

PETER SCHÄFER

OUR HELP AS A THREAT

A CONTRIBUTION CONCERNING THE EFFECT OF "DEVELOPMENT AID"
AND "DEMOCRACY PROMOTION" IN THE ARAB WORLD

Since the resignations of Tunisia's President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at the latest, the USA, the European Union, and some of the latter's member states have been talking about wanting to support the "democratic transformation" in these countries. That sounds like a change of mind on the part of Western states, as if they suddenly recognize that close cooperation with the former dictators was wrong, but now honestly intend to help the pursuit of democracy and freedom reach a breakthrough.

For many people in the region, however, these promises of help are a threat. The people are opposed to the interests of the European Union and the USA: the prevention of "illegal" immigration, uninhibited access to the raw materials of the region, the security of Israel, and the "war against terror." Unequal trade relations – that is to say, trade relations profitable for the West – can only be maintained if the governments of the states delivering raw materials are cooperative. And the "war on terror" – from which in practice usually the civilian population in targeted countries suffers – can only be continued if at least some of the regional governments participate in it, whether through political approval, the cooperation between intelligence services, financial support, or by providing military bases.

It's clear that democratic Arab governments, representing among other things the majority opinion of their populations, will no longer be willing to engage in this type of cooperation with the West. The question, however, is whether they have any other option. Governments, economic systems, individual businesses, and the non-governmental sector in the region are all, to various degrees, dependent upon or otherwise constrained by loans and other financial assistance from the West. Changing this system would be a step with far-reaching consequences, especially for a country acting alone.

That's why the schemes for supporting the movements for democracy in Egypt and Tunisia sound like saber-rattling in the ears of participants.

Current foreign intervention in Arab affairs and support for repressive regimes is seen in the region as part of an uninterrupted continuity of neo-colonial policy approaches in history. Direct or indirect European colonial rule is part of the past of

all Arab states. Direct British control even extended into the 1960s, so the active memory of it still looms large. In some states, Europeans even installed the first "independent" governments, and contact with the old elites continued to be cultivated. And, through economic and/or military pressure, the West aggressively influenced the behavior of regional states up to the present day. The continuing use of arms against Iraq and Afghanistan are just the most obvious examples.

THE DISCOVERY OF CIVIL SOCIETY

After the end of the Cold War, the West discovered Arab "civil society", or rather, the supposed need for its construction. Methods such as those used by the US Congress for Cultural Freedom until the end of the 1960s in Western Europe in the struggle against Communism were now deployed in the Arab world. However, the West's understanding of civil society in the Arab/Islamic world remained rather limited. It usually does not mean political parties, labor unions, and other associations rooted in society, but rather human rights organizations and other thematic initiatives staffed by full-time professionals.

These organizations have been active to some extent for decades, have their roots in political movements and do very necessary work with regard to monitoring their governments and promoting progressive values in politics and culture. However, these organizations are usually very loosely connected to one another, administratively tailored to individuals (particularly in patriarchal societies such as in the Arab world), and in this unaccountable form, their political orientation is very susceptible to external incentives. Traditionally, this sector is based upon voluntary labor and local support. But the availability of considerable Western financial assistance has changed this sector profoundly.

These days, a large number of projects financed by foreign institutions and implemented by local NGOs must be considered in the context of their close connection with the "war on terror" and the increase in Islamophobic policies. All too often, behind the labels of "developmental aid" and "democracy promotion" lurks a multilayered support for repressive regimes, while simultaneously aiding non-governmental or-

ganizations, who play an important role as observers – but also as fig leaves – for foreign powers. It's financially worthwhile to found an NGO or work for one. Some NGO directors and their upper-level employees have become part of the upper-middle class in many regional states on the basis of their salaries.

This part of civil society is not accountable (anymore) to its community or its (former) political relationships, but rather to its foreign patron organizations. Such NGOs have money and international connections. But beyond this relatively small circle of direct beneficiaries, there are often few people in the affected societies who politically welcome the engagement focus points of a foreign institution.

As a result, the effects of the intervention of Western organizations in the Arab world are as follows:

Progressive politics is delegitimized

A large number of NGOs supported by the West originate from the societal left, thus giving rise to the only apparently odd phenomenon of even strictly conservative Western organizations supporting Arab communists.

When progressive, leftist people work with the money provided by donors with different political ideas, that isn't just suspicious in the Arab world, and the progressive ideas offered by such NGOs are rejected. For example, with regard to strengthening women's rights in Palestine, it's led to a situation, according to local criticism, where externally financed discourses are rejected and participants turn to organizations that are regarded as having more credibility, namely representatives of political Islam.

In Iraq, foreign intervention through local NGOs is most striking. The vast majority of the organizations that first emerged after 2003 (outside of Kurdistan) are being instrumentalized as the civil arm of the war effort, directly financed and politically protected by the US government and its allies. Ideas such as freedom of expression and association are thus automatically suspected of actually covering up for completely different interests.

"Effective crisis management requires a comprehensive approach involving political, civilian and military elements and entities" stated NATO in its Strategic Concept from December 2010, thus making state support of NGOs an official part of its military policies. "The Alliance will engage actively with other international actors before, during and after crises."

Progressive Parties and other Grass Roots Organizations are Weakened

The delegitimization of progressive values such as freedom of expression and gender equality leads to a loss of trust in local leftist parties. Furthermore, it robs them of their most competent personnel. It's simply the case that an NGO pays better. It also provides a large part of the social work that party members previously did voluntarily, which once contributed to the attractiveness of the left. In turn, religious welfare organizations were able to fill the remaining vacuum in many societies.

These side effects are seldom noticed by foreign implementing organizations. The individual project reports they compose usually present very positive results. And an external evaluation (on behalf of implementing organizations) is performed by institutions and individuals who are professionally dependent upon the developmental aid complex. Unsatisfactory reports can be altered or scrubbed. As a whole, developmental cooperation with Arab countries has hardly been independently dealt with.

FEEDBACK IN THE WEST

The Western approach to aid for the Arab region also leads to negative effects in the originating countries. The acceptable state and non-state actors who are the focus of support constitute the main contacts to this part of the world. Often due to their dependence upon the West, they conveniently confirm its viewpoints and fears, for example of political Islam. Direct contact with representatives of these rather heterogeneous political currents only occurs in exceptional cases. And thus, political Islam, its adherents, and its motivations are explained to us by its opponents, the acceptable Arabs.

And thus even an undemocratic government can reckon with Western support for its role as a bulwark against Islamism. For example, it was recently revealed that the Egyptian government went very far in order to secure this support. At the moment, the deposed Egyptian interior minister Habib El-Adly is being investigated on the suspicion of being behind the bomb attack on a church in Alexandria on December 31st 2010 that killed 21 people. At the time, the government accused "Islamic extremists with connections to Al-Qaeda" of being responsible for the attack.

All the euphonious Western declarations of friendship with "the" Muslims have so far been devoid of content. The proclaimed "dialogue with Islam" has so far not only presented itself as a series of conversations between like-minded people; rather, all the people of the entire region, from Morocco to Pakistan, have been stamped as Muslims, people whose lives appear to be organized entirely according to spiritual criteria, constantly out to serve an apparently violent god. The actual people in the various societies and their respective contexts cannot in any case be understood in this way.

If concern with the Arab world is to result in the attainment of knowledge, then first of all, attitudes toward this large and diverse region must change. The reason for conflicts, even inner-societal ones, cannot be sought in the confrontation between different religions, even if this point is emphasized by religiously motivated actors (in the Arab world and in the West). The tensions between Sunni Muslims or Christians and the Shiite Hezbollah in Lebanon are not of a religious nature, and neither is the war between the Islamic North and the non-Islamic South in Sudan. Conflicts such as these can be traced back to social inequality, which are in part massively inflamed by foreign actors.

If these Western attitudes do not change, then the announced massive aid for the Arab democracy movements will predictably not lead to the creation of more democratic systems friendlier to human rights.

Peter Schäfer was the director of the Palestine office of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung until 2012, and will be the director of the forthcoming office of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung in Tunis, Tunisia.

Translation: Alexander Locascio

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