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Civil Society, language and the authoritarian context: The case of Saudi Arabia

I. Introduction

The dominant theories on the role of civil society in the processes of change in the Arab world have a strong tendency to underemphasize, if not ignore, the role and capacity of civil society in societal and political changes. Much attention has been given in the academic literature to the power of the state to regulate, direct and manipulate different social and political actors, including civil society. In these analyses the state incorporates and reshapes civil society to 'upgrade' its authoritarian role or to reinforce the status quo.[1] In this literature, the emphasis on the state's power to create, control and incorporate civil society organizations has underestimated the significance of civil society organizations in an authoritarian context. By giving attention to the language of civil society, the discourses that it uses and the expectations that it has within the dynamic matrixes of power relations, this article projects a more dynamic image of civil society than most of the existing literature. Without ignoring the state's role in regulating and subjugating societal forces, this article goes beyond the state-centric approach of analysing the relationship between the state and civil society. Instead, it looks mainly at the dynamics within civil society itself and its political and semi-political roles. Analytically, the article distinguishes three types of civil society: non-political; semi-political; and political forms of civil society. This division is based on the topics and questions that concern each branch, the activities that they are practising and the ideas that they are producing.

II. Civil Society: Definition and Approach

Civil society is a Western concept that is strongly related to liberal ideas and practices of ruling. It is part of a specific Western articulation of the relationship between state and society. But this Western origin does not prohibit the concept from emigrating beyond its place of origin into new contexts. The ongoing globalization of the concept spreads civil society's ideas, language and institutions to different parts of the world.[2] But in the literature on civil society,[3] there is still a lot of definitional dispute, conceptual confusion and operational vagueness about the concept.[4]

This article uses a minimalist definition of civil society that sees civil society as the zone of voluntary associational life beyond family ties but separate from the state. This definition includes a wide variety of associations, such as advocacy NGOs, service-oriented NGOs, labour unions, professional associations, ethnic associations, student groups, cultural organizations ('from choral societies to bird-watching clubs'), sporting clubs and informal community groups (including coffeehouses).[5] In other words, civil society refers to uncoerced associational life that is distinct

1 'Upgrading authoritarianism' is one of the dominant theories in studying Middle Eastern political systems, including Saudi Arabia. It emphasizes the mechanisms of re-establishing, enduring and reproducing authoritarianism, even through talking democratic language, or even implementing some 'democratic reforms' when needed. Of course, this approach generates important insights into how modern authoritarian states work, how the authorities function and how the context is regulated, but it leaves one very important point behind: it does not see the limits of the 'upgrading' processes and overemphasizes a rigidly regulated political and intellectual in which the political subjects, including agents of civil society, in the Middle East find themselves. This approach also does not look at how new discourses function and how new ideas and agencies emerge. See Steven Heydemann, Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World, The Saban Center at The Brookings Institution, No. 13 (October 2007). For recent insights of the same approach, see Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience: Regime Responses to the 'Arab Awakening', *Globalization*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (2011), pp. 647–653. See also Thomas Carothers, The End of the Transition Paradigm, *Journal of Democracy*, January 2002, pp. 5–21; Amy Hawthorne, Middle Eastern Democracy: Is Civil Society the Answer?, *Carnegie Paper* No. 44 (March 2004); and Sean L. Yom, Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (December 2005).

2 John Keane, Global Civil Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

3 Thomas Carothers, Civil Society, Think Again, *Foreign Policy* (winter 1999), pp. 18–29. Also see Jeremy Jones, Negotiating Change: The New Politics of the Middle East (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007). Different typologies of civil society exist. See, for instance, Asef Bayat's 'six types of activism', which are expressed in urban mass protests, trade unions, community activism, social Islamism, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and quiet encroachment, in 'Activism and Social Development in the Middle East', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (February 2002), pp. 1–28. Also see Oliver Roy, The Predicament of "Civil Society" in Central Asia and the "Greater Middle East", *International Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 5 (October 2005), pp. 1001–1012; Yom, Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World; and Francesco Cavatorta and Vincent Durac, Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: The Dynamics of Activism (London: Routledge, 2010).

4 Finn V. Heinrich, CIVICUS: Global Survey of the State of Civil Society (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2007).

5 Hivos, Knowledge Programme: Civil Society in Closed Societies, Programme Plan 2008–2010 (2010), unpublished document.

from the family and state institutions. Furthermore, non-organizational actors and online activists are included as parts of civil society and civic activism. In the case of Saudi Arabia, online activism or digital civil society deserves special attention, because it is one of the few forms of activism that is not directly controlled by the state and that operates in a free – although not unlimited – cyberspace.

Another important point to be raised here is the normative dimension of civil society. It is mostly believed that civil society as such is good. It is assumed that the development of civil society will automatically lead to transparency and accountability, and will create a stable, democratic society, thus empowering citizens. According to this vision, civil society is another name for social and cultural progress, for doing the good and the right things.[6]

Actually, this positive and normative approach to civil society has been criticized in light of more than two decades of the promotion of civil society worldwide. It assumes that few of the high expectations have materialized.[7] According to these critics, "civil society *can* be a source of democratic change but it is not *inherently* one."[8] The reason, according to them, is simple:

> *"The majority of civil-society organizations and movements support the status quo, are single-issue oriented organizations with small constituencies. Moreover, they are largely dependent on foreign funding, advocating conservative reforms, and in most cases are apolitical".*[9]

While this critique of the normative approach to civil society is accepted, I have doubts about the hasty conclusion that civil society is usually apolitical and does not challenge the status quo. This type of argumentation is hampered by a narrow conception of politics that reduces politics to the struggle between the state and society. More fundamentally, it ignores the political role of language in the process of change and its impact as an essential part of public speech, which is directly related to political life.[10] Even in a country like Saudi Arabia, the majority of civil society organizations speak the language of rights, ranging from the discourse of abstract human rights to the more concrete rights of children, women, orphans and prisoners, etc. They also speak the language of respect, pluralism and diversity. Most literature on civil society and authoritarianism does not take this linguistic dimension into account. It is true that civil society in the Arab world, especially in Saudi Arabia, is not *the* liberating force, but ignoring this dimension of language, discourse and ideas, and disregarding its long-term potential to instigate change, is also a mistake.[11]

Language is not only a neutral means of communication but it is also a tool to construct and reconstruct social reality–that is, language has a "performative" power.[12] Language generates agencies that can turn into a social force for change.[13] Political life has a strong linguistic nature and the political functions and content of language cannot be understood adequately by theories that regard language merely as a vehicle of communication, representation and the exchange of information. A civil society that speaks the language of human rights and pluralism in an authoritar-

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6 Hivos, Knowledge Programme: Civil Society in Closed Societies.

7 For two recent collections on the resilience phenomenon, see Oliver Schlumberger (ed.), Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); and Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michele Penner Angrist (eds), Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005). On the specific limitations of 'the politics of democratization' through civil-society promotion, see Nicola Pratt, Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007). Another critical survey is given by Mervat Rishmawi and Tim Morris, Overview of Civil Society in the Arab World, *Intrac: Praxis Paper* No. 20 (October 2007); and several contributions to Sarah ben Néfissa *et al.* (eds), NGOs and Governance in the Arab World (Cairo and New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2005).

8 Hivos, Knowledge Programme: Civil Society in Closed Societies, p. 6.

9 Hivos, Knowledge Programme: Civil Society in Closed Societies, p. 6.

10 Hanna Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

11 The power of the language of rights was obvious in the Arab revolts of recent months. Suddenly we have been witnessing a mass of angry people from Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria and Bahrain, etc., speaking a proto-liberal language of individual and collective rights and demanding different forms of freedom. This language was created during the last two decades and different agencies have participated in the processes of its creation, including segments of civil society, intellectuals, some state institutions, and transnational satellite television.

12 The relationship between language, thinking and acting has been an important theme in modern literature. In his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell writes about Newspeak as a very limited language with very few words as a means of controlling and disciplining society in an authoritarian system. The government in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* aims to cut back the Newspeak vocabulary. Through introducing Newspeak, the government wishes to alter the public's way of thinking. Newspeak narrows the range of thought and shortens people's memories.

13 Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex' (London: Routledge, 1993).

ian context cannot be reduced to another instrument of control on the part of the authoritarian regime. On the contrary, it can turn into a force that challenges the authoritarian regime and leads to serious contestation. As Bourdieu argues, modes of domination and exclusion are enacted and sustained through linguistic exchanges and, as such, language becomes a force that challenges domination and exclusion.[14] For the purpose here, I will argue that the discourses that circulate and the language that different groups use are important aspects of societal and political life. This new condition politicizes citizens, albeit slowly. It gradually opens up new spaces outside the institution of the state and makes political contestation more likely in the long run. This does not mean that a new popular movement will emerge immediately, but it does mean that the emergence of different societal stories in the long run can work as a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges the official story and the legitimacy of the state.

III. Types of Civil Society

In most of the academic literature, civil society is understood as a sphere that is distinct from, yet has a particular relationship with the state. This relationship to the state is diverse and cannot be reduced to either oppositional or independent. New approaches to conceptualizing civil society have analysed different forms of relationships between civil society and the state. Two theorists distinguish six perspectives on this relationship between civil society and the state.[15]

Civil society *apart from* the state. In thinking about civil society as separate from the state, three features stand out: the voluntary nature of participation; the plural quality of activities, and the negative character of civil society's boundaries. The last feature means understanding civil society as something that is separate from the state – establishing a boundary primarily to keep the state out.

Civil society *against* the state. In this role, civil society is not simply a sphere that is separate from the state; it is, or can be seen as, an agent that interacts with, and indeed opposes, the state.

Civil society *in support of* the state. The relationship between civil society and the state to emerge from this view is complex and often reflects a love/hate dynamic. On the one hand, civil society underpins and supports the state. On the other hand, it represents a certain amount of opposition towards the state.

Civil society *in dialogue with* the state. In this case civil society is in a creative and critical dialogue with the state. This means that the state has a certain degree of accountability and generally gives an account of its actions in answer to the multiple and plural voices that are raised in civil society.

Civil society *in partnership with* the state. In this case, the state is in need of civil society and its specific functions. The state cannot cope, as national and even regional policies are determined by local and international developments. The state cannot deliver goods or services without the help and mediation of non-state-sector associations. To answer these new challenges, the state thinks about the system of multi-level governance, subsidiarity and new public management. In this situation, civil society becomes a partner of the state.

Civil society *beyond* the state. This refers to a global transnational civil society and civil organizations that cross state boundaries.

These six perspectives on society – state relations "are not mutually exclusive, nor do they necessarily compete with each other. As will become clear, it is possible to subscribe to a number of these views at the same time".[16] These different perspectives indicate that civil society can organize itself in different ways, not only in opposition to or independent from the state. In the case of Saudi Arabia, this point is crucial, because a large section of Saudi civil society cannot and does not organize itself against or independent from the state. It is controlled by the state and is forced to be in support of, or in partnership with, or in the best case in dialogue with the state. The Saudi state forces a corporatist character on the organizations of civil society and tries not only to incorporate them into its structures but also to use them to consolidate its political power. The state does not hesitate to use any method, including violence, to prevent the emergence of independent civil society organizations if they constitute a threat.

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[14] Pierre Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990). See also Pierre Bourdieu, The Economy of Linguistic Exchanges, *Social Science Information*, Vol. 16, No. 6. (1997), pp. 645–668.

[15] Chambers and Kopstein, Civil Society and the State, chapter 20.

[16] Chambers and Kopstein, Civil Society and the State, chapter 20.

As already mentioned, three types of civil society in Saudi Arabia are distinguished here: non-political; semi-political; and political. Generally speaking, the non-political and semi-political organizations fall within categories three to five mentioned above: they *support* the state; form a *partnership* with it; and are in continuous *dialogue* with its agencies. The political form of civil society, however, falls within the first and second categories, and is forced to work *separately* from the state and in some cases even in *opposition* to it. Most political civil society organizations are not licensed and work, according to the Saudi law, illegally. These organizations are exclusively human rights organizations.

IV. The Landscape of Civil Society in Saudi Arabia

As mentioned above, the landscape of civil society in Saudi Arabia contains three forms of civil society: non-political; semi-political; and political organizations. One common thread among all is the language of rights. Obviously, one speaks this language louder and more adamantly than the other.

IV.1 Non-political Organizations

The non-political organizations of civil society in Saudi Arabia cover a wide range of organizations. The most important of those associations are the following.

IV.1.1 Charitable organizations

These form the largest part of Saudi civil society and can be found in almost every Saudi city and village. Charitable work is basically seen as one of the foundations of Islam. Traditionally, the imam is trusted to receive the alms that are collected to be distributed to the poor. Commonality and solidarity, as part of the culture of the people, are the other origins of charity work. Charity is an important support to the state in overcoming its shortcomings to deliver the basic needs to different segments of the Saudi population, which is set to double within 20–30 years.[17]

Charitable work has grown to such an extent that it contributes to the well-being of society as a whole. As a specialist in civil society in Saudi Arabia, Caroline Montagu states that charitable organizations have become "service-providers of housing, health, education, social and housing benefits, and disability provisions. So too have some of the foundations been set up by particular companies or individuals, such as Al-Rajhi Banking and the Prince Walid bin Talal or Abdul Latif Jameel Foundations. The umbrella charities, such as Al-Birr, have expanded".[18]

Despite the non-political character of most of these charity organizations, the sector provides a social space for political competition between different agents. Hence, "royal donations have traditionally been used as a means of consolidating power by assuring the loyalty of subjects".[19] The princes also compete for the title of the most generous or the most committed to the kingdom's development.

IV.1.2 Business community, well-being work and empowerment

Cooperation between big businesses and civil society organizations is another form of civil engagement in Saudi Arabia. This kind of cooperation is called 'Corporate Social Responsibility': the companies assist groups or communities in society who need financial support. The assistance aims at creating possibilities for development and empowerment of the community. The cooperation between Nasma Holding Co. Ltd. and the al-Birr association for assisting orphan children in Jeddah is an example of this kind of civil engagement and work. The general manager of human recourses at Nasma explained the difference between their work and the work of a formal charity organization as follows:

> *"The charity organizations make people passive and dependent, but we try to empower them. Our philosophy is: don't give someone a fish but teach them how to fish".*[20]

Al-Birr in Jeddah is responsible for the well-being of 3,000 orphan children. The orphan children at Al-Birr receive support from the elementary school level until the end of their education, sometimes even until they obtain their Ph.D. from Saudi universities or abroad. Even after their studies they get the advice and assistance that are needed to find a job.

[17] Salman Baqer Al-Najar, *Al-Dimuqratiya Al-'Siya Fi Al-Khalij Al-Arabi* ['The Inaccessible Democracy in the Arabian Gulf'] (Beirut: *Dar al-Saqi*, 2008).

[18] For comprehensive information on different charity associations in Saudi Arabia, see Montagu, Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia, pp. 67–83.

[19] Club de Madrid, Strengthening Dialogue and Democratic Discourse through Freedom (Madrid: Club de Madrid, 2009), p. 144.

[20] Interview by the author with the manager of Nasma in Jeddah, June 2010.

This includes writing application letters, drawing up a CV, English-language training and computer courses. According to the general manager of human resources at Nasma, this form of corporate social responsibility is a growing trend in Saudi Arabia.

IV.1.3. Chambers of Commerce

Chambers of Commerce in Saudi Arabia are organizations for the private sector's business community. The Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry is the umbrella organization for all of Saudi Arabia's local chambers. This organization is influential and helps with mediation between Saudi companies and the state. The members of the chambers are businessmen and women who come together to defend their individual and collective interests, to act as a pressure group and to coordinate their efforts. The chambers are one of the kingdom's few organizations that are financially independent. Their activities are financed by members' subscriptions and they hold elections for their committees. The chambers provide information to the government and lobby for their members' plans and projects. All ministries in the kingdom and the *Majlis al-Shura* consult the central Council of Saudi Chambers on any proposed business legislation.

Although these chambers concentrate more on lobbying than acting as political pressure groups, their activities go beyond mere economic activity. For instance, they participate in social development, assisting local civic organizations to organize themselves, and train local people in different skills to participate in the labour market. They are also well connected with state institutions and sometimes even with the king himself. In this regard, Montagu writes "through an order from King Abdullah, then Crown Prince, every ministry has to involve the private sector and therefore consult the Council, including on all government tenders. It acts as a pressure group, appealing finally to the King as a last resort for resolving disputes".[21]

Particularly striking is the active participation of women in the chamber in Jeddah, who form a group of intelligent and assertive women who fight for their rights in the business industry. The Alsayedah Khadijah bint Khwailed Businesswomen's Center (AKBK) is an illustration of this kind of engagement in the business world in Saudi Arabia. AKBK promotes the empowerment of women so that they will become active partners in the national development. In recent years, especially since the reign of King Abdullah, AKBK has intensively communicated with the Saudi government to break down the obstacles that hinder women's emancipation. It has achieved important successes. For instance, it succeeded in changing article 114 of the Labour Regulatory Laws, which stated that the mixing of genders in the workplace is forbidden, and replaced it with a new article for both men and women requiring them to abide by *shari'a* law in the workplace, with no further mention of forbidding the mixing of genders.

There are also women's sections of the Chamber of Commerce in other parts of Saudi Arabia. In the eastern part of the kingdom there is the Eastern Province Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Even in Riyadh, which is more rigid and socially conservative than the rest of Saudi Arabia, women have developed their women's section in the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

IV.1.4 Community centres and neighbourhood centres

Community centres are a new kind of grassroots organization in Saudi Arabia. In the Eastern Province, for example in Qatif, you will find *majalis al-ahiya* ('neighbourhood committees'), which are independent voluntary grassroots organizations. Their main task is to supervise the municipal policies. They play the role of consultant between the community and the local authorities.

Jam'iya marakiz al-ahliya ('the neighbourhood association centres') are another example of this kind of civil organization. They have branches in Mecca, Jeddah and Taif. Since 2007, the organization has opened centres in several neighbourhoods in those cities. In Jeddah, for example, they have 28 neighbourhood centres, eleven for females and seventeen for males. Each centre has three main programmes. The first is called 'the community of the neighbourhood', which aims at improving social relationships in the neighbourhood and solving the problems that can emerge between families. The second programme, 'Men of the Future' and 'Pioneering Women', aims at preparing young people to lead their life and community in the future. The programme entails the development and ex-

[21] Montagu, Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia, p. 75.

pression of talents, exchanging ideas and opinions, while discussing and developing a sense of citizenship and patriotism. The third programme is called 'Our Neighbourhood Reads', and it is lead by Dr Khadija al-Saban, Professor of Arabic Language and Literature. In this programme the people from the neighbourhood read a book every month. In an organized meeting in the neighbourhood they discuss it among themselves under the supervision of one expert.[22]

IV.2 Semi-political Organizations

IV.2.1 The literary and cultural clubs

Saudi Arabia has sixteen literary and cultural clubs. The club of Jeddah is the oldest one (established in 1975). Until early June 2010, the board members of these clubs, always ten persons, were appointed by Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture and Media. No internal elections were held and the ministry stipulated who presided over the clubs.

A new charter, which was introduced and published by the Ministry of Culture and Media in June 2010, laid down new regulations, giving the clubs the possibility of holding independent elections to elect the president and the club's board members. Women also obtained the right to become candidates for both the board and the chairmanship of the clubs.

These clubs draw up annual programmes. The Jeddah club, for example, invites 30 intellectuals each year to discuss different topics, including dicey topics that touch upon cultural and religious taboos. The participants of these clubs are mainly young people, particularly students – both males and females. Despite the fact that these clubs do not engage in political activities, they treat topics that have political implications.

The majority of the members of these literary and cultural organizations consist of liberal-minded writers and intellectuals who criticize and discuss the dominant religious views and morality in Saudi society. This critical approach is also present in the works written by women in the kingdom, particularly in novels. Saudi women novelists have become something of a phenomenon. Since the early 1990s, Saudi Arabia has experienced an enormous increase in novels written by women.[23] The most important names are Qamasha al-Aliyan, Raja al-Sani', Saba al-Hazar, Warda Abdul Malik, Zainab Hanafi and Miral al-Tahawi. Social oppression, problems relating to women's sexuality, and abuse and discrimination of women in the parental house, in marriage and in society as a whole are dealt with extensively in these novels. Marriage is often presented as a prison, with the husband or a male member of the family as the guardian of that prison, and religion as the law regulating prison life.[24] These novels break taboos by targeting and heavily criticizing the religious elite.

IV.2.2 Virtual civil society and the new media

There is a large and complex network of new media in Saudi Arabia and a sizeable number of Saudis are participating in it.[25] According to two Saudi pedagogues who researched internet use by youths aged between sixteen and nineteen, in six schools (three for boys and three for girls) in the region of Hafer al-Baten, 93 per cent of boys and 94 per cent of girls at secondary schools are using the Internet. According to their findings, the average number of hours per day being spent on the Internet is between four and five for girls, and four for boys. Furthermore, 55 per cent of the boys and 30.3 per cent of the girls confirm that they have made 'friends' in foreign countries through the net, and that 91 per cent of youngsters are enthusiastic about the Internet and claim that they develop their knowledge and skills because of it.[26]

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[22] Interview by the author with Dr Khadija al-Saban, Jeddah, June 2010.

[23] For an overview of the development of Saudi women's novels, see 'Abd al-Rahman bin Mumamad al-Wahabbi, *Al-Riwaya Al-Nisaia Al-Sa'udiya wa Al-Mutagairat Al-Thaqafiya* ['The Saudi Women's Novel and the Cultural Changes'] (*Al-Elm wa el-Eman Lilnashir wa Al-tawzi'*, 2010). See also Saddeka Arebi, Women and Word in Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Literary Discourse (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

[24] For the role of men in the Saudi women's novel, see Hassan al-Na'mi, *al-Riwaya al-Sa'udiyya* [The Saudi Novel] (Riyadh: Ministry of Culture and Media, 2009), pp. 58–61.

[25] According to optimistic Saudi journalists who are actively engaged in this digital network, Saudi Arabia is witnessing *al-Nahda al-Jadida* ['a new Renaissance']. The role of Facebook, Twitter and blogs on the net is, according to them, vital in creating this renaissance. "The new media has given the people not only possibilities of developing new ideas, but they also facilitated the rising of new groups and new initiatives". Interview by the author with two journalists, Jeddah, June 2010.

[26] *Al-Hayat*, 26 June 2010.

In the Arabic version of her book on the challenge of the new generation in Saudi Arabia, Mai Yamani emphasizes the politicization of youth in the Saudi kingdom as a consequence of massive use of new media and the internet.[27] According to Yamani, youth in Saudi Arabia – the majority of the population – wants "more civil freedom, citizenship and patriotism".[28] Yamani sees the Internet – she labels it the "technology of globalization'"– as the "greatest challenge" to the country's rulers.[29] According to her, the number of internet users is 7.7 million of a total population of 25 million, and in 2009 more than 97 per cent of them were massively using Google. In Yamani's view, this has created a "new political culture".[30] Furthermore, the Internet has given different groups in Saudi society the opportunity to express and develop their identity outside the reach of the Saudi state and to make these identities visible. Yamani gives the example of Shiite and Ismaili websites, which defend the Shiites and Ismailis against insults and discrimination by extremist Wahhabi clergymen.[31]

Given these developments, one could speak of the emergence of a "virtual Saudi civil society", a cyberspace in which different individuals and groups can act freely. One simple example is that all of the Saudi newspapers are currently on the Internet, and readers can freely comment on the articles that they read. Hundreds of responses are frequently posted, so a whole discussion ensues. A human rights activist who is especially interested in the readers' comments said:

> *"Those comments show the rise of a critical conscience of the average Saudi reader. The Saudis now have a better understanding of freedom in general and of freedom of opinion and expression in particular".*[32]

Perhaps more important and effective than the capacity to react to the published pieces in the newspapers is the capacity to use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to spread messages and to establish groups and social communities. One example that shows the effectiveness of the new media is the manner in which these media were used during the flooding of Jeddah in 2009. The official media initially denied the scope of the destruction and refused to acknowledge the deaths that the flood had caused in the city. But young people were quick to publish pictures on Facebook and Twitter of the dead victims and the catastrophic impact of the flood on the city. Short films were placed on YouTube, which showed a totally different picture of Jeddah than the rosy picture that had been portrayed by the official media. "The new media put the official media in a very difficult position and people started to realize that the state lies to them", said a journalist who is active on the net.[33]

In short, the new technology has created a relatively free space for discussion, the exchange of ideas and even mobilization of people when needed. The role of this technology during the Arab Spring was prominent, but one must still be careful not to exaggerate the role of the modern media. What happens on the internet can also be seen as mere compensation for what is lacking in real life. Cyberspace can be used as a way to flee the hard reality and to take refuge in the worldwide web.

IV.2.3. Diwaniyyat

The *diwaniyyat* (sing. *diwaniyya*) are informal groupings that are mainly based on family, tribal, intellectual or business ties. They are privately held weekly social meetings in the homes of prominent families. The gatherings can be compared to the nineteenth-century literary *salons* in Europe. The total number of *diwaniyyat* in the Kingdom is unknown, but a 2008 conference organized by the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue brought 65 of these *diwaniyyat* together. Remarkably, there is no law that organizes their work. Different activities are organized in these weekly meetings, ranging from reciting poetry to debating serious political questions. Sensitive issues, such as the conservative role of religion and even state policies, are debated. Critical voices, especially liberal voices, can speak out during these meetings and heated debates take place. In a meeting in Riyadh that I attended, there were more than 70 participants who critically discussed the role of reli-

[27] Mai Yamani, *Hawiyat Mutaghayyira: Tahadi al-Jil al-Jadid fi al-Sa'udiyya* ['Changed Identities: The Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia'] (Beirut: *Riad El-Rayyes* Books, 2010).
[28] Yamani, *Hawiyat Mutaghayyira*, p. 12.
[29] Yamani, *Hawiyat Mutaghayyira*, p. 13.
[30] Yamani, *Hawiyat Mutaghayyira*, pp. 13–14.
[31] Yamani, *Hawiyat Mutaghayyira*, p. 33–34.
[32] Interview by the author with two journalists, Riyadh, January 2011.
[33] Interview by the author with a journalist, Jeddah, June 2010.

gion in Saudi Arabia and the negative role of the Saudi state in it. Participants criticized the pact between the Saudi state and the country's conservative religious establishment. The evening's conclusion was that society cannot develop itself on the basis of religion alone and the Saudi state must listen to all the voices in the country, including those of secularists and liberals.

Several women's, but not gender-mixed, *diwaniyyat* exist. Some twelve years ago, a number of Riyadh women, led by an academic, Hatun al-Fassi, created an informal discussion group known as *al-Multaqa al-Ahadi* ('The Sunday Group'), which organized annual programmes that included topics such as women in society, family violence, municipal elections and, in 2006, Saudi literature. This group formed a lobby encouraging women to stand in the 2005 municipal elections, using media, television and government officials to promote their cause. In 2010 they started the same campaign for participation in the next municipal elections.

IV.2.4 Different organizations in the Eastern Province

Almost everything in the Eastern Province, where the majority of the Shiite population lives, is political. They feel heavily discriminated against and unjustly treated. The prominent imam and intellectual Hassan al-Saffar elaborates on this point:

> *"The Shiites in Saudi Arabia are politically marginalized, they cannot reach important positions within the state, and there is not one single Shiite minister, even under-minister, in the country. In the Shiite province there is not even one director in the state bureaucracy. On the religious level, the Shiites cannot build their own mosques. In Najran there are half a million Shiites but they cannot build a mosque for themselves. In Dammam, with almost a 25 per cent Shiite community, there are no graveyards for Shiites and they have difficulty in burying their dead persons. In the province of Ahsa, where 60 per cent of the population is Shiite, there are 400 schools, but you cannot find one single school director who is Shiite."*[34]

Al-Saffar continued, "I can say we are now in Saudi Arabia busy with creating a culture of respecting diversity, but not the reality of respecting diversity. For instance, two months ago a *fatwa* was issued according to which it is forbidden to sell land to Shiites in Riyadh".[35]

There are a huge number of organizations dealing with different aspects of the social, cultural and religious life in this part of Saudi Arabia. Some examples are:

- *Shabab Min Ajl al-Taghyir* ('Youth For Change'). This organization aims to develop the abilities and talents of youth in its province and, more particularly, organizes workshops on human rights.
- *Markaz al-Ibda' li-l-Funun* ('Centre for Art Innovation'). In the early stage of its activities, this organization focused on developing art in the Eastern Province, but now its basic activities concentrate on creating a culture of peace, respecting diversity and encouraging acceptance.
- *Al-Siyaha al-Ma'rifiyya* ('Knowledge of Tourism'). This organization emphasizes the cultural and intellectual developments in the province, focusing on the cultural elite and trying to develop cooperation with intellectuals in the rest of the Arab world. It also has a relationship with UNESCO and other international organizations.

IV.3 Political Organizations

Although the Saudi regime does not permit independent civil society organizations – by either incorporating pre-existing organizations or bringing the new established ones under state control and banning all others – there are still some organizations that comply with this standard image. In Saudi Arabia a few unofficial, bottom–up organizations – located outside the state's control mechanisms – exist. These organizations have been established by individual Saudi citizens without the government's approval, they are unregistered and unlicensed organizations. The main field of activity of these organizations is human rights.

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[34] Interview by the author with Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, Dammam, January 2011.

[35] Interview by the author with Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, Dammam, January 2011. For more details about the Saudi Shi'a, see Ibrahim, The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia; and Al-Rasheed, The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia. See also International Crisis Group, 'The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia, *Middle East Report* (Amman/Brussels/Riyadh: International Crisis Group, 19 September 2005); and Laurence Louër, Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

These non-official organizations can indeed be characterized as political organizations. This has to do with their political demands, their demand to be fully independent and the manner in which they think about the future form of rule in Saudi Arabia. Some of these organizations call for a constitutional monarchy. It is difficult to know the exact number of these independent, explicitly political, human rights organizations in Saudi Arabia, but there must be more than a few.[36] Most of them have official websites and they are also present on Facebook and Twitter; in this sense they are part of Saudi digital civil society. The following organizations belong to this category:

IV.3.1 Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA)

This organization was founded in December 2009 by a group of human rights activists in Riyadh and submitted a registration request to the king. According to the founders of ACPRA, the organization was created "in response to what was seen as a worsening human rights situation in Saudi Arabia".[37] ACPRA issued many provocative statements on different issues, including the Jeddah flood disaster, political prisoners, the judicial system and bringing officials to trial. Its members are also present on a regular basis in media outlets. ACPRA is an independent liberal-minded organization. Its aim is to establish the rule of law, freedom of expression, freedom of association and political participation in Saudi Arabia. In its founding declaration, the group announced that "the most important reasons for the establishment of the Assembly are that the human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly the political rights in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, are seriously violated".[38] Its members are openly pessimistic about the government's reform programme:

> *"In spite of the fact that the era of King Abdullah began as a promising start to reform, with the release of a number of political prisoners, and people were enthusiastic and encouraged by some steps, such as the establishment of the Human Rights Commission, these reforms soon stagnated because of the increasing domination of the Ministry of Internal Affairs upon the lives of people, and the human rights situation returned to where it was before."*[39]

IV.3.2 Human Rights Monitor–Saudi Arabia

Human Rights Monitor-Saudi Arabia was founded by Waleed Abulkhair, a lawyer based in Jeddah who has been interrogated many times by the authorities. Abulkhair took many cases to court and volunteered to defend victims of human rights violations. The group has a Facebook page monitoring violations and cases of human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia and a collection of articles on human rights issues.[40]

IV.3.3 Human Rights First Society (HRFS)

HRFS was established in 2002 and led by Ibrahim al-Mugaiteeb. It is the Saudi branch of the international organization Human Rights First. It seems to have other members from different parts of Saudi Arabia.[41] The organization issues statements on different cases and distributes other organizations' published statements to its mailing list. Since its establishment, it has applied for official recognition, but to date it remains unrecognized.[42]

IV.3.4 Rights Activists Network (RAN)

Founded by a group of human rights activists from the Eastern Province and joined by around 350 members from different regions in Saudi Arabia, Rights Activists Network aims to mobilize activists in Saudi Arabia and to educate and train human rights practitioners. The organization coordinates training workshops inside and outside Saudi Arabia in cooperation with regional human rights organizations, and has achieved the training of a very high number of individuals.[43]

IV.3.5 The Association for the Protection and Defence of Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia

The founder, Wajeha al-Huwaider, is a women's activist and writer from the Eastern Province, who was stopped from writing in

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36 Interview by the author with a human rights activist, Riyadh, January 2011.
37 See the Facebook page of ACPRA, available online at http://www.facebook.com/pages/Saudi-Civil-and-Political-Rights-Association/206754282676539, accessed in November 2011.
38 For the Arabic version of this declaration, see online at www.acpra6.org/news_view_1.html, accessed in June 2010.
39 Interview by the author with a member of ACPRA, Riyadh, January 2011.
40 See the website of Human Rights Monitor at http://www.facebook.com/groups/40258229626/.
41 See the website of Human Rights First Society at http://www.hrfssaudiarabia.org/.
42 See the website of Human Rights First Society at http://www.hrfssaudiarabia.org/, accessed in November 2011.
43 See Rights Activists Network's website, see online at http://www.ractivists.net/?act=home, accessed in November 2011.

local Saudi papers and faced many problems in her work at Aramco Company. She is very vocal in raising women's issues to the public and gained support from other activists, such as Fawzia Al-Oyouni. She took the initiative to drive her car and walk across the causeway to Bahrain to protest against male-guardian permits for women. The organization itself is not well known as a women's organization, as there are no publications, websites or activities under its name.[44]

V. Conclusion

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an authoritarian state and Saudi civil society is an example of a civil society that is functioning within the boundaries of that type of state. The Saudi government does not believe in participatory governance, and civil society has only a very limited autonomous capacity to influence policies.

Furthermore, civil society in Saudi Arabia mostly has a top–down nature; it is mainly administrated and controlled from above. There are strict restrictions on the opportunities to establish an association; doing so without the support of a member of the royal family is almost impossible.[45] Many Saudi civil society activists are aware of their need to cooperate with the state, as a woman from the Chamber of Commerce in Jeddah aptly remarked:

> *"Change in my country does not work through protest but through dialogue with the state and the officials. We cannot force change; we can only reach change through working with the government and not against it. We have to lobby on a daily basis to achieve a change."*[46]

In spite of all the restrictions and difficulties confronting Saudi civil society, there is a strong presence of the language of rights. There is a lot of talk about human rights, respect for diversity, the importance of national unity, freedom of speech, aversion against violence, gender equality, criticism of fanaticism, promoting tolerance, criticizing fundamentalism, and ideas about fighting poverty. There are also some weak sounds on the importance of transparency.

In an authoritarian fashion, the Saudi state tries to use civil society as an instrument of control, but this does not mean that the state always succeeds in doing so. The emergency of the language of rights and discourses on human rights, tolerance, economic reform, and cultural and religious pluralism in Saudi Arabia create a new intellectual environment in the country. Some segments of the Saudi state itself and the religious elite, different civil society actors, some parts of the Saudi press, and intellectuals are agents of these new discourses.

This new form of political power appears in arenas and spaces that, from a conventional perspective, are deemed non-political. Yet they *are* political and they aim at changing the status quo. There are also conscious efforts by individuals, organizations and other social actors to transform this language into a public discourse. This is not a linear process, of course, and it will witness moments of backlash, but it is still a noticeable shift.

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[44] For an interview with Wajeha al-Huwaider, see online at http://www.thenation.com/article/161224/conversation-saudi-womens-rights-campaigner-wajeha-al-huwaider. See also on YouTube: Wajeha Al-Huwaider is Driving a Car and Sending a Message to All Saudi Women about Driving on Women's Day, available online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8GiTnb33wE.

[45] Mamoun Fandy, Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), p. 35.

[46] Interview by the author with a female member of the Chamber of Commerce, Jeddah, January 2011.