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Civil Society in North-South Relations. The Case of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. A view from the South

“Ministers noted the recommendations contained in the Final Declaration of the 2005 Civil Forum and encouraged reaching an agreement on mechanisms to strengthen its presence in the partnership.”

(Author’s emphasis)

1 Introduction

Over the last three decades, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have not only become important actors within their own national space, but have further become influential within the international arena. The “associational revolution”, to borrow Salamon’s terminology, has been accompanied and supported by the growth of transnational networks between International NGOs (INGOs), local NGOs and civil organizations. Networking has both enabled and become the means of a new mode of action in which territorially based actors and organizations engage in activities that transcend the boundaries of a specific/single locality. Closely linked to this is the fact that external influences increasingly bear on local, primarily Southern, governments through activation of the transnational ties of local NGOs, especially when advocating sensitive questions such as human rights. This has been labeled the “boomerang effect” by Sikkink and Keck. E.g. Jordanian NGOs have long attempted to lobby their government against honor crimes. However, the Jordanian government only began to take measures against this practice when strongly criticized by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in 1999.

Within the context of globalisation (economic and political restructuring, increasing global integration, converging and diffusing values), NGO-networks have been well received as new actors into the international relations arena. One view regards NGO-advocacy across borders as analogous to a social movement in form and effects. Therefore some have heralded the rise of Transnational Social Movement Organisations (TSMO). TSMOs are seen as significant actors in global politics, albeit mostly behind the scenes, which contribute to the development of the global civil society through controversial as well as co-operative relations. Undoubtedly the rise of trans-
national networks reveals the inadequacies of the state-centric analytic approach, which considers official state actors as the central agents in international relations, thus neglecting the impact of the INGOs and civil society. However, to what extent does the emergence of transnational networks signify a paradigmatic shift in international relations? Is it euphoria to talk about the emergence of a global or regional civil society as some activists and scholars do?

This article aims to review the impact of civil society on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership from a Southern perspective. The term “Southern actors” in this article refers mainly to actors within the Arab sphere, while “Northern actors” is to be read as referring to European ones. The EU policy towards the Mediterranean region is governed by the global and comprehensive Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) between the European Union and its twelve Mediterranean Partners (hence called the Barcelona Process, which overarches bilateral and multilateral EU relations) launched at the 1995 Barcelona Conference. Many co-operation based initiatives have evolved in the region since 1995, not least at the level of non-state actors such as the Euro-Med Civil Forums. This process represents the first attempt to introduce mechanisms based on a collectively developed international instrument on a regional scale, in order to ensure the democratic development in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Theoretically the multilateral approach of the Barcelona process places human rights at the centre of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. Article 2 of the Association Agreements, which governs the bilateral relations between the European Union and its Mediterranean partners, emphasises this priority setting.

The principal financial instrument of the European Union for the implementation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership is the MEDA program. The program offers technical and financial support of around one billion Euro a year to accompany the reform of economic and social structures in the Mediterranean partner countries (except Israel, Cyprus and Malta, which are excluded from MEDA funds because of their level of economic development). The low priority of civil society cooperation within the EMP is also indicated by the fact that some 86% of the resources allocated to MEDA I have been channelled bilaterally to Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and the Palestinian National Authority, to support economic transition and to strengthen the socio-economic balance. Only 12% of the re-

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6 This definition is used to highlight the problem of the power relations between these actors which influences the relationship and “partnership” between “Northern” and “Southern” NGOs in the EMP framework.

7 For a general outline of this analysis, Cf. Hanafi & Tabar, op. cit.

8 Israel takes a specific position in this respect: politically I conceive it as a northern power, geographically it is located in the South.

9 Article 2, to be read jointly with clauses of suspension or cessation of the Association Agreements. In theory, one party suspends or ends the execution following a serious violation of human rights. (http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/medass/agreemens.htm)

10 Examples of projects financed by MEDA are: structural adjustment programs in Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan; the Syrian-Europe Business Centre; the social fund for employment creation in Egypt; rehabilitation of the public administration in Lebanon; rural development in Morocco. Examples of loans signed by the EIB are: projects to improve waste water treatment and management of water resources in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Morocco; measures to reduce pollution; and modernization of traffic control systems at airports in Algeria; renovation of a train line in Tunisia; post-earthquake reconstruction of infrastructure and industry in Turkey (idem.).
sources have been used to fund regional activities.\textsuperscript{11} Regional and multilateral co-operation are used in all three areas of the Barcelona Declaration: the political and security dimension, the economic and financial dimension, and the social, cultural and human dimension, which include the programs of civil society cooperation. Fundable regional activities are open to all partners of the process.\textsuperscript{12}

Euro-Mediterranean Civil Forums have provided EuroMed civil society activists with an opportunity to co-operate and to network among themselves and enabled the organisation to make recommendations to the EMP governments. Civil Forums have been organized since 1995 starting with Barcelona: followed by Malta (1997), Forum Naples (1997), Stuttgart (1999), Marseille (2000), Brussels (2001), Valencia (2002), Chania (2003), Naples (2003) and Luxembourg (2005). The Barcelona process gave rise to different types of networks. Important examples are the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN), introduced below, and the Med-Media Jemstone Network (Jemstone). Jemstone is the biggest of Europe’s Med-Media projects. Founded in 1997, it was established to increase contacts and understanding between Europe and the Mediterranean Partner Countries (MPCs).\textsuperscript{13} The EMHRN, located in Copenhagen, is an example of a network that has developed within the human rights field. It was founded in 1997 and has since delivered studies and reports, thus disseminating current information on human rights conditions in the Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{14}

A closer look at the Barcelona declaration\textsuperscript{15} and the implementation of this agenda reveals many contradictions, and poses questions about the relevancy of NGOs in shaping this process, especially where human rights issues are concerned. This paper analyses North-South NGO-relationships, focusing on the critical issue of the European position towards Israel’s occupation policy and its violation of human rights. The focus lies on this issue not to stress the importance of the Palestinian question for Southern actors\textsuperscript{16}, but because it reveals certain contradictions between theory and practice in the international arena as this paper will argue in more detail. In addition, it highlights the disparity between civil society declarations and those of governments.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11}http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/euromed/meda.htm.
\item \textsuperscript{12}Idem. Examples of projects financed are the EuroMeSCo network of foreign policy institutes, the Femise network of economic research institutes, the SMAP environmental program, the Euromed Heritage program and the Euromed Youth program. (Idem.)
\item \textsuperscript{13}Jemstone has been Europe’s only media project operating in the Eastern Mediterranean organizing separate events ranging from workshops on TV set-design to courses for senior managers running training departments. Jemstone works with experienced journalists, media professionals and managers to improve skills and create supportive networks. Jemstone’s main activities come under several headings: general journalism skills; specialist journalism, including business and economics; master classes in specific craft-skills; Euro-Med Round Tables; media management, including audience and readership research; the development of in-house training capacities; and network maintenance and development. (Idem.)
\item \textsuperscript{14}http://www.euromedrights.net.
\item \textsuperscript{15}Whenever in this text, the Barcelona declaration or one of its items is mentioned, this refers to a text published by the European commission in 1995 or in http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/euromed/bd.htm.
\item \textsuperscript{16}In the author’s opinion there are many good reasons to criticise the fact that the Civil Forums sideline issues such as authoritarianism and minority rights in the Arab World.
\end{itemize}
Thus, the article will first address the issue of power disparities and asymmetries between Northern and Southern NGOs. I argue that the Civil Forums in the Barcelona process generally represent an agenda of civil society institutionalisation, largely determined by the European side. Northern NGOs influence joint projects strongly by selecting the participants and by setting the agenda of international conferences and meetings. Both strategies will be discussed in the following sub-chapters drawing on different examples from EMP events and other networks. In addition, this partnership has unintended effects such as the strengthening of inter-Arab co-operation even though one of the objectives of the EMP was to set up Arab-Israeli co-operation. This will be analysed drawing on the example of the Arab Human Rights Network. In a second step I will discuss the Civil Forum on Human Rights in Stuttgart (1999). The following questions will be raised: to what extent does the institutionalisation of civil society carry the source of its own empowerment and how far does it exploit them? Do the Northern actors dominate in this partnership, and if so, how are the Southern actors capable of transgressing this domination? This chapter will concentrate on selection processes and agenda setting at the Stuttgart meeting. The fourth chapter will summarize the results of the article and draw final conclusions.

The paper adopts an anthropological approach in order to not merely analyse the documents and declarations but in order to shed light on the different actors and their practices. The article was conceived in a long process of interviews with Palestinian and European actors involved in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) between 1998 and 2003. The interviews were held as part of the research project “Donors, International organisations and Local NGOs: Agenda setting and networking”, which involved interviews with thirty Palestinian and Arab NGO-actors as well as interviews with 63 donors and active participants of international and European organisations. Participant observation was also used as a research method when I was member of the Palestinian delegation to many Civil Forums as a former director of a Palestinian research centre.

2 Northern and Southern NGOs: An asymmetrical relationship
2.1 Participation in Networks: Who Selects?

I consider the mechanism of selection useful as a heuristic tool in order to explore power asymmetries: the question of which NGOs participate in a network can be quite banal or extremely contentious, depending on the context, the actors involved and the issue addressed. A structural feature of donor-initiated networks such as the EMHRN is that the Northern side invariably directs the selecting of NGOs to participate in the network. This structural feature has two important impacts, firstly it affects the network itself, since the type of NGOs selected will influence debates as well as coalition building around issues and advocacy initiatives. At the same time the selection process also has an impact on the local context. If a donor or an international organization (IO) selects the participants of a network, there is often a reliance on informal personal networks, which are very similar to clientelistic relationships between the donor of the network and the NGOs.

In some cases, the mechanism of selection can facilitate forms of exclusion. For instance, some have argued that NGOs with radical social agendas were excluded
from sessions at the Beijing conference on women by the NGO Facilitating Committee as part of an effort to stifle the advocacy efforts of women’s movements.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, the selection process becomes a part of the contested nature of the event, representing a tactic which illuminates a new side of the encounter between NGOs and states at UN conferences. However, the role of the Northern actor in selecting participants does not necessarily have to be negative. As pointed out with regard to the Bunian\textsuperscript{18} networking project of some Arab NGOs, the presence of the external actor is often advantageous in a climate of fragmented NGOs. A selection process determined from abroad can also help bring people from different political and ideological trends together at an event, as compared to a mechanism of selection that reinforces local divisions and narrow clique gatherings. In fact, the selection process can be based on a co-operative and consultative process that counterbalances the structural inequality between the Northern and Southern actors. For instance, the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation set up a democratic mechanism to guide the selection of Palestinian NGOs (PNGOs) wanting to participate in the environmental sector of the Marseille Civil Forum. Having set up the network, the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation left the selection of which NGOs should attend the Civil Forum up to the members of the network. It imposed only two conditions, that there be parity between the Gaza and the West Bank and that there be at least one woman. For the Marseille meeting, the Palestinian environmental network was unable to achieve a consensus about who would represent the network, so that the Foundation intervened and designated a participant for the meeting.

Other modalities in selection mechanisms are also possible. Concerning the World Bank events such as the Mediterranean Development Forum, the selection process included both the local actors and the decision makers abroad. Firstly, the World Bank chose an institution to be in charge of the selection. For the MDF-3 in Cairo, the Palestinian Center for Research and Studies in Nablus was responsible for designating 12 people to attend the conference. Then Hisham Awartani, the director of this centre, selected individuals from private, public, NGO, and academic sectors. At the same time, the World Bank chose other names. The heads of workshops in MDF-3, for example Saad Eddin Ibrahim, who was the head of the civil society workshop, could also issue invitations. Here, the selection appeared to be decentralised, with local, regional and international actors participating in the decision-making process.

There is, of course, another side to the selection process, namely, its impact on structural relations between donors and NGOs in local society, as well as on the organisational practices and relations within NGOs. The selection mechanism used in the Civil Forum of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership summits can be used to illustrate this. In the Stuttgart and Marseille meetings, the selection process proceeded as


\textsuperscript{18} The Bunian project focuses on capacity building and networking among Arab NGOs in Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. It started in 1997 for a two-year period, and now it is in its second phase. It is funded by the European Commission and the Friedrich-Naumann-Foundation and implemented by the latter (Jordan office) and a Lebanese organization (the International Management and Training Institute).
follows: The “Forum des Citoyens de la Méditerranée”19 came to Palestine and met with the PNGO Network, the most important of Palestinian NGOs and composed mainly of leftist organisations. At the end of the meeting the Forum decided upon a few participants, taking into account different “objective” criteria (sector, presentation, geographical location, gender equality, etc.). However, such a selection process is certainly influenced by the amount of knowledge the Northern NGO has about the Southern context at issue. In this regard, it is usually the larger NGOs, led by prominent and charismatic personalities, that are most known by INGOs and NNGOs. In the Palestinian context, contact is made primarily with the directors of these NGOs. The consequence of this is a type of selection process that reinforces unequal relations between NGOs as well as within them. For instance, one leader of a very prominent NGO attended 12 conferences abroad in an 8-month period while no one else from the NGO represented the organisation abroad. Moreover, few of the smaller NGOs attend networking forums at all.

Regarding the structural relationship between donors and NGOs, this example reflects a form of clientele relationship between PNGOs and the network organiser. The NGOs that attend the cocktail parties at the embassies or have strong relationships with donor agencies are the best known and have more of a chance to be selected. That is to say, the larger and more influential NGOs develop working contacts as well as personal relations with the INGOs and donors initiating the network, which implies access to sources of patronage. In this case, patronage represents entry into the network, the knowledge, resources and contacts it can provide.

Concerning the impact of selection processes on relations within NGOs, I asked the organizer of a network about the implications for democratic and accountable relations within NGOs in cases where the same charismatic NGO-leader (NGOs director) represents the organisation at conferences abroad. The organiser responded that they select the NGO rather than the individual representing the organisation. However, the organiser acknowledged that there is a leadership problem, but felt that it could be considered interference in the NGO if a name was selected for them to participate in the network.

On the one hand, donors should be able to impose transparency conditions, which imply that individuals other than the director participate in the network. On the other hand, this may be a difficult and sensitive issue. As one of the Friedrich-Naumann-Foundation officials declared:

“We tried with NGOs to increase transparency to see if the board is active, meets and how often and to prioritise gender sensitivity in the board, but there are limitations to this. We cannot know everything. We are working with what we see on paper. Sure we can see how many times the board met but how can we know the substance of the meetings? Also there is a lot of sensitivity about donor intervention in internal operations.”

19 French NGO created in 1993 to organise the EMP and fostering networking between Northern and Southern NGOs in the Mediterranean. It organised and animated different civil Forums in Stuttgart, Marseille et Brussels. (Interview with Monique Prin, Présidente du Forum des citoyens de la Méditerranée, March 2001.)
Finally, while I have highlighted the selection process controlled by the Northern actors as a central structural aspect of networks, there are also other factors which affect whether NGOs participate in networks outside their local context. Sometimes, the INGOs and the organisers of the international event promote the forum without providing grants to cover the costs of attending the event. In this case, it is only the wealthy and the larger NGOs that can afford to attend a conference in venues such as New York or Geneva. For example, the General Union of Palestinian Women complained about the high cost of attending the Beijing+5 conference in New York. Other NGOs also mentioned that they could not afford to partake in this sort of activity. This supports the claims of those arguing that transnational networking should not be over-estimated as it often reproduces class and social divisions. Also its accessibility should be inquired into and not be taken for granted. One PNGO leader discussed the barriers associated with networking outside Palestine:

“We participate in a network of Arab organisations for the disabled and have tried to make a twin-ship with a Norwegian organisation. There is not a lot going on at this level. We do not have funds to allocate to such activities. It would require a PR-person, which we do not have. We are badly in need of this, but we have a problem with the funding. We do not have the projects to sustain us into the future and it is difficult to start income-generating projects, therefore these sorts of activities are kept on the side.”

Sometimes, however, donors help overcome this barrier by providing funds for NGOs to attend international forums, such as with the Beijing+5. Still, one can ask which NGOs do donors fund to attend these conferences?

Finally, rivalries enter into the selection process, creating forms of exclusion. The fact that the impetus and the idea for the Barcelona process came from Europe, played a role in the effectiveness of the initiative, as it resolved both the problem of the polarisation of the Arab world and the question of leadership. The case of the Palestinian human rights organisation, Mandela Institute, is an example of this. Mandela was excluded from the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network. The official reason given was that Mandela is not considered a NGO in accordance with the platform designed by the network. However, there is a rivalry between some Palestinian leaders of the network and this NGO, and the former played a role in the latter’s exclusion. Therefore, this shows how the idea of the network must be critically analysed rather than idealised. As with NGOs, the network is also a location which reflects and reproduces within itself the inequalities and power struggles at large.

2.2 Setting the agenda: A case study from the Arab Human Rights Network

The Arab Human Rights Network is a network that was formed by NGOs in the Arab region prior to the Barcelona process. Interestingly, the Arab Human Rights Network had been inactive for a long time, and the meetings organised through the Barcelona process played an important part in reactivating this network. Thus, ironically what had been designed to promote an Arab-Israeli encounter became the opportunity for the advancement of an Arab agenda. Here, the agency of Southern NGOs was important and made it possible for pre-conceived agendas to be overturned and reworked in
practice. In this case, the activation of the Arab Human Rights Network, within the context of the Euro-Med initiatives, enabled the Arab side to become a cohesive force within the network and to redirect its focus. The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network also played a part in the activation of the Arab network by funding it. I take the Rabat Conference on the Rights of Palestinian Refugees as an example.

The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), in co-operation with the Moroccan Organisation for Human Rights and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, with the participation of experts and representatives of Arab and international human rights organisations, organised an “International Conference on the Future of the Palestinian Refugees under the Current Political Settlement/the Third International Conference of the Human Rights Movement in the Arab World” from February 10-12, 2001, in Rabat, Morocco. The debate was very important in the context of the second Intifada in which Palestinian and Arab human rights organisations were polarised. Two main positions were observed: one that the Palestinian human rights discourse should be closely compatible with the international discourse; the other that human rights issues cannot be disconnected from the deeply political context of the occupation, in which case their role is to expose and demystify the discourse and practices of the international human rights organisations.

Actors from the South have been significant in this respect and developed a capacity to divert and even change the stakes that had been pre-designed by the European governments. While the networking initiatives had developed out of the Euro-Mediterranean desire to foster a relationship between the Arab and Israeli NGOs, the Arab actors who featured heavily in this network used it to reinforce the inter-Arab relationship. The conference in Rabat illustrates such practice, especially with an agenda which decidedly reflects the political concerns of the Arab partner: the question of “Palestinian Refugees Future”. Out of this conference a strong statement emerged supporting the rights of the Palestinian refugees, reflecting the quasi cohesiveness of the Arab actors within the network.

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20 This reflects similar rifts I observed at the UN Commission on Human Rights meeting held in Geneva during October 2000 before the beginning of the second Intifada. Palestinian human rights groups mobilised and participated in the meeting. Two trends were observed among the Palestinian participants: some wanted a soft declaration, to gain European support during the vote, while others wanted a strong statement declaring Israel a perpetuator of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The second group influenced the final decision.

21 I will not enter here in the deep analysis of how the NGOs agenda is set up and which role the donors, international organizations and recipient NGOs play. For the sake of this article I would say that European governments still strongly influence the agenda of NGOs. One can refer to my book with Linda Tabar. Op. Cit. Chapter 4. This publication is aware not only of the agenda setting but also the local elite formation. An examination of the sites where the “global” and the “local” intersect and intertwine is inseparable from an analysis of the effects of new transnational relations, specifically the aid system, and their impact on local social formations. This is to say that local actors and social structures do not remain static, but are transformed as they are drawn into new transnational relations and then seek to negotiate their place within the aid system and their relations with donors and international NGOs.

3 The Euro-Med Civil Forum on Human Rights at Stuttgart

As part of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Agreement, summits are regularly held to enable partner governments to “monitor the application of the Declaration and define actions enabling the objectives of the partnership to be achieved”.23 As mentioned before, summits have previously been held in European cities almost every year. Since Barcelona 1995, civil society gatherings related to the summits have been organised. They represent an opportunity for civil society representatives to meet and present their recommendations to the governments of the region.

Here, I will analyse the 1999 meeting in Stuttgart, in particular the human rights Civil Forum, which I monitored closely. The official Conference of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in Stuttgart in April 1999 was accompanied by a Civil Forum to discuss various problems concerning the Mediterranean region. The Civil Forum covered the following conferences on human rights and citizenship in the Mediterranean, unions, and journalism. The conference on Human Rights and Citizenship in the Mediterranean was organised by the Friedrich Ebert-Foundation in cooperation with the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network and the Forum des Citoyens de la Méditerranée. This was the first conference where thematic forums rather than a single Civil Forum were set up. In addition, an official encounter was organised for the first time between government representatives of the partner countries and the representatives of organisations present in Stuttgart.

3.1 Inside the Network

Reviewing the network around the Human Rights Civil Forum, it is clear that it created an opportunity for NGO action and advocacy work, especially since an encounter with the state actors of the area was organised. At the same time specific structural issues are associated with this sort of networking, in particular, the role of the conference’s organiser in mediating the outcome of the network’s activities, both in terms of selecting the participants of the network and in monitoring the content of the network’s final statement. In general however, this type of networking, which brings together actors from the North and the South, is conceived in a different manner to other forms of North-South exchange. For some of the participants, this network is not marked by the hegemony of the North as much as are other encounters. Ilan Halevi, who participated as part of the Palestinian delegation (as Vice-President of the Forum des Citoyens de la Méditerranée), found the network to be an improvement over his experiences in the Human Rights Committee of the International Socialists. This latter committee, which is controlled by Northern countries, “tends to behave as if giving lessons to the Southern countries” as he puts it.

The participants of the Stuttgart Civil Forum on human rights24 discussed the issue of Israeli violations of the Geneva Conventions in the Palestinian Territories and the preparatory measures that had been taken to convene the Conference of the High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention. A position paper launching the International Campaign for the Implementation of the Fourth Geneva Convention was

23 Cf. Barcelona Declaration.
24 55 Arab and European human rights organizations attended the meeting.
signed by fifty-one Arab and International organisations including B’tselem, an Israeli human rights organisation. These organisations agreed to participate in the campaign by raising awareness of the issue in the countries where they operate and by lobbying their governments to ensure that the conference would convene on the specified date and under the agenda defined by the UN General Assembly. In this regard, the forum opened up a new advocacy initiative and facilitated co-operation and a transnational campaign. The advantage of this type of network for Southern NGOs and NGO actors in general is clear. Yet more consideration needs to be paid to the structural aspects of this type of networking and the type of obstacles which are inevitably associated with advocacy initiated by NGOs inside the network. The conference on Human Rights was interesting and successful in generating debate and connecting different human rights organisations in the region. Firstly because of the well established Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network as well as because of the French organising Forum des Citoyens de la Méditerranée, both of which had prepared the conference and had selected the participants.

As mentioned above, one has to admit that the participants were selected according to the state of knowledge of the network’s leader and the personnel contacts of network members. This means that those invited belonged to the circles of these members; thus, a French organiser led to the over-representation of Franco-North African associations at the expense of Italy and Spain, which were marginalised. England was, in any event, absent because of its marginal interest in the Mediterranean area. In line with the aim of integrating Israel into the region, its civil society was represented by four human rights associations and an intellectual. Yet, these four associations were known for their opposition to the violation of human rights in the Occupied Territories. Therefore, the selection of these Israeli organisations does not reflect a kind of “national representation” but the choice of the Euro-Mediterranean Network.

Sometimes, selection does not pass without pressure. In the Tunisian case there was pressure exerted on the Friedrich Ebert-Foundation to include three GNGOs (Governmental Non-Governmental Organisations) representatives. These official organisations were extremely incommodious during the meeting, as they tried to hinder the other Tunisian associations based in Europe from discussing human rights violations in Tunisia. Some of the organisations included solidarity groups such as Collectif Palestine, which is a federation representing an important number of the French organisations working in Palestine. Isabel Avron, the former president of Collectif Palestine, played a major role in pushing the recommendations to taking concrete measures against the colonial practices of Israel, such as freezing the Association agreement between Europe and Israel. Amnesty International and others are really international organisations and not solidarity groups. It was clear that Amnesty did not want to take a “radical” position on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Nevertheless, the selection process undertaken by the network enabled fertile discussion during the meeting, since common ground was found before the conference. This reinforces and supports effective discussion of the final statement and recommendations directed toward the official meeting.

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26 Interview with one of the FES officials present in this meeting.
3.2 Discussion of the final statement

Concerning the Palestinian issue, the final statement developed by the forum included a strong section concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict:

“It must be realised today that neither the peace process nor the respect of human rights have progressed in the region. In fact, quite the opposite is true. The peace process in the Middle East, the region at the centre of this discussion, has been ruined by the policies of the current Israeli government which has placed the region under dangerous pressure and violates the agreements signed since Oslo for the interim period, which will end in a few days. We see that the dead end in the Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Palestinian peace process is slowing down the entire process of the Barcelona partnership. In this respect, the conference participants call upon the European Union:

− to apply pressure on Israel to implement the agreements made since Oslo with the Palestinians.
− to intervene through all means to ensure that Israel retreats from the occupied Palestinian territories, Golan and South Lebanon, the immediate cessation of colonisation, particularly in Jerusalem. The status of this city must be the subject of negotiation.
− to commit itself to the recognition of the Palestinian state once it has been proclaimed and to help this state establish its independence as soon as possible and to help it exercise its full sovereignty.”

Moreover, the meeting adopted a conclusion that asked the European Commission to call on the European countries, in accordance with the second paragraph of the partnership agreement, to freeze the European-Israeli partnership due to Israel’s ongoing violations of Palestinian human rights. In addition, a working group was formed to follow up on Palestinian human rights conditions. Overall, the final statement that was produced was interesting and advocacy oriented, although the first draft had been stronger since it requested the European Union to freeze the Association agreement between the European Union and Israel until Israel comply with the Wye River Accord and halt all settlements. However, this proposition was rejected by the representative from Amnesty International and by the Israeli organisations.

While the role of the Israeli organisations in preventing an endorsement of the more aggressive statement is clear, the organisers of the conference, too, intervened to prevent the first draft from being finalised. The Friedrich Ebert-Foundation representative, who until the preparation of the first draft had acted as an observer, interjected for the first time stating that as a donor he could not accept such a statement. Although the debates at the meeting reflected a desire by most speakers to freeze the Association agreement with Israel, and hence in favour of the first draft, the final pronouncement was reduced to a statement requesting pressure against Israel. It is worth noting that these debates were held before and during the final session in which the overwhelming majority of European, as well as southern NGOs, were in favour the first draft. This shows that the

Southern NGOs have a glass-ceiling in their capacity to change policies in an international or regional conference. The event also illustrates the need to critically analyse the role of the organisers and consider their role as mediators who can affect the final outcome of the action produced through the network.

The institutionalisation process of the civil society delegations make these organisations adopt a low profile and be less radical in order to allow for more influence at official meetings. A growing number of key actors are dissatisfied with the methods of organising the civil forums and their lack of political impact on decision-makers and civil society. Therefore, past and present organisers of the civil forums met during and after the Valencia Civil Forum in 2002 to discuss how to strengthen the civil forum format. Further meetings took place in November, 2002, and January/February 2003, in Brussels. In April 1, 2005 in Luxembourg, the non-governmental Euro-Med Platform at the recent civil forum was created. The adoption of a Charter as well as the election of a representative Board have helped to structure the activities of an independent civil society to provide a better interface with the official activities of the partnership in the future.

3.3 NGOs and Governments

Despite this, the importance of the Civil Forum remains obvious, especially since the position adopted by the NGOs was much clearer than that of the official meeting of the foreign ministers held in the same time in Stuttgart. This statement regarding the peace process was much weaker:

“Many Ministers welcomed the recent declaration of the Berlin European Council. Ministers encouraged the European Union to continue increasing its role in support of the Middle East Peace Process.”

As the term “many” indicates, this statement did not reflect a consensus among the ministers.

The impact of these civil forums on the formal ministerial meetings is still weak. E.g. the European Union and the European governments did not send a single official to the final session of the Euro-Mediterranean Forum in Brussels (2001) to take note of the Civil Forum recommendations. Some voices emerged from the South during the Stuttgart and Marseille meeting, such as Sa’eda Kilani’s from Jordan, who wondered if the Barcelona Declaration was anything more than ink on paper. She argued that during the period of 1995–1999, violations of basic principles of freedom of expression increased and restrictions on the press, media and freedom of thought more than doubled in many countries in the Euro-Mediterranean area during these years, while the European partners failed to take action or move to condemn these violations. Thus, the impact on governments’ decision-making is still limited. The Euro-Mediterranean forum was more and more institutionalised and sometimes manipulated by the states. It is not anecdotal to note that the first two association agreements signed after the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership were with the states which are among the most

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problematic: one was with the most authoritarian of all, Tunisia, and the second with Is-
rael, a country with occupation practices. This illustrates how much the official Euro-
pean thinking is still guided by fascination with the idea of an enlightened despotism,
the laissez faire attitude of a colonial state, and by the desire to dominate the EMP.

While one speaker at the first conference in Barcelona called on civil society to
seize the opportunity and activate itself, ten years later it seems social actors are still
marginalized in consequential areas of decision-making such as human rights, migra-
tion and the peace process. This is not only true on the official level, media coverage
is also often weak. Thus, the national French media did not even cover the Marseille
Civil Forum; in fact it received the attention of only a few local newspapers. In con-
trast to this, the Ministerial meeting of the Euro-Mediterranean states was extensively
reported on and covered by French TV and radio. This demonstrates that the media
continue to strongly focus on the classical diplomatic actor: the state. The same can be
said about Europe in general: a Finnish journalist who attended the same conference
the next year at Marseille was not able to convince Finnish newspapers to publish an
article that she wrote about this event. One reason for this is a general trend in the
media of privileging official and state actors over NGOs, which are taken to be less
important.

At the latest Euro-Mediterranean conference in Luxembourg (1–3 April 2005 for
the Civil Forum and 31 May 2005 for the official meeting) the gap between the civil so-
ciety declaration and the official one narrowed, especially concerning the Palestinian-
Israeli conflict and migration policies. For the first time, the final official declaration
of the Euro-Mediterranean conference in Luxembourg mentioned the recommendation of
the Civil Forum, say that it had been “noted” (but meaning “noticed” rather than
“noted”):

“Ministers noted the recommendations contained in the Final Declaration of the
2005 Civil Forum and encouraged reaching an agreement on mechanisms to
strengthen its presence in the partnership.”

This progress, while positive perhaps, does not contradict the general criticism of the
power-asymmetries between Northern and Southern NGOs and of the relevance and
impact of NGO action on governmental policies that I have presented in this paper.

4 Conclusion: déjà vu?

To conclude, I will link some of the results presented here to some general international
trends concerning the active role of transnational networks in international relations and
I will use the UN Conference against Racism in Durban (2000) to understand this dy-
namic. Some important questions surround the efficacy of these Civil Forums as a type
of network that is linked to state-sponsored agreements. While the Civil Forums are cer-
tainly interesting, the mechanism used for choosing participants invariably results in the
same people almost always attending these civil society festivals and the same discus-
sions being repeated without making progress. This feeling of déjà-vu, as Annette

Jünemann calls it,\(^\text{30}\) that arose when encountering the same actors in both Stuttgart and Marseille, has been expressed by different observers. In addition, it is important to remember that the NGOs that participate in the Euro-Med Civil Forums only represent a small proportion of the “civil society” organisations: in fact just 85 organisations represent all of the Euro-Mediterranean countries.\(^\text{31}\) The 85 organisations are also signatories to the new Euromed Non-Governmental Platform, which held its Founding Assembly on April 1\(^\text{st}\) 2005 in Luxembourg.\(^\text{32}\) Many of these organisations do not necessarily have relations with grassroots groups, and Islamic NGOs are excluded. Annette Jünemann strongly argues that

> “The EU has failed to recognise that its concept of civil society must address the issue of Islamic organisations if it is to be fully representative and inclusive.”\(^\text{33}\)

One could raise the objection that the advantage of NGO networking lies in its ability to mobilise people in the street, for example, as happened in Seattle, this being preferable to strategy-meetings for advocacy initiatives held in the prestigious halls of 5-star hotels. In Marseille, a meeting and demonstration were held at the time of the Civil Forum meeting. From the point of view of these alternative organisers, e.g. ATTAC, the NGOs of the Barcelona process are instrumentalised by governments and are not even able to play their role as watchdogs.

Comparing regional networking with other levels of networking (like UN conferences), I argue that its dynamic is more relevant than that of the international level. Here, the capacity of the Southern actors to negotiate agenda-setting and alliance building with Northern NGOs and even states in order to participate in decision making is more effective and important. This finding is supported by the results of a study that Linda Tabar and I conducted concerning the participation of Arab and Palestinian NGOs in UN conferences. For instance, Palestinian and Arab Women’s organizations did not play any significant role in the agenda setting process in the Beijing Conference in 1995 and in Beijing+5 in New York in 2000.\(^\text{34}\) Still, the manner in which the majority of the Palestinian and the Arab organisations shaped the agenda during the Civil Forums in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict somewhat negligently overlooked the need to deal with important issues like authoritarianism and ultra-liberalism in certain Arab regimes, or the rights of ethnic minorities in the Arab World (e.g. Kurds and


\(^\text{31}\) Source: http://www.euromedforum.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=60.

\(^\text{32}\) This platform presents its history as follows: “In the margins of the Civil Forum in Valencia, Euromed civil society networks and actors engaged in a reflection on their participation in the Civil Forum and more generally on the role of civil society in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Following several meetings between these groups, the EuroMed Non-Governmental Platform was established in February 2003 as an inclusive and open-ended group of active civil society networks and organizations ...” Cf. http://www.euromedforum.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=45


\(^\text{34}\) Cf. Hanafi & Tabar, op. cit. Chapters 6 and 7.
Berbers). But this corresponds also to the EU conception of the process of democratisation in the Arab World, as this process should be gradual and under the strict control of ruling elites.35

Although at first North-South networking was celebrated as a new era in international politics, this perception started changing towards the end of the 20th century. Both the “radical” self-positioning of the majority of NGOs present at the UN Conference against Racism in Durban (2000) and the authoritative policies of Western governments after 9/11 have created a climate of suspicion vis-à-vis certain types of NGOs, especially those dealing with human rights and democratisation issues or those close to anti-colonial or Islamist movements. Moreover, many pro-Israeli associations in the USA point their fingers at the Ford Foundation for its funding of Palestinian and Arab delegations to the Durban conference.36 Many articles and editorials in American newspapers suggest that Western governments ought to have more control of the Northern and Southern NGO activities, and attempt to link 9/11 and the activities of Islamist NGOs. After September 11th, the US administration pushed for tighter control of certain NGOs and international organisations as they were perceived to have (or to be encouraging) “some terrorist elements” in them. In Europe the “struggle against terrorism” is an increasingly important issue on the agenda of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership.37 This is also reinforcing the desire for tighter state control over certain NGOs because Islamist NGOs especially are thought to be threatening and dangerous.

This marginalization of radical NGOs was also reinforced by a series of strongly worded criticisms of the position of the NGOs declaration at the World Conference Against Racism in Durban (South Africa) in August 2001 made by state actors and certain international organizations. This declaration was considered a turning point in the history of the global human rights movement – not because of the victory of one of the longest-suffering victims of colonialism, the Palestinians, nor because reparations for slavery were introduced on the international agenda, but because the role of the Southern states at this world event eclipsed the role of the Northern and international NGOs.38 The shift, indeed, is not a shift from the classic diplomatic actors to NGO actors, but towards actors who are victims themselves.

Finally, I have argued that one should be careful about accepting verbatim the euphoric visions of the institutionalisation of the role of the European and Southern NGOs within the EMP being a process which leads these organizations to share the decision making in international relations. In spite of the importance of these processes, there are still many struggles ahead in order to reach this aim.

36 Interview with one of the program officers in Ford Foundation, June 2005.