or media freedom in the region.

for building a democracy and a state of law. This view is dominant among humanitarian workers and international organisations active in the area, as well as among their indigenous subsidiaries or local NGOs funded by them. The basic idea is that democracy, human rights and a state of law are universal concepts, which presuppose a society made of free citizens, not bound by any corporate or collective links, entering freely into associations to work for the common good. A free market is seen as a prerequisite for such an evolution, which means the promotion of individual entrepreneurship and private ownership of land. Civil society is constructed outside (or against) the State, but it is also significantly different from a “traditional society”, where bonds are built on primordial communities, kinship and patronage. Civil society is a virtual space between an ambivalent State (too strong or too weak) and an elusive traditional society, either ignored or perceived as a liability.

Such a definition raises many problems. Firstly, how do we address the “traditional society”? Moreover, such a concept of civil society is often seen by local people (for good or bad reasons) as an idealised and abstract paradigm of modern Western society. That has been the result of an historical process which took centuries, but is presented as a ready-made compulsory blue-print for reforms to be implemented in « oriental » societies, in the span of one generation; there is often the suspicion that there is a hidden agenda (political control). Finally are the potential negative side-effects of implementing a “civil society” worth the results?

One should here make a distinction between countries that ask for technical assistance because both the ruling elites and public opinion want to join the club of Western democratic states (like Poland), or countries where an authoritarian regime (Uzbekistan) or the lack of an effective state (Afghanistan) is an obstacle to the process of democracy building through State institutions. In the first case, the role of the NGOs is minimal and most of the job is done by bilateral agreements between the State and international institutions and agencies: in Eastern Europe for instance the ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, which is an OSCE’s agency) played a central role. But in the case of failed or authoritarian states, even if the latter pays lip service to democracy (Kirghyzstan) or pledges cooperation with the OSCE (Uzbekistan), there are only two ways to engage in democratization: regime change or building a civil society from scratch. Regime change could be performed either from inside (a coup or a revolution, like in Iran in 1979) or from outside (Iraq in 2003). But coups and revolutions are not necessarily the harbingers of democracy, and could lead to another authoritarian regime or to anarchy. Conversely, the American neo-conservatives argued for regime change through external action in order to impose democracy in the Middle East: Iraq was supposed to be the first case that would trigger a chain of regime changes from Iran to Syria, even including Saudi Arabia. But the difficulties that the US administration is now facing in Iraq show how superficial such an approach of democratization was. The Greater Middle East Project is clearly a retreat from the neo-conservative grand strategy: the issue is no more regime change, but building a civil society without confronting the existing regimes. The idea is that, in the course of t time, authoritarian regimes will be “encircled” by civil society and will either reform or collapse. Nevertheless, the main issue remains: how to root democracy into society?

When traditional society pre-empts civil society

There is never a tabula rasa. Even in chaotic situations, there are networks, leaders, traditions and a memory of the past. In fact few development projects (both in terms of economic and political development) are explicitly targeting the existing networks of power, for two reasons: in some cases the fact that there could be a traditional society is simply ignored, in some others such networks are seen as a liability and an obstacle for democratisation. For instance, as far as Central Asia is concerned, a common idea was that the Soviet system had destroyed the traditional society and that no civil society could be built without eliminating
what remains of the Soviet rule, first of all the kolkhoz system, in favour of a complete and immediate privatization. In a word, the “communist” notable was seen as a recent, illegitimate and oppressive figure. By the same token, in Afghanistan, the local commanders and warlords are considered as pure products of the war, imposing their power through sheer violence and lacking any social basis. In a more subtle and complex way, the promotion of women’s rights entails also the bypassing of traditional elders and notables. I am not saying here that traditional notables, former Soviet apparatchiks and armed commanders should be considered as the main actors in the process of democratization, but ignoring the historical, cultural and social conditions that had empowered them is simply counter-productive. In a more complex way, such leaders and notables are recasting traditional patterns of power, leadership and social interaction to legitimate and make comprehensible (if not popular) their actual behaviour. Durable empowerment is never based on sheer violence. This means that these people may find it easy to adapt to development (and specifically privatization) policies in order to retain their power in a new guise (private landowners or entrepreneurs), thus emptying large parts of the development programme of its political dimension, namely democratisation.

I would define the “traditional society” as networks of solidarity based on primordial communities, kinship and patronage that allow the population to resist encroachments from a strong authoritarian state, or to compensate for the weakness or corruption of the State (a State, by the way, could be both weak and authoritarian as illustrated by the case of Kirghyzstan). Such a society does not necessarily predate the State: in fact in many cases (from Iraq to Afghanistan) there has been a dialectical relationship between States and “tribes”. Using local notables and even enhancing their status by appointing them as intermediaries between the State and the population has always been a way for a State to engage in some sort of “indirect rule” and to decrease the cost of ruling. State building is not necessarily at the expense of traditional notables; there could be a process of mutual recasting: both the State and the notable see the other as a tool to enhance their respective positions (for example the State hands over to the local notable the task of taxation and conscription; or land may be registered under the name of the tribe’s head, as it was done by the late Ottoman Empire). In Soviet Central Asia, the local communist parties were not an association of political activists bound by a common allegiance to Marxism, but a network of client-patron relations, with strong rooting in regional identities.

In fact a social artefact (a kolkhoz for instance) may in many respects be antagonistic to a true process of democratization, but has nevertheless become a social reality. By not addressing the social dimensions of the kolkhoz, the process of privatization ignores the local balance of power and vested interests: the existing social fabric and hierarchy will adapt to the changes and the former apparatchiks will easily become the new leaders of a “window” civil society. In a word the real issue is not one of acknowledging or rejecting traditional notables (including apparatchiks and military commanders) but of mastering the way the traditional society will recast itself into the so called civil society. The notables and leaders use their own power and influence to appropriate for themselves (and distort) the development programmes (privatization, disarmament etc.) in order to re-install themselves as the “real” people. The

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This point is developed by other anthropologists of the Middle East: see Richard Antoun « Civil Society, Tribal Process, and Change in Jordan » IJMES (vol 32, n°4, 2000). In Afghanistan, the « Loya Jirga » or traditional assembly of elders and local notables is often presented by anthropologists as a way to build a legitimate State, by opposition to free elections, which are both unfeasible and unsuitable for a political culture based on collective identities.

fact that privatisation usually strengthens the weight and role of the former kolkhoz leaders is not acknowledged by the international institutions advocating crash privatisation programmes.

Such a dialectical relationship between notables and state exists with any power, whatever its basis: the US forces which landed in Afghanistan were quite happy to find warlords, commanders and tribal leaders to pursue the fighting on the ground (and to undermine the ideological leadership of the Taliban). The US troops were fighting a war and not building a civil society (something the military are neither inclined nor trained to do). Privatisation, in many instances (in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) may also mean handing the bulk of the kolkhoz land to the family and friends of the former kolkhoz’s president, which brings us back to the Ottoman Empire and not to a society of individual middle class private farmers. But the same is true for many NGOs which need a “key” to be able to work in a not very friendly context: during the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, the only safe way for a NGO to work inside Afghanistan was to be closely associated with a local commander, who provided safety, but whose local power was strengthened and legitimated by the very fact he was getting support from abroad. In a sense a dependency relation, and even a client-patron relationship, could be built between the NGO and its local protector. Many western political networks supporting known figures of the Afghan resistance (Masud, Amin Wardak) were largely built through NGO connections. Conversely, NGOs supporting “independent democratic intellectuals” used to relay the message in the West that traditional leaders have no legitimacy. In a word, NGOs tend to rationalize in political terms the way they established themselves in a given country.

Ignoring that means risking either being manipulated by such notables or having to build from scratch a window civil society which exists only in the activity reports of the different NGOs and institutions. Imposing from above development schemes and ready-made formulas not only does not work, but hides the real stakes.

**Window Civil Society**

Handling de facto power networks and notables may prove hazardous. Many NGOs prefer to build from scratch their own projects pertaining to civil society. This is particularly tempting in areas where neither the State nor local notables could match the input brought by foreign help. Two problems arise here: defining the programme and choosing the partners or local staff.

The main issue is that, in terms of political development, supply defines demand. Or, more exactly, the donors decide what is desirable. Funds are rarely if ever provided by the general public, made aware of a difficult situation in a remote country through a campaign waged by a dedicated NGO. Funds are provided by Western States and International Institutions, -the US Congress and the European Commission being the biggest donors. These are political institutions which decide what should be done, according to various determinations, usually politically motivated (I have no time here to study another trail: that of purely bureaucratic decisions). Privatisation, women’s rights, democratisation, conflict prevention, small business, low-interest loans are favourite topics. There is a tender notice with terms of reference; the various NGOs have to answer the demands of the donor: it would be suicidal to object that the proposal is totally irrelevant (5). This importation of ready made paradigms

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5 When I was a young and naïve militant going into Afghanistan to support the Afghan Mojahedin, I was asked by a big US foundation to play a leading role in a programme to “build democratic worker unions in communist dominated countries”. I objected that there were almost no industrial workers in Afghanistan, because two of the three existing plants stopped work for lack of supplies (the cotton mill in Kunduz and cement plant in Pul-I Khumri) while the third (the wine factory in Kabul) had just been blown up by the Mojahedin in my presence (the wine was not so good). I suggested to use the money
(whatever their intrinsic value) often offends the receivers, as Elizabeth Faier noted about Palestine: « Activists contend that in order to receive foreign funds, they must design programmes and market local organisations in ways that appeal to Western agendas for Middle East development and peaceful relations between Jews and Arabs» (8). Once again I am not saying here that these issues are irrelevant, but they may become irrelevant, through the process of implementation: the local population may resent -single issue help, consider that other more important needs are not addressed, or may baulk at the cultural or social consequences of the programme. Lastly, the programme could be hijacked by the real power networks (in 1997 a donation of some 17 millions dollars to Azerbaijan for launching a small loans programme for recently privatized farmers did not reach the concerned people). Some programmes, which are very popular with donors, are irrelevant as long as they are not conceived within a larger (but less fashionable or more costly) frame: battered housewives, street children, and also conflict prevention (which by the way is very cost-effective, for unlike with conflict resolution: as long as nothing happens, one can claim that conflict prevention did work).

The other issue is the disruptive effect of humanitarian and development aid on the local markets. I am not speaking here in purely economic terms. The issue of a too high visibility of NGOs and international institutions in terms of living standards is well known: it does not matter in big countries like Egypt but could play a disrupting role in terms of the housing market or salary scale in relatively small towns like Kabul. But it is a short term issue. A long term problem concerns the local partners (not employees) of the programmes. There are in fact three pools from which to recruit partners: returnees, local notables or local technocrats. Returnees have usually the same problems as expatriates, and, except for a few dedicated militants, would very reasonably ask for the same wages and living standards. Traditional notables, as we saw, will match foreign help with their own agenda: there may be nothing wrong in that (and probably it is a good way to root a programme in the existing society), but many NGOs hate to loosen their control. Hence the popularity of “technocrats”, usually educated people, who are out of the political game, either because they belong to the wrong side (democratic opposition parties) or lack political or familial connections. They master English, paperwork, the art of writing reports and know what the donors are expecting. They can make supply fit demand (at least on paper). NGOs need “partners” that they can control, not only because they are accountable for the money spent, but also because they are in a relation of power with their partners (a NGO in itself is always a hierarchic organization, where the issue of leadership and power cannot be ignored). NGOs tend to limit the development of the local entities they create in order to remain in control. Relations with partners are always very personalised.

On the one hand, development policies may attract highly educated and competent people, such as university professors, whose competence may or may not be properly used. In Afghanistan or Tajikistan, for example, an English-speaking driver for an NGO will earn at least ten times the salary of a university professor. In other cases, when rightly employed (as in Egypt for programmes funded by the Ford Foundation) an employee of a local NGO or Foundation will still make two or three times what he earned as a university Professor. There is clearly an internal brain drain effect.

On the other hand, development policies may also attract disenfranchised would-be leaders, people whose expectations are not met by the present situation and who see in development programmes a way to find a new position and assert themselves. This could be fine: one needs leaders and people with ambition and long-term prospects. But the political tensions that may

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for other democracy related projects but was told that the money having been allotted under the title “democratic worker unions”, it should be spent for that purpose and no other.

6 Elizabeth Faier « Making « civil society » in divided communities », « Workshop for Home-Grown Models of Civil Society in the Muslim World ». 
result should be closely monitored by the concerned organizations. A danger would be to create some sort of artificial reserve for a new endangered species: the democratic intellectual or the independent free woman, who, at the end, may find a safer and better position by becoming a development professional, with more ties and links to western institutions than with their own countries, leading sometimes to exile.

**Imported paradigms?**

We already mentioned the on-going debate about the universality of civil society’s concepts and paradigms. I do believe that democracy and human rights are universal (7). Anyway, the choice is not between leaving Middle Eastern and Central Asian societies as they are or changing them through a development policy. These societies are changing: wars, political dissent, social tensions, education and globalization have pushed forward new actors and demands for change. Many ideas and actors which are often seen as “traditional” or a “legacy of the past” (Islam for instance) are in fact part of the evolution and adaptation process (8). Development policies may miss the point, but they nevertheless have an impact by opening the political field and triggering debates; even a possible backlash against the “liberators” (Iraq) or the “benefactors” (NGOs) is part of a process of building a political space and identifying the issues at stake. But, in order not to be disappointed by the reactions of the “helped”, one should adopt a systemic approach to the policy of political development in authoritarian or failed states, which is neither a Western plot nor a benevolent help, nor even a mix of both, but a mirror relation.

The issue is not importation but rooting and re-appropriation. The issue for me is about rooting these paradigms in real societies. It is not just an issue of religion and culture (Is Islam compatible with -take your pick- democracy, secularism, human rights, women’s rights, animals’ rights etc?: It means taking into account the political culture: there is no way to root democracy without addressing the issue of political legitimacy and nationalism. The US failure in Iraq is not a problem with *sharia* but with the inability to understand Iraqi nationalism and the demand for political legitimacy.

That said, some of the paradigms used in political development are creating more problems than they solve. For instance, the paradigm of “minority groups”: first it supposes that such groups could easily be defined and ‘bordered’, which is rarely the case (who is a Tajik in Afghanistan? Are Aymaqs Tajik or just Aymaq?). Second, they are usually understood as “ethnic minorities”, hence the tendency to categorize religious groups in terms of ethnicity (speaking for instance of Iraq as being divided into three parts: Kurds, Sunnis and Shi’as). Isolating the issue of women’s rights, as if women were also some sort of specific and separate group (it is difficult to speak in terms of minority here), is also a problem: how to address the “Islamist” women? The issue is not “knowing better” in order to avoid mistakes; it is simply not to use paradigms that may create more problems than solutions.

Human rights are usually conceived as automatically opposed to *sharia*, which may be true, but skips the issue of how to assess the *sharia* and the call for *sharia*: is it a way of empowerment (by ordinary males, by clerics as well as rulers) or a reference to a cultural authenticity which could be shared by many women? The role of *sharia* is a political issue: to oppose or ignore *sharia* from a purely technocratic point of view (it does not fit with human rights) leads automatically to a call for the return of *sharia* made by opponents of western encroachments.

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7 see for instance a very stimulating paper *Practical Islam on the Margins of Europe : Civil Society in Albania and Bosnia*, Steven Sampson, « Workshop for Home-Grown Models of Civil Society in the Muslim World ».

To conclude, such issues should be discussed and decided by the political body of the targeted country. Democracy is not a consequence of the imposition of human rights and a state of law; it is a pre-condition to establish both. Democracy should precede democratization: this is why it was a mistake to have supported the cancellation of the Algerian elections of 1991, as well as to have established a CPA in Iraq, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, waiting for conditions to be created for true democratic elections. Politics always prevail over development aid.