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State-Civil Society Relations in Syria

EU Good Governance Assistance in an Authoritarian State

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I. Abstract

The European Union's (EU) good governance policies consider civil society an actor promoting development as well as political accountability of governments, thus contributing to the democratisation of political systems. By means of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU promotes good governance in its relations and cooperation with neighbouring countries to the East and the South, including Syria. The cooperation in the domain of good governance has not been successful in the southern neighbouring countries, although some governments have allowed civil society to become more active. Indeed, authoritarianism prevailed in the whole Arab region until recently. This study argues that the EU's good governance policy is based on questionable assumptions with respect to the nature of civil society, as well as the willingness of state and civil society to cooperate. Syria, as an extreme case of authoritarianism, is taken as an example. The connotation attached by the EU to civil society in Syria is normative and overlooks its complexity and the character of its relations with the state.

Whilst grounded on a discussion of theoretical notions and paradigms regarding civil society and state-society relations, this study is primarily policy-oriented. The study analyses state civil society relations under the authoritarian Assad regime, focussing primarily 2006 to 2010. This period corresponds to the 10th Five Year Plan of the Syrian government. As part of its socio-economic reform, the Syrian government aimed at strengthening the role of civil society organisations (CSOs). While the Syrian government and the EU, as well as the United Nations (UN), committed themselves to good governance in cooperation agreements, in practice good governance had no priority. The Syrian government blocked any reform perceived as a threat to its power position. For its part, the EU gave priority to security and stability at its borders over promoting democratisation, human rights and the rule of law in Syria. Unlike under his father's rule, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had a different approach towards civil society organisations. His regime continued to repress human rights and pro-democracy groups as well as other potential opponents, but permitted the activities of certain CSOs, because of political and/or socio-economic reasons. It allowed civil society initiatives by regime supporters, such as development organisations initiated by the President's wife and crony entrepreneurs, as well as other groups the regime tried to co-opt, such as a number of religious, mainly Islamic, charity organisations. Within the context of intergovernmental and multilateral cooperation, the Syrian regime could select and control activities in the domain of good governance, including possible involvement in its implementation by Syrian CSOs, which were not perceived as a threat to the

regime’s power. In fact, this support may have even contributed to the resilience of this authoritarian regime.

II. Summary in Dutch

De Europese Unie (EU) bevordert door middel van haar Europees nabuurschapsbeleid goed bestuur in haar betrekkingen en in de samenwerking met de buurlanden in het oosten en het zuiden, waaronder Syrië. Het maatschappelijk middenveld beschouwt de EU daarbij als een actor die ontwikkeling alsook politieke verantwoordingsplicht van de regeringen bevordert, en daarmee bijdraagt aan de democratisering van politieke stelsels. De samenwerking op het gebied van goed bestuur is bij de zuidelijke buurlanden niet succesvol gebleken, hoewel sommige regeringen het maatschappelijk middenveld hebben toegestaan activiteiten te ontplooien. Deze studie stelt dat het beleid voor goed bestuur van de EU gebaseerd is op twijfelachtige aannames met betrekking tot de aard van het maatschappelijk middenveld, alsook de bereidheid van de staat en de maatschappij om samen te werken. De Arabische regio werd tot voor kort gedomineerd door autoriteir bestuur. Syrië, een extreem geval van autoritarisme, wordt als voorbeeld genomen. De betekenis die de EU geeft aan het maatschappelijk middenveld in Syrië is normatief en gaat voorbij aan haar complexiteit en aan het karakter van haar relaties met de staat.

Hoewel het onderzoek op een bespreking van theoretische begrippen en paradigma's steunt met betrekking tot het maatschappelijk middenveld en de relaties tussen staat en maatschappij, is deze studie in de eerste plaats beleidsgericht. De studie analyseert de verhouding tussen staat en maatschappij onder het autoritaire Assad bewind; in het bijzonder gedurende de periode 2006 en 2010. Deze periode komt overeen met het 10de vijfjarenplan van de Syrische regering. Als onderdeel van de sociaaleconomische hervormingen, zette de Syrische regering zich in op het versterken van de rol van maatschappelijke organisaties. Terwijl de Syrische regering en de EU evenals de Verenigde Naties (VN), zich committeerden aan een beleid voor goed bestuur in samenwerkingsovereenkomsten, had in de praktijk goed bestuur geen prioriteit. De Syrische regering blokkeerde elke hervorming die zij beschouwde als een bedreiging voor haar machtspositie. De EU gaf van haar kant prioriteit aan veiligheid en stabiliteit aan haar grenzen, in plaats van het bevorderen van democratisering, mensenrechten en de rechtsstaat in Syrië. In tegenstelling tot het bewind van zijn vader had de Syrische

president Bashar al-Assad een andere benadering tot maatschappelijke organisaties. Hoewel zijn bewind voortging met het onderdrukken van mensenrechten en pro-democratie groepen alsmede van andere potentiële tegenstanders, gaf het echter bepaalde maatschappelijke organisaties om politieke en/of sociaal en economische redenen ruimte voor hun activiteiten. Het stond maatschappelijk initiatieven van regime aanhangers toe, zoals door de vrouw van de president geïnitieerde ontwikkelingsorganisaties en van aan het regime gelieerde ondernemers, evenals activiteiten van andere groepen die het regime aan zich probeerde te binden, zoals een aantal religieuze (vooral islamitische) liefdadigheidsorganisaties. Het Syrische regime kon binnen de kaders van de intergouvernementele en multilaterale samenwerking activiteiten selecteren en controleren op het gebied van goed bestuur; waaronder inbegrepen mogelijke betrokkenheid bij de uitvoering ervan door Syrische maatschappelijke organisaties die niet werden gezien als een bedreiging voor de macht van het bewind. In feite kan deze steun ook hebben bijgedragen aan de veerkracht van dit autoritaire regime.

III. Map

Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Un-syria.png?uselang=nl.

IV. Acknowledgements

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Table of Contents

I. Abstract iii

II. Summary in Dutch iv

III. Map vi

IV. Acknowledgements vii

V. Glossary x

VI. List of Tables and Figures xii

1. Introduction 1

1.1 Background 1

1.2 Research Problem 10

1.3 The Case of Syria 31

1.4 Relevance 34

1.5 Objective and Questions 37

1.6 Method 39

1.7 Organisation of the Thesis 44

2. Concepts and Analytical Framework 46

2.1 Conceptualising Civil Society 46

2.1.1 Civil Society Today: Contested Meanings 54

2.1.2 Civil Society and Democratisation 58

2.1.3 Forms of Civil Society 61

2.1.4 Civil Society Organisations and NGOs 62

2.1.5 Relevance of the Concept Civil Society in Development Cooperation Context 69

2.2 Conceptualising the State 70

2.2.1 State-Civil Society Relations 78

2.2.2 State and State-Society Relations in the Developing World 81

2.2.3 Authoritarian Resilience 87

3. State and Ideology in Syria 92

3.1 Pre-Ba'ath State-society Relations in Syria 92

3.2 State-society Relations under Ba'ath Party Rule 96

3.2.1 The Institutional Pillars of the Syrian Regime 101

3.2.2 Sources of Regime Legitimacy 112

4. Contending Social Forces 121

4.1 Multiple and Competing Identities 122

4.2 The Islamist Opposition 127

4.3 Kurdish Opposition 137

4.4 Secular Opposition 141

4.5 Foreign Pressures and Political Opposition 145

5. Syrian Civil Society 151

5.1 Origins of Civil Society in Syria 151

5.2 Civil society under the Ba'ath Party Rule 155

5.2.1 The Legal Framework 157

5.2.2 Refusal and Dissolution 159
5.2.3 Government Support 161
5.2.4 Types and Activities of Registered Associations 164
5.3 Case Studies of an Emerging NGO Sector 171
5.3.1 Developmental NGOs 171
5.3.2 Women's and Youth Associations 177
5.3.3 Human Rights Organisations 186
5.4 The Politics of Civil Society 192

6. European Union - Syrian Development Cooperation and the Role of Civil Society ... 201
6.1 The European Union response 203
6.2 The United Nations response 216
6.3 Unrealistic Assumptions 220
6.4 Dilemmas in Democratisation 228

7. Conclusions 232
7.1 Inaccurate Assumptions 233
7.2 Lack of Policy Coherence 236
7.3 Key Conclusions 239

Epilogue: 2011, the Syrian Uprising 245

List of Interviewed Persons 250

Annex 1: Questionnaire Civil Society and Accountability 251

Annex 2: Questionnaire UNDP and European Commission 252

Annex 3: Repression in Figures 2007-2010 254

Annex 4: Comparison of Given Purpose with Stated Type of Activities of Registered Associations 258

Annex 5: UNDAF 2007-2011 260

Annex 6: UNDAF 2007-2011 261

Annex 7: The United Nations Development Programme 262

References 268

Biography 284

V. Glossary

AIDOS	Italian Association for Women in Development
AKDN	Aga Khan Development Network
AOHR	Arab Organisations for Human Rights
ASP	Arab Socialist Party
BGFK	"Berliner Gesellschaft zur Forderung der Kurdologie"
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CDF	Committees for the Defence of Democratic Freedom and Human Rights
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSP	Country Strategy Papers
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
EC	European Commission
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
EMHRN	Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network
EMP	European Mediterranean Partnership
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
ENPI	European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument
EU	European Union
FIRDOS	Fund for Integrated Rural Development
GONGO	Government-operated non-governmental organisation
GWU	General Women's Union
HRAS	Human Rights Association of Syria
HRBA	Human Rights Based Approach
IFIAS	Institute for International Assistance and Solidarity
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
MAWRED	Modernising and Activating Women's Role in Economic Development
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MEDA	Mesures d'Accompagnement, French for accompanying measures. MEDA is the financial instrument of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership
MOSAL	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NADWR	National Association for Developing Women's Roles
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NIP	National Indicative Plan
NOHR	National Organisation for Human Rights
NPF	National Progressive Front
NSA	Non-state actors
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party

PYD	Democratic Union Party (Syria)
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SCFA	Syrian Commission for Family Affairs
SCM	Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression
SEA	Syrian Environmental Association
SEPS	Syrian Environment Protection Society
SEYA	Syrian Young Entreprenuers Association
SFPA	Syrian Family Planning Association
SHRIL	Syrian Human Rights Link
SIS	Social Initiative Society
SPC	State Planning Commission
SSNP	Syrian Social Nationalist Party
SWL	Syrian Women's League
UN	United Nations
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, also known as the UN Refugee Agency
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VBI	Village Business Incubator

VI. List of Tables and Figures

Tables

1. Table 1: Instruments and Mechanisms for Good Governance Promotion

2. Table 2: Committed Bilateral EU Aid to Southern Mediterranean Countries (in million euros) under MEDA and ENPI Programs

3. Table 3: Social Associations, Type of Activity and Location (2005)

4. Table 4: EC-Democratic Governance Assistance under MEDA/ENPI (in million euros)

5. Table 5: EC-Democratic Governance Assistance under EIDHR (in million euros)

6. Table 6: Number of Known Political Detainees in Syria at the end of 2007 and the Reason for their Detention

7. Table 7: Arrested and in Detention

8. Table 8: Ongoing Projects in 2009 of UNDP in Cooperation with the Syrian Administration in the Field of Democratic Governance

Figures

1. Figure 1: Analytical framework for Good Governance

2. Figure 2: Fowler's Analytical Framework