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# Social Movements, Activism and Social Development in the Middle East

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## Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| **CDA** | community development association |
| **DISK** | Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions |
| **FIS** | Islamic Salvation Front |
| **IMF** | International Monetary Fund |
| **PVO** | private voluntary organization |
| **RP** | Rifah Party |
| **SFVO** | Street Food Vendors' Organization |
| **USAID** | United States Agency for International Development |

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## Summary/Résumé/Resumen


### *Summary*

To what extent is "pressure from below" requisite for meaningful policy change and institutional reform conducive to social development, and for people's livelihoods and rights, in the Middle East? What forms of activism are gaining prominence in the current period of socio-economic restructuring in the region?

Prior to the advent of political-economic restructuring in the 1980s, the Middle Eastern countries were largely dominated by either nationalist populist states (Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria), or pro-Western rentier states (Arab oil states, Iran). These authoritarian states pursued a state-led economic development strategy. Oil income offered the rentier states the possibility of social provisions; and the ideologically driven populist states dispensed significant economic and social welfare in education, health care, employment, housing and so on. Yet the oppressive nature of both types of states restricted political participation and the development of civil society organizations. Indeed, in many cases, there was demobilization or, at best, controlled mobilization of certain segments of the population. These political economies then frustrated any attempt to develop participatory institutions or culture.

The arrival of liberalization and marketization in the Middle East during the 1980s brought about important socioeconomic changes. The free market economy has made consumer commodities available and enriched society's upper strata, while it has also increased income disparity. State provisions have been undermined and poor people must rely chiefly on themselves for survival. Meanwhile, the globalized notions of human rights and political participation have placed economic rights and citizen participation on the political agenda, opening up new areas for social mobilization.

Collective responses to these new conditions have varied. The use of coping strategies and massive urban cost-of-living protests were early reactions to aspects of neoliberal policies during the 1980s, as in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia. The urban uprisings, however, seem to have given way in the 1990s to institutional methods of dealing with austerity. While trade unions are continuing to push for living standard adjustments—opposing aspects of structural adjustment policies—they nevertheless represent only a fraction of the total workforce in the region. The vast majority of the labouring classes remains dispersed in the informal urban economy. In general, trade unions have failed to link community concerns to those of the workplace. For this reason, urban grassroots movements may find a space for collective action in the community or neighbourhood, rather than the workplace. People are, for the most part, facing the same challenges of day-to-day living: finding secure housing, being able to pay rent, acquiring urban amenities, and having adequate schools, clinics, cultural centres and the like. Community-based struggles for such "collective consumption" through institutional settings characterize, in some sense, "urban social movements". However, community activism in the form of urban social movements is rare in the Middle East. Local soup kitchens, neighbourhood associations, church groups, or street

trade-unionism are hardly common features in the region. The prevalence of authoritarian and inefficient states, the legacy of populism, and the strength of family and kinship ties render primary solidarities more pertinent than secondary associations and social movements.

There is, however, an argument that considers the Islamist movements in the region as the Middle Eastern version of urban social movements. No doubt Islamist movements—notably that of social Islam—represent a significant means through which some disadvantaged groups survive hardship and better their lives. These movements contribute to social welfare not only by direct provision of services and assistance to the needy; they also tend to compel rival social groups and institutions, such as state agencies and secular NGOs, to do the same. Despite these contributions, it is doubtful that Islamism can mobilize at a grassroots level for social development. Its religious exclusivism, discrimination against secular forces and religious minorities, as well as women who conform to Islamism, defeat any idea of free participation.

Does the explosion of NGOs in the region compensate for both the partial retreat of the state and the shortcoming of political Islam in mobilizing at the grassroots for social development? Indeed, because of their small size, efficiency and commitment to the cause of the poor, NGOs are seen as a real means for grassroots participation in development. They are sometimes viewed as a bulwark against the creeping spread of Islamic fundamentalism by offering an alternative outlet to the Islamist agenda. Most accounts point to the vital role of NGOs in the provision of social safety nets and valued services. This seems true especially in countries where the state has been defunct or non-existent—such as Lebanon during the civil war, and Palestine. However, social development is more than survival, relief and a safety net. It also means achieving certain social and economic rights, and self-sustenance, which may be achieved when active mobilization and participation prevail. But Middle Eastern NGOs in general fail to provide such conditions. Apart from cultural and structural reasons—such as clientelism and hierarchy—the problem is that very often NGOs are attributed with development qualities and abilities that they do not possess. However, the socioeconomic conditions of the Middle East seem to be conducive to a particular form of activism—a grassroots non-movement that I call the "quiet encroachment of the ordinary". This refers to non-collective direct actions of individuals and families to acquire basic necessities (land, shelter, urban collective consumption, informal jobs, business opportunities) in a quiet, unassuming fashion.

While quiet encroachment has a longer history, the spread of Islamism and NGOs gained momentum during the 1980s and, especially, the 1990s. The growth of these types of activism (along with social movements associated with women and human rights) coincides with the relative decline in traditional, class-based movements—notably peasant organizations, co-operative movements and trade unionism. Meanwhile, growing economic informalization and urbanization in the Middle East shift popular needs and demands. Struggles for wages, for example, lose ground to broader concerns about jobs, conditions of work, cost of living, and urban collective consumption, health care, education and transportation. Thus emerges a salient feature of grassroots activism in the region (aspects of which may be observed elsewhere): it is

characterized less by demand-making movements than direct action, individual, informal or institutional. Through direct action, grassroots groups and their middle-class supporters make themselves heard; they create realities on the ground that the authorities sooner or later have to come to terms with, adjusting their policies accordingly. In short, "pressure from below" in the Middle East experience is highly relevant to social development. Given the gradual retreat of states from their traditional social responsibilities, the poor in the Middle East would be worse off had grassroots actions been totally absent.


***Résumé***

A quel point une "pression de la base" est-elle est nécessaire pour permettre des changements politiques significatifs et des réformes institutionnelles propices à un développement social, ainsi que pour garantir les droits et les moyens d'existence des peuples du Moyen-Orient? Quelles formes de militantisme sont en train de devenir importantes dans la période de restructuration socio-économique que traverse actuellement la région?

Avant l'avènement de la restructuration politico-économique des années 1980, les pays du Moyen-Orient étaient largement dominés soit par des Etats nationaux populistes (Egypte, Irak, Libye, Syrie), soit par des Etats rentiers pro-occidentaux (pays arabes producteurs de pétrole, Iran). Ces Etats autoritaires poursuivaient des stratégies étatiques de développement économique. Les recettes pétrolières permettaient aux Etats rentiers d'offrir des prestations sociales; et les Etats populistes, mus par l'idéologie, dispensaient une aide économique et sociale importante en matière d'éducation, de santé, d'emploi, de logement, etc. La nature oppressive des deux types d'Etat restreignait cependant la participation politique et le développement des organisations de la société civile. Il y a donc eu, dans nombre de cas, démobilisation ou, au mieux, mobilisation contrôlée de certains segments de la population. Ces systèmes économiques contrariaient, en somme, toute tentative de développer des institutions ou une culture participatives.

L'arrivée de la libéralisation et du marché, dans les années 1980, s'est accompagnée de changements socio-économiques importants. L'économie de marché a rendu les denrées de consommation disponibles et enrichi les couches supérieures de la société, tout en augmentant l'écart entre les revenus. Les prestations de l'Etat ont été minées et les pauvres n'ont plus compté que sur eux-mêmes pour survivre. Entre-temps, les notions devenues mondiales de droits de l'homme et de participation politique ont inscrit les droits économiques et la participation des citoyens à l'ordre du jour politique, ouvrant de nouveaux domaines à la mobilisation sociale.

Les réponses collectives à ces conditions nouvelles ont été diverses. Le recours à des stratégies de riposte et à des manifestations urbaines massives visant à dénoncer le coût de la vie ont constitué les réactions initiales aux aspects des politiques néolibérales des années 1980, ainsi qu'on l'a vu en Egypte, en Jordanie, au Liban, au Maroc, au Soudan et en Tunisie. Les soulèvements urbains semblent cependant avoir cédé la place, dans les années 1990, à des

méthodes institutionnelles de faire face à l'austérité. Tandis que les syndicats continuent de réclamer des ajustements du niveau de vie—en s'opposant, par conséquent, à certains aspects des politiques d'ajustement structurel—ils ne représentent néanmoins qu'une fraction de la main-d'œuvre globale dans la région. La vaste majorité des classes laborieuses demeure dispersée dans l'économie urbaine informelle. Les syndicats, en général, n'ont pas réussi à lier les préoccupations de la communauté à celles du lieu de travail. Pour cette raison, les mouvements populaires urbains peuvent trouver un espace pour une action collective dans la communauté ou dans le quartier, plutôt que sur les lieux de travail. Les gens font face, pour la plupart d'entre eux, aux mêmes défis de la vie au jour le jour: trouver un logement sûr, être en mesure de payer le loyer, acquérir des équipements urbains, avoir des écoles, des cliniques, des centres culturels adéquats, etc. Les luttes basées sur la communauté pour une telle "consommation collective" par le truchement de cadres institutionnels caractérisent, en un sens, les "mouvements sociaux urbains". Le militantisme communautaire sous forme de mouvement social urbain est cependant rare au Moyen-Orient. Les soupes populaires locales, les associations de quartier, les groupes confessionnels ou le syndicalisme de rue sont des particularités peu communes dans la région. La prévalence d'Etats autoritaires et inefficaces, l'héritage du populisme et la force des liens familiaux et parentaux rendent les solidarités primaires plus pertinentes que les associations et les mouvements sociaux secondaires.

Selon certaines théories, cependant, les mouvements islamistes dans la région seraient la version moyen-orientale des mouvements sociaux urbains. Il est indéniable que les mouvements islamistes—notamment ceux de l'islam social—représentent un moyen important permettant à certains groupes désavantagés de survivre à la pauvreté et d'améliorer leur vie. Ces mouvements contribuent au bien social, non seulement en fournissant directement des services et une aide aux plus nécessiteux; ils ont également tendance à obliger les institutions et les groupes sociaux rivaux tels que les organismes nationaux et les ONG laïques à faire de même. Malgré ces contributions, il est douteux que l'islamisme puisse mobiliser au niveau populaire en vue d'un développement social. Son exclusivisme religieux, la discrimination dont il fait preuve à l'égard des forces laïques et des minorités religieuses, ainsi que des femmes qui se conforment à l'islamisme, mettent en échec toute idée de libre participation.

L'explosion des ONG dans la région peut-elle compenser le retrait partiel de l'Etat et les carences de l'islam politique, en mobilisant la base en vue d'un développement social? En raison de leur petite taille, de leur efficacité et de leur engagement en faveur de la cause des pauvres, les ONG sont considérées comme un moyen réel de susciter une participation populaire au développement. Elles sont parfois perçues comme un rempart contre la progression larvée du fondamentalisme islamique, dans la mesure où elles offrent une alternative au programme islamiste. La plupart des rapports font valoir le rôle vital des ONG dans le filet de sécurité social des pays et en tant que fournisseur non négligeable de services essentiels. Cela semble vrai, surtout dans les pays où l'Etat est mort ou non-existant—comme au Liban durant la guerre civile ou en Palestine. Le développement social représente cependant plus qu'une survie, un secours ou un filet de sécurité. Il signifie également obtenir certains droits sociaux et économiques, ainsi qu'atteindre l'autosubsistance, qui peut être obtenue là où existent une

mobilisation et une participation actives. Mais les ONG au Moyen-Orient ne réussissent pas, en général, à fournir de telles conditions. Indépendamment de raisons culturelles et structurelles—telles que le clientélisme et la hiérarchie—le problème est que très souvent, on attribue aux ONG des qualités et des capacités en matière de développement qu'elles ne possèdent pas. Les conditions socio-économiques au Moyen-Orient semblent néanmoins être propices à une forme particulière de militantisme—un non-mouvement populaire que je qualifie d'"empiètement tranquille de l'ordinaire". C'est une allusion aux actions directes non-collectives de la part d'individus et de familles pour acquérir le nécessaire de base (terre, abri, consommation collective urbaine, emplois informels et perspectives commerciales) de façon tranquille, modeste.

Alors que l'empiètement tranquille ne date pas d'hier, la progression de l'islamisme et des ONG s'est accélérée durant les années 1980 et surtout 1990. Le développement de ce type de militantisme (parallèlement à celui des mouvements sociaux associés aux droits de la femme et de l'être humain) coïncide avec le déclin relatif des mouvements traditionnels, basés sur les classes, notamment des organisations paysannes, des coopératives et du syndicalisme. Entretemps, la croissance de l'urbanisation et celle de l'économie informelle transforment, au Moyen-Orient, les besoins et les exigences populaires. Les luttes pour les salaires, par exemple, ont perdu du terrain par rapport à des préoccupations plus larges concernant l'emploi, les conditions de travail, le coût de la vie, la consommation collective urbaine, les soins de santé, l'éducation et les transports. Ainsi apparaît un trait saillant du militantisme de base dans la région (dont certains aspects peuvent être observés ailleurs): il se caractérise moins par des mouvements faisant des réclamations que par des actions directes, individuelles, informelles ou institutionnelles. Par le biais de l'action directe, les groupes populaires et leurs partisans dans la classe moyenne se font entendre: ils créent des réalités sur le terrain que les autorités devront tôt ou tard reconnaître, tout en ajustant leurs politiques en conséquence. En bref, "la pression de la base" dans l'expérience moyen-orientale est très pertinente pour le développement social. Vu le retrait graduel des Etats par rapport à leurs responsabilités sociales traditionnelles, les pauvres au Moyen-Orient seraient dans une situation pire, s'il n'y avait eu aucune forme d'action populaire.


***Resumen***

¿En qué medida es la "presión desde abajo" una condición para un cambio político significativo y para una reforma institucional conducente al desarrollo social, así como para los medios de vida y los derechos de las personas, en el Oriente Medio? ¿Qué formas de activismo están adquiriendo importancia en el periodo actual de reestructuración socioeconómica de la región?

Anteriormente a la reestructuración político-económica que tuvo lugar en el decenio de 1980, los países del Oriente Medio estaban fundamentalmente dominados por Estados populistas nacionalistas (Egipto, Irak, Libia, Siria) o por estados rentistas en pro de Occidente (los Estados árabes petrolíferos, Irán). Estos Estados autoritarios seguían una estrategia de desarrollo económico dirigida por el Estado. Los ingresos del petróleo brindaban a los Estados rentistas la posibilidad de ofrecer prestaciones sociales; y los Estados populistas regidos ideológicamente

invertían una parte importante del bienestar económico y social en la enseñanza, la atención a la salud, el empleo, la vivienda, etc. Sin embargo, la naturaleza opresiva de ambos tipos de Estados limitaba la participación política y el desarrollo de las organizaciones de la sociedad civil. En muchos casos se produjo una desmovilización o, en el mejor de los casos, una movilización controlada de determinados sectores de la población. Estas economías políticas acabaron entonces con toda tentativa de fomentar las instituciones o la cultura participativas.

La llegada de la liberalización y la comercialización en la década de 1980 supuso importantes cambios socioeconómicos. La economía de libre mercado ha conducido a que pueda disponerse de los productos básicos del consumidor y ha enriquecido las capas más altas de la sociedad, aumentando al mismo tiempo la desigualdad de ingresos. Se han menoscabado las prestaciones del Estado, y los pobres deben confiar únicamente en sí mismos para poder sobrevivir. Entretanto, los conceptos mundializados de los derechos humanos y la participación política han logrado que se introduzcan en los programas políticos los derechos económicos y la participación de los ciudadanos, abriendo nuevas esferas para la movilización social.

Las respuestas colectivas a estas nuevas condiciones han sido diversas. El uso de estrategias para hacer frente a la situación y las protestas urbanas masivas sobre el coste de la vida fueron las primeras reacciones contra algunos aspectos de las políticas neoliberales en la década de 1980, como en los casos de Egipto, Jordania, Líbano, Marruecos, Sudán y Túnez. Sin embargo, los levantamientos urbanos parecen haber conducido a la aplicación de métodos institucionales en el decenio de 1990 para abordar el problema de la austeridad. Si bien los sindicatos siguen reivindicando ajustes en lo que concierne al nivel de vida—oponiéndose a varios aspectos de las políticas de ajuste estructural—estos sólo representan una pequeña parte de la fuerza de trabajo total en la región. La gran mayoría de las clases trabajadoras sigue dispersa en la economía informal urbana. En general, los sindicatos no han logrado vincular las preocupaciones comunitarias con las del lugar de trabajo, por lo que posiblemente los movimientos populares urbanos puedan emprender más fácilmente una acción colectiva en la comunidad o barrio que en el lugar de trabajo. En su mayoría, las personas deben hacer frente a los mismos desafíos de la vida cotidiana: encontrar una vivienda segura, asegurarse de poder pagar el alquiler, lograr comodidades urbanas, y poder acceder a escuelas, clínicas y centros culturales adecuados. Las luchas comunitarias por dicho "consumo colectivo" mediante regímenes institucionales caracterizan, en cierto modo, los "movimientos sociales urbanos". Sin embargo, en el Oriente Medio es infrecuente un activismo comunitario que adopte la forma de movimiento social urbano. Las cocinas populares, las asociaciones de vecinos, los grupos de fieles de las iglesias o el sindicalismo callejero apenas son características comunes en la región. El predominio de Estados autoritarios e ineficaces, el legado del populismo, y los fuertes vínculos familiares o de parentesco conducen a que las solidaridades primarias sean más importantes que las asociaciones y movimientos sociales secundarios.

Sin embargo, hay un argumento que considera los movimientos islamistas de la región como la versión del Oriente Medio de los movimientos sociales urbanos. Indudablemente, los movimientos islamistas—en particular el Islam social—representan un medio importante para que

algunos grupos desfavorecidos superen sus penurias y mejoren sus condiciones de vida. Estos movimientos contribuyen al bienestar social, no sólo mediante la prestación de servicios y asistencia a los necesitados, sino que también tienden a obligar a los grupos e instituciones sociales rivales a actuar del mismo modo, como los organismos estatales y las ONG seculares. A pesar de estas contribuciones, es dudoso que el islamismo pueda movilizarse a nivel popular para el desarrollo social. Su exclusivismo religioso, su discriminación contra las fuerzas seculares y las minorías religiosas, así como contra las mujeres que comulgan con el islamismo, excluyen toda idea de participación libre.

¿Compensa la explosión de las ONG en la región la retirada parcial del Estado y la deficiencia del Islam político en movilizarse a nivel popular para el desarrollo social? Indudablemente, debido a su pequeña talla, su eficacia y su compromiso con la causa de los pobres, las ONG se consideran un medio real de la participación popular en el desarrollo. A veces se consideran un baluarte contra la extensión progresiva del fundamentalismo islámico, al ofrecer una salida alternativa al programa islamista. Por lo general se destaca el papel fundamental que desempeñan las ONG en la red de seguridad social de las naciones y como proveedor importante de servicios valiosos. Esto parece cierto particularmente en los países donde el Estado ha desaparecido o es inexistente—como en Líbano durante la guerra civil y en Palestina. Sin embargo, el desarrollo social es algo más que la supervivencia, el alivio y una red de seguridad. También significa adquirir determinados derechos sociales y económicos, y el autoabastecimiento, que puede lograrse cuando predominan la movilización y la participación. Pero las ONG del Oriente Medio generalmente no logran facilitar estas condiciones. Independientemente de razones culturales y estructurales—como el clientelismo y la jerarquía—el problema reside en que a menudo se atribuye a las ONG cualidades y capacidades de desarrollo de que carecen. Sin embargo, las condiciones socioeconómicas del Oriente Medio parecen conducir a una forma particular de activismo—a una reacción popular que denomino "el avance sigiloso de las personas ordinarias". Esto se refiere a acciones directas no colectivas emprendidas por individuos y familias para adquirir las necesidades fundamentales (tierra, vivienda, consumo urbano colectivo, trabajos informales y oportunidades comerciales) de un modo sigiloso y desentendido.

Si bien el avance sigiloso es más antiguo, la expansión del islamismo y de las ONG fue mayor en la década de 1980 y, en particular, de 1990. El crecimiento de estas formas de activismo (junto con los movimientos sociales asociados a las mujeres y los derechos humanos) coincide con el declive relativo de los movimientos tradicionales, basados en las clases—especialmente, las organizaciones de campesinos, los movimientos cooperativos y el sindicalismo. Entretanto, la informalización económica y la urbanización crecientes en el Oriente Medio dan lugar a que cambien las necesidades y las reivindicaciones. La lucha por los salarios, por ejemplo, perdió terreno ante preocupaciones mayores por los trabajos, condiciones de trabajo, coste de la vida y consumo urbano colectivo, atención sanitaria, educación y el transporte. Así aparece un rasgo destacado del activismo popular en la región (aspectos que pueden observarse en otros lugares): no se caracteriza tanto por los movimientos reivindicativos como por la acción directa, tanto a nivel individual, informal o institucional. Los grupos populares y los defensores de las clases medias se dan a conocer mediante la acción directa; crean realidades sobre la base de que

las autoridades tendrán que avenirse, más tarde o más temprano, a ajustar sus políticas a las circunstancias. En breve "la presión desde abajo" en la experiencia del Oriente Medio reviste una gran importancia para el desarrollo social. Dado que los Estados se han desentendido gradualmente de sus responsabilidades sociales tradicionales, la situación de los pobres del Oriente Medio sería peor, si no hubiera habido acciones populares.

## Introduction

To what extent is "pressure from below" requisite for meaningful policy change and institutional reform conducive to social development, and for defending people's livelihoods and rights in the Middle East? This paper examines the extent to which activism from below in various forms has contributed to social change from below and to policy change from above in Middle Eastern countries. It discusses various types of social activism—carried out either by or on behalf of grassroots groups—including urban mass protests, organized labour, social and political Islam, NGOs and the "quite encroachment" strategy of the urban poor. The latter refers to non-collective direct actions of individuals and families to acquire basic necessities (land, shelter, urban collective consumption, informal jobs, business opportunities) in a quiet, unassuming, and illegal, fashion. Examining the potential of each for social change, this paper shows that both social Islam and NGOs gained a principal position during the 1990s. However, neither matches the strategy of quiet encroachment in pervasiveness and perseverance.

By the end of the 1990s, more people in the Middle East were living in cities[1] than in rural areas, with a large number living in poverty. Thus, this paper focuses on social activism at the urban grassroots level, principally, the urban poor. Reference to other types of activism, such as movements associated with human rights, democracy, women and farmers, is made only to highlight their relevance to the focus herein. Although I have attempted to survey as many countries in the Arab/Muslim Middle East as possible, Iran and Egypt are the central focus of this study.

## From Populism to Neoliberal Policies

Prior to the advent of political-economic restructuring in the 1980s, most Middle Eastern countries were dominated by either nationalist populist[2] (largely Arab Socialism) states (Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Turkey) or pro-Western rentier states (Arab Gulf states, Iran). Financed by oil or remittances, these mostly authoritarian states pursued state-led development strategies, attaining a remarkable 21 per cent annual average growth rate.[3] Income from oil allowed the rentier states to offer social provisions to many of their citizens; and the ideologically driven populist states dispensed significant economic and social welfare in education, health care, employment, housing and the like (Biblawi, 1990). For the post-colonial regimes, such dispensation was necessary to build a social basis among peasants, workers and the middle classes at a time when they were struggling against colonial powers and the entrenched ruling classes. But it was the state that acted as the moving force of economic and social development on behalf of the populace. Indeed, the economic prosperity and social

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1 The 1996 proportions of urban population in Middle Eastern countries were: Bahrain, 79 per cent; Egypt, 44 per cent; Iran, 60 per cent; Iraq, 73 per cent; Jordan, 70 per cent; Kuwait, 96 per cent; Lebanon, 86 per cent; Morocco, 47 per cent; Qatar, 91 per cent; Saudi Arabia, 80 per cent; Syria, 51 per cent; Tunisia, 56 per cent; and Turkey, 67 per cent.

2 By populist I refer to regimes that combine nationalist ideology, etatist economy and authoritarian polity, resting on controlled mobilization of the "popular classes" (workers, peasants, middle classes).

3 The average gross national product growth rates for selected Middle Eastern countries during 1970–1979 were: Egypt, 7.6 per cent; Iran, 22.2 per cent; Iraq, 28.8 per cent; Jordan, 19.6 per cent, Kuwait, 22.6 per cent; Saudi Arabia, 37.2 per cent; Syria, 15.4 per cent; and Turkey, 15.1 per cent. Sources: World Tables, 1991; IMF, 1994 and 1996.

welfare of most Arab Gulf states in the late 1970s attracted masses of Arab (in particular Egyptian and Palestinian) and non-Arab migrant workers.

Yet, the authoritarian nature of both types of states restricted effective political participation and the development of effective civil society organizations. The regimes' etatist ideology and patrimonial disposition rendered the states the main, if not sole, provider of livelihoods for citizens in exchange for their loyalty. According to this developmental ideology, the state is to industrialize, tend to agriculture, provide education and health services, and further social justice. Such ideology does not leave much room for the society to develop itself—for interests and groups to surface, compete and act autonomously. This kind of ideology, in most cases, has led to demobilization of the populace, or at best selective and controlled mobilization of certain pro-government segments of the population. Thus, corporatist unions and the National Union movement in Egypt under Nasser and currently in Syria, state-run syndicates and the Rastakhiz Party under the Shah, Ba'ath parties in Iraq and Syria, Islamic Associations under Ayatollah Khomeini, and People's Councils in Libya today, exemplify aspects of this controlled mobilization, or general demobilization.[4]

However, at the same time, by building the infrastructure for development, the states unintentionally created social forces—large working classes, especially national labour aristocracy, large middle classes, educated youth, and publicly active women—that would later confront the states, since few institutional channels were made available for their expression. With the exception of Lebanon and Turkey, political parties, independent press, professional syndicates, independent trade unions, and NGOs were limited in the region. Dissidents were not tolerated and many human rights were violated; judicial independence and citizen participation in political life were seriously restricted.

The advent of liberalization and marketization in the 1980s unleashed important socioeconomic changes. The free market economy has made consumer commodities available and enriched society's upper strata, while increasing income disparity. Many Middle Eastern states have retreated from the traditional social responsibilities that characterized their early populist development. Most social provisions have been undermined and poor people must rely on themselves for survival. For example, the Egyptian government, after some delays, began to implement the recommendations of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) to "adjust" the economy. Subsidies on basic food stuffs such as rice, sugar and cooking oil have been removed; and on items such as fuel, electricity and transport, subsidies have been reduced. Rent control has been reconsidered, a new land law ended farmers' land tenure, and pubic sector reform and privatization continue, all with significant social costs. In 1993, a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) report already warned of the "deteriorating social conditions in Egypt" (1993:2). While certain social indicators have improved, unemployment, urban income poverty and income gap reportedly increased in the 1990s (Westley, 1998; Amin, 1998; see also Assad and Roshdi, 1998). Similar changes are taking place in Jordan, but several specific events deepened the crisis there. Until the early 1990s, Jordan

[4] For a typology of the states in the Middle East, see Richards and Waterbury, 1990.

enjoyed remittances from its workers in the Persian Gulf. It also received grants, aid and subsidies from neighbouring Gulf countries and the United States for its delicate position in the Arab-Israeli conflict. With the second Gulf war, many of these financial channels were blocked. Structural adjustment was negotiated with the IMF in 1989, leading to the imposition of austerity measures (Majdalani, 1999a). Iran's government vacillated between etatism and free market policies. Liberalization efforts began in 1990, accelerated in 1993, but were then curtailed by public pressure. Attempts were indeed made to cut back on some subsidies, such as petrol, bus fare and urban services. Yet compared to other countries in the region, the progress of economic liberalization is slow, due partly to labour resistance[5] and partly to the struggle between political factions. Although the Syrian economy remains predominantly under state control, the private sector is being allowed to expand gradually (Hinnebusch, 1996).

Neoliberal economic policies are often said to come with a liberal political structure, although this does not always hold true. Nevertheless, there are indications in the region of changes in political openness in civil society institutions. The Middle East has not been immune to certain positive consequences of globalization. The spread of the concepts of human rights and political participation, often linked to political and economic diplomacy, has placed economic rights and citizen participation on the political agenda. Even gentle reminders by Western governments to their Middle Eastern allies about violation of citizen rights would empower people in the region. In light of anti-state sentiments of the 1990s, Western aid went not to governments, but largely to NGOs. Access to funding encouraged many people to establish local NGOs. The global discourse on civil society following the collapse of the Communist regimes also penetrated the Middle East, albeit to a lesser extent. A recent survey of civil society in the Middle East suggests that despite the cynicism of Orientalist writers, some kind of civil society does exist in the area.[6] According to A.R. Norton's survey, despite the authoritarian nature of many states, pressure from human rights activists, artists, writers, religious figures and professional groups has been brought to bear on governments for accountability and openness. In Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon and Jordan, the NGO sector has thrived. Trade unions and professional syndicates in Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, and Jordan remain quite vibrant; and in Lebanon they have worked to prevent fragmentation of the country into sectarian enclaves. In Kuwait, the male gatherings (*diwaniyya*) were central to the pro-democracy movement after the war, when they became the main opposition. In many Arab countries, Islamist movements and professional associations offered avenues of social and political participation. In Jordan, specific political reforms were introduced, including the National Charter in 1991, legislative elections, liberalization of political parties, and the lifting of martial law (Brynen, 1998:71–100), which together triggered public debate on social provisions. President Muhammad Khatami's rise to power in Iran in 1997 brought about considerable openness and people's participation—based on the concepts of civil society, rule of law and tolerance.

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[5] Personal communication with Sohrab Behdad, an Iranian economist expert on these matters.

[6] See Norton, 1995:7. He defines "civil society" as a "melange of associations, clubs, guilds, syndicates, federations, unions, parties, and groups come together to provide a buffer between state and citizen". Civil society implies shared identities, with citizenship and civility as part of the concept.

The expansion of civil society in the region is due to both internal and global factors. Beyond the pressure of globalization, it is attributed to the inability of the populist states to either incorporate or suppress the new social forces (such as lower middle and middle classes) which they helped generate. In other words, when states are unable to accommodate the needs of these groups, they seek civil society institutions to fulfil them. This has invigorated the Islamist movements and NGOs as manifestations of such alternative institutions (Ibrahim, 1998:373–385).

For the student of social movements, these two conditions (deteriorating social conditions and the creation of some political opportunity for expression) should trigger activism and pressure. How does the populace in the Middle East, particularly at the grassroots level, respond to changing social and economic realities? What are the patterns of social activism in the region?

## Social Response

Broadly speaking, four types of activism are readily conceivable: passive, survivalist struggles, collective protest and social movements. The "passive poor" perspective, expounded by policy makers and the elite, tends to consider the masses as politically passive, struggling to make ends meet. This idea has an essentialist overtone whereby the poor are given fixed characteristics such as fatalism, criminality, religiosity, lack of ambition, hopelessness, superstition and the like. Oscar Lewis's "culture of poverty", drawn from his work in Latin America, is a scholarly version of this view (Lewis, 1959).

The theoretical shortcomings of a culture of poverty are well defined: it is essentialist; it disregards the varying ways in which poor people in different cultures handle poverty; it is only one type of culture among many.[7] Sizable studies of popular quarters in the urban Middle East show the inadequacy of the culture of poverty. Unni Wikan (1997) has demonstrated that ambition, hope, social networking, and investment in children are the major "cultural capital" of Egypt's urban poor. Diane Singerman has highlighted the genius ways in which ordinary Cairenes create "avenues of political participation". They extend the family network for security, establish locally based, informal credit systems (*gamaiyyat*),[8] and get around government regulations on taxes and subsidies, pinching bits and pieces from the state (Singerman, 1995). And Homa Hoodfar (1997) unveils the ability of lower-class women to strategize their livelihoods.

The poor cope with deteriorating social and economic conditions by either stretching their resources to meet their needs or by cutting down on their consumption. Thus, primary earners in households are forced to work longer hours, while other family members—including children—must also work for pay. Some people resort to selling personal belongings for cash, begging and even prostitution. They reduce expenses by sharing living space with relatives, purchasing low-quality food and second-hand clothes, which they may share with others in the

[7] For criticism on the "culture of poverty" perspective, see Perlman, 1976 and Worsley, 1984:190–194.

[8] *Gamaiyyat*, the plural of *gamaiyya*, are locally based informal credit systems. Groups of families in the localities contribute money to a fund. Members needing money borrow from the fund on rotation without any interest.

household, limiting health and education expenses, and reducing meals to two or one per day. Internal migration and informal saving groups represent additional methods.[9]

Many of these grassroots activities, however, remain in the realm of "survival strategies". The survivalist model goes beyond the culture of poverty, implying that although severely constrained, the poor do not wait for fate to determine their lives. Rather, they are active in their own way to ensure survival. As a relative concept, coping strategies are conceivable not only among the poor, but perhaps everyone. These actions are the immediate responses of individuals to come to terms with a decline in their moral and material conditions, but often carried out at expense to themselves or fellow humans. Thus cutting down on consumption or working multiple jobs may ensure one's survival, but at the cost of possible malnutrition or exhaustion. These strategies are often adopted where resources and opportunities for resistance are seen to be absent, otherwise grassroots groups may engage in social actions. Urban mass protest is one such social action taken in the Middle East.

## Urban Mass Protests

The Middle East experienced numerous urban riots during the 1980s as various countries tried to reduce their deficits through austerity policies, such as cuts in consumer subsidies. This violated the social contract between the states and the masses, triggering anger and discontent. Although it is difficult to determine the precise profile of the protestors, the urban middle and lower classes were among the main actors. In August 1983, the Moroccan government reduced consumer subsidies by 20 per cent. Despite the fact that public sector salaries were raised by an equal amount, riots broke out in northern Morocco and other regions. Similar riots occurred in Tunis in 1984 (89 people killed), and Khartoum in 1982 and 1985 (unknown number of dead). In summer 1987, the Lebanese involved in the civil war staged a massive demonstration in Beirut against the drop in the Lebanese pound. Algeria was struck by cost-of-living riots in fall 1988, and Jordan experienced similar violence in 1989 (Richards and Waterbury, 1995:268).[10] These accounts exclude many political protests that raised issues of individual freedoms, regional autonomy and professional matters (for example, Egypt's Military Academy in 1986).

Despite the acceleration of neoliberal policies, urban mass protests ebbed noticeably during the 1990s. Several factors contributed to this. Alarmed by earlier unrest, governments imposed tighter control, while delaying or only gradually implementing the unpopular policies. Aside from internationally sponsored safety nets, such as the Social Fund for Development, additional outlets were offered by the growth of welfare NGOs and "social Islam".

Compared to other countries (notably Egypt), Iran remained an exception. Unlike the relatively quiet 1980s, six major protests took place in Tehran and other Iranian cities in the early 1990s.[11] In

[9] For Egypt, see Shoukry, 1993. For Iran, based upon my own observations.
[10] For a more thorough analysis see Walton and Seddon, 1994.
[11] A decision to extend the length of service for army personnel in Egypt in 1986 created unrest, which spread to different sectors of society. In Tabriz, three days of rioting in July 1992 ensued after a dispute between the moral police and some youths after a soccer match. In Qazwin in 1994, people rampaged when Tehran's Parliament

August 1991 squatters in a Tehran district rioted against municipality agents who had begun demolishing their illegal shacks. Rioting occurred in the city of Shiraz in March 1992 when 300 disabled war veterans held a protest and this inspired squatters to protest against forced eviction. Mass unrest in the city of Arak caused hundreds of people to be arrested or detained. But the most dramatic civil unrest took place in the city of Mashad in 1992, and Tehran's Islamshahr in 1995. In Mashad, discontent was triggered by squatters whose demands for legalization of their communities had been rejected by the municipality. The army failed to put down the massive uprising that followed: more than 100 buildings and stores were destroyed; 300 people were arrested; and at least 12 people were killed. Three days of rioting in Islamshahr, a large informal community in South Tehran, in April 1995 had to do with the postwar economic reforms under President Hashemi Rafsanjani. It was started by some 200 youths who demanded better supplies of fresh water and a decrease in bus fares. This grew into a demonstration of 50,000 poor people protesting against price rises for public transport and fuel.[12] The experience of the Islamic revolution and the war with Iraq distinguish Iran from its regional counterparts. While many regimes in the Middle East were shedding their populism during the 1980s and 1990s, this process began in Iran only after the revolution. The Islamic regime's pro-downtrodden (*mustaz'afin*) rhetoric contributed to the mobilization of grassroots groups. Once the war that had suppressed internal dissent ended, a new opportunity for collective activities arose.

The urban protests in the Middle East had mixed results. Following immediate repression, the governments in many cases had to revoke the unpopular measures (as in Egypt in 1977, Tunisia and Morocco in 1984, Sudan in 1985, Algeria in 1988, Jordan in 1989, and Iran many times). At times, they have made tactical concessions, such as wage increases. However, these affect only the wage earners and are implemented at the cost of self-employed poor people and the unemployed (Walton and Seddon, 1994:205–214). When protests are local or small scale, governments usually manage to end them by force. In their campaign against downsizing, workers of Kafr Eddawar, an industrial town in northern Egypt, for example, managed to win only part of their demands. The Egyptian farmers' protests across isolated villages in 1998 failed to modify a new policy that ended farmers' land tenure. However, when social protests gain national support by embracing diverse issues and actors (such as students and the middle class making economic as well as political claims), they often follow significant changes including political reform (as in Algeria, Jordan, Tunisia and Turkey in the late 1980s).

Despite their drama and at times remarkable impacts, urban mass protests are usually spontaneous, *ad hoc*, and consequently uncommon; they often involve violence and a risk of repression. Urban riots are a response to the absence of effective, institutionalized mechanisms of conflict resolution. Social groups without an institutional power of disruption (such as the unemployed who cannot strike) and those who enjoy such power but find it inadequate (workers, students) are likely to follow leaders initiating mass protests. However, this is not to say, as some have claimed, that Middle Eastern masses lack a "truly collective life", resorting

refused to grant the city province status. In Tehran and eight other cities, student unrest and widespread street demonstrations took place in summer 1999 following a deliberate attack by the Basij groups (informal youth groups supported by conservative elements of the Iranian state) against students in a Tehran University dormitory.

[12] For a more detailed discussion of urban unrest in Iran, see Bayat, 1997, Chapter 5.

instead to "mob action".[13] For in favourable conditions, they also engage in modern forms of collective action, such as trade unionism.

## Organized Labour

Unlike urban riots, trade unionism represents a sustained institution through which working people defend their rights or exert pressure on economic elites and governments to bring about social change. Trade unions have the potential to respond rapidly and systematically to unjust labour practices, distributive issues and political matters.

Originally, trade unions in the Middle East emerged in the context of European colonial domination. Their struggles involved both class and nationalist dimensions—usually a tense strategic position. With independence, most trade union organizations were integrated into the state structure or the ruling parties, resulting in the current arrangement where single and compulsory unions are the majority of labour organizations. These types of unions—in which public sector workers constitute the core membership—operate in countries with a populist past (such as Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Syria), as well as in Yemen and Kuwait. The Arab Gulf states, using mostly foreign workers, impose tough discipline and prevent labour organizations in exchange for relatively high pay. Surveillance, however, has not prevented occasional outbreaks of labour unrest, such as the Palestinian workers' strike in the Saudi oil industry in the 1980s, and the Egyptian workers' riots against discrimination in Kuwait in October 1999 (**Al-Ahali**, 1999:3). Only Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Turkey have pluralist unions relatively independent from the state or ruling parties.

Of course, union structure affects workers' ability to maintain or advance their gains. Independent unions are more likely than corporatist ones to defend workers' rights. However, in the experience of the region, workers tend to utilize existing, corporatist organizations to further their interests. In Iran, the earlier labour unions close to the Tudeh Communist Party played a crucial role in the workplace and in national politics during the interwar periods—until the CIA-engineered coup of 1953 crushed both the communist and labour movements. In the following years until the revolution of 1979, the Shah's regime imposed tight controls on labour through the secret police and state-run syndicates. This, however, did not prevent the periodic outbreak of strikes. With the revolution of 1979, plant-level workers' councils (*shuras*) emerged, some of which managed the workplaces. In the meantime, in 1979–1980, unemployed workers organized, struggled and won financial aid for the jobless. They also forced the government to create jobs, reopen shut-down industries, and rush to reconstruct the economy after the revolution.[14] In the following years, the *shuras* gradually turned into workplace syndicates. They currently operate under the umbrella of Workers House (*Khane-ye Kargar*), a national labour organization that has a daily publication and representatives in Parliament.[15]

[13] See, for instance, Lapidus, 1967:107.
[14] For details on unemployed movements in Iran, see Bayat, 1997d.
[15] For a detailed discussion of the workers' councils in Iran, see Bayat, 1987.

Following a period of relative independence during the liberal era (1928–1952), Egyptian unions underwent a corporatist transformation during Nasser's populist era, at a time when public sector workers enjoyed relative prosperity. Privatization and public sector reform, then, are a major concern of Egyptian unions today. The Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (DISK), dominated modern industry in Turkey starting in 1967. It organized strikes against austerity, and was a factor for military intervention in 1980 that outlawed DISK; but Turk-Is, the main moderate union, continued operation. Following a decade of control, union activities resumed when the military retreated in the mid-1980s. The non-sectarian strikes for peace of the Confederation Generales Travailleurs Libanaise in Beirut in 1986, 1988 and 1990 reflected a class action of this labour union (Johnson, 1997:338–339).

Historical developments aside, organized public sector workers, more than any other group, currently suffer the immediate consequences of economic adjustment. Thus trade unions are concerned with, and often struggle against, cuts in consumer subsidies, price rises, reduced wages and allowances, layoffs and government interference in union affairs. A human rights organization reported 70 strikes in large companies in Egypt during 1998, most of which involved state security forces. The main cause of these industrial actions was "government reform policy".[16] Citing official statements, in early 1999 the Egyptian press reported the occurrence of more than five strikes or sit-ins per week. They resulted largely from reductions in allowances and perks and from the introduction of fines (**Al-Wafd**, 1999:1). In Iran, the 1990s witnessed a rapid rise in worker strikes. During the first half of 1991, some 2,000 strikes were reported (Walton and Seddon, 1994:210). According to one account, strikes by workers trying to catch up with inflation were so common that the authorities hardly noticed them.[17] New labour laws, drafted to accord with the neoliberal era and economic realities, have been hotly contested, since they often strip workers of their few traditional rights, notably job security. In 1994 in Egypt, the labour unions compelled government and business to accept an exchange of "the right to strike for the right to fire" (Posusney, 1997:5). In Iran, labour law remained a matter of dispute for over a decade between the ruling clergy and pro-labour forces.

Some observers underestimate the capacity of organized labour in the Middle East for influencing social and political change, on the grounds that strikes, workers' strongest tool for leverage, are illegal and often involve the threat of arrest and imprisonment for workers. In addition, they argue, states usually co-opt the leaderships of these largely corporatist labour unions, thus rendering union activism practically ineffective.[18] It is true that strikes are illegal and labour leaders may be bought off, with many of them being part of the ruling parties and the state bureaucracy. However, "labor has been able to pursue economic demands and wring concessions from the state, in spite of corporatist controls"; its ability to do so "is contingent on the specific issue at hand and how policy around that issue is made" (Posusney, 1997:10). In fact, even corporatist leadership must be somehow responsive to the views and concerns of rank and file members. Not only do labour leaders often express opposition to certain

[16] See, for instance, Land Centre for Human Rights, 1998.
[17] **Middle East Economic Digest**, special report on Iran, 21 February 1991.
[18] See, for instance, Richards and Waterbury, 1990:267.

government policies (such as the removal of subsidies, privatization and aspects of labour law), but the rank and file tend to wage unofficial industrial action when leadership fails to take the initiative. In Egypt the opposition of organized labour has been the main factor causing the delay or renegotiation of terms of adjustment with the IMF. Previous governmental attempts, under Nasser and Sadat, and the current impasse to implement privatization were thwarted by labour opposition. In September 1988, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak told a rally, "we need economic reform, but I've told the IMF that this reform must be in line with our social and economic situation and the standard of living" (Walton and Seddon, 1994:185).

Notwithstanding its social and political impact, organized labour in the Middle East constitutes only a small portion of the total workforce. The vast majority are self-employed, and the majority of wage earners work in small workshops in which paternalistic labour relations prevail. On the whole, between one third and one half of the workforce in cities (Egypt, 43 per cent; Iran, 35 per cent; Turkey, 36 per cent; and Yemen, 70 per cent) are active in the informal sector, and thus remain unorganized and beyond the provisions of labour law.[19] Although tension between bosses and employees is not uncommon in these paternalistic establishments, labourers are more likely to remain loyal to their bosses than to form alliances with workers in the shop next door.

## Community Activism

Rather than the workplace, then, urban grassroots groups may find that the community or neighbourhood offers a sense of common identity and a ground for collective action. People are, for the most part, facing the same challenges of day-to-day living: finding secure housing, being able to pay rent, acquiring urban amenities, and having adequate schools, clinics, cultural centres and the like. Community-based collective struggles for such "collective consumption" through institutional settings is what in a sense characterizes "urban social movements". This kind of community activism, often contentious, should be distinguished from the notion of "community development". The latter has had the double effect of maintaining the status quo and engendering social change. Indeed, the program of community development in the West was originally aimed at "counter-insurgency against communism" (in the colonies), containment of discontent among the black underclass (in the United States) and the "management of the poor" by providing "community solution" (in the United Kingdom).[20] Yet, community development may also open space to cultivate resistance against the elite classes and foster social change. This is often the case when grassroots groups initiate development on their own, or are mobilized by local leaders, NGOs, religious groups, or politicians (as in the Brazilian Barrios or the Self-Employed Women's Association in India). Here mobilization may not necessarily be contentious; it could express co-operative community engagement whereby people work together to improve their lives and communities with a good degree of control over decisions and outcomes.

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[19] For more detailed figures, see Richards and Waterbury, 1994:140.

[20] For a discussion on community development and social movements see **Community Development Journal**, Special Issue, Vol. 32, No. 3, July 1997; see especially Popple and Shaw, 1999:101–198.

How do Middle Eastern cities fare in terms of such community activism? In recent years community mobilizations that bore a resemblance to urban social movements took place in some Middle Eastern cities. In Ezbat Mekawy, a low-income community in Cairo, the people campaigned against industrial pollution created by smelter plants that caused major health and environmental problems (Tewfik, 1995 and 1997). They used traditional strategies of communication within the community, as well as modern tactics such as engaging the media, lobbying politicians and accessing the court system as a means of registering opposition. In another example, members of the Shubra Al-Khaima community rapidly responded to a Governorate's (municipality) plan in August 1994 to demolish an unauthorized section of a community complex. The complex included a mosque, a clinic and a pharmacy, which took inhabitants 10 years to self-fund and build. The Governorate backed down from demolition, and the Interior Minister dismissed a major general for misconduct (Halawi, 1994).

At certain periods—notably when states become more vulnerable—even more enduring and large-scale mobilization develops. Shantytown (*gecekundu*) construction in Turkish cities has resulted from collective land occupation by largely rural migrants. After the 1967 war, collective land takeovers and squatting occurred in Alexandria, Egypt by people driven from their homes as a result of the hostilities. Similarly, in Beirut during the civil war many displaced families were mobilized to occupy vacant homes; and thousands from the south moved to the southern suburb (*dahiya*) of the city, building illegal settlements that currently make up 40 per cent of housing in the area. The Iranian case is as remarkable. Immediately after the Iranian revolution of 1979, many poor families took advantage of the collapse of police control by taking over hundreds of vacant homes and half-finished apartment blocks, refurbishing them as their own properties. In them, they established apartment councils (*shura-ye apartman*) to discuss common matters of concern. As the option of home squatting was limited, land takeover and illegal construction accelerated, despite a police crackdown. With the help of local and outside mobilizers, squatters got together and demanded electricity and running water; when they were refused or encountered delays, they resorted to do-it-yourself mechanisms of acquiring them illegally. They established roads, opened clinics and stores, constructed mosques and libraries, and organized refuse collection. They further set up associations and community networks, and participated in local consumer co-operatives. A new and more autonomous way of living, functioning and organizing the community was in the making.[21] Perhaps the most remarkable examples were the Palestinian popular organizations (for women, youth, neighbourhoods and health) that emerged in villages and cities during the Intifada.[22]

However, when compared to some Latin American countries, these experiences seem uncommon. They tend to happen in extraordinary social and political circumstances—revolutionary conditions, in times of crisis and war when the state is undermined, or when it is totally absent, as in Palestine. Thus, few such activities become a pattern for sustained social mobilization and institutionalization in normal conditions. Once the exceptional conditions (in which these types of community mobilizations took place) come to an end, the experiments begin to wither or

[21] For a detailed discussion of these kinds of movements, see Bayat, 1997b, Chapters 4 and 5.
[22] For popular organizations in Palestine, see Hiltermann, 1991.

become distorted. In Iran, community activism did not have the chance to consolidate. Lack of experience, rivalry between outside mobilizers and political groupings, and especially the hostility of the government, seriously undermined the experiment. During the war with Iraq, many poor neighbourhoods in the cities, therefore, functioned around the official mosque associations. The latter offered assistance to local people by distributing basic necessities such as food, while it also served to control political discontent in the neighbourhoods. By the late 1980s, the mosque associations dwindled and neighbourhood associations became an extension of the state without much mobilizational impact. Indeed, they resembled the community development associations (CDAs), 3,000 of which currently operate throughout Egypt.[23] Although CDAs improve the poor's social well-being, their mobilizing impact is minimal. As a field researcher working in a popular quarter of Cairo stated, "Even in the highly politicized Sayyeda Zeinab, organized social action that involves the area's inhabitants seems minimal. Residents' role is usually limited to that of beneficiaries of whatever services that are available" (El-Karanshawy, 1998).

Needless to say, urban communities are not black holes, devoid of social interaction. Surely they are more than small villages subject to individualism, anonymity and competition; they contain numerous forms of networks and institutions. In the modern city of Tehran, neighbourly relations, according to a recent study, still prevail; residents assist each other, pay visits, consult and take part in weddings and funerals.[24] In Egyptian cities, migrant associations have institutionalized some of these functions. Funeral activities and maintaining cemeteries for people from "home villages" are their main activity.[25] Influential individuals may take advantage of the state-controlled neighbourhood councils (*majalis el-mahalliah*, *shura-ye mahallat*). But the informal credit system (*gamaiyyat*) is perhaps the most important form of community network in urban Egypt, and to a lesser degree in Iran.

However, social networks that extend beyond kinship and ethnicity remain largely casual, unstructured and paternalistic. The weakness of civic or non-kinship co-operation at the community level only reinforces traditional hierarchical and paternalistic relations with people who depend on local leaders (*kubbar*, *shaikhs* or Friday prayer leaders), problem solvers, and even local bullies (*laats* or *baltagiyya*) more than on broad-based social activism. In such social conditions, modern institutions such as political party branches, local NGOs or police are susceptible to clientelism. So, while the Egyptian lower classes, for instance, are aware of environmental problems, they do little in the way of undertaking collective action, either through communal engagement to upgrade the community itself, or through contentious protest actions to demand that officials do it for them (Hopkins et al., 1998).

Why is it that community activism—a social action for collective consumption—is relatively uncommon in the Middle East? Why is the region a "blank space on the global map of community action", as some observers have put it?[26]

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[23] For a good analysis of the CDAs, see Mahfouz, 1992.
[24] On this survey, see Sadiq Sarvestani, 1997.
[25] In 1990, there were 823 such associations, of which 80 per cent were concentrated in greater Cairo. See Tanada, 1996.
[26] See, for instance, Durning, 1989:71.

One reason has to do with the legacy of populism that continues to influence the political behaviour of ordinary people in most Middle Eastern countries. Populist regimes established a social contract between the lower/middle classes and the state, whereby the state agreed to provide basic necessities in exchange for support, social peace, and consequent demobilization, or controlled mobilization. This was an agreement between the state and not independent classes, but a shapeless mass, an aggregate of individuals and corporate institutions in which independent collective identity and action were seriously undermined.[27] While the social contract is currently waning and market forces are escalating, many people continue to look at the state as the main source of protection—as well as misfortune. In countries where authoritarian populism still predominates (such as Iran, Libya and Syria), statesmen's dread of the public sphere has given to regimes a structure that tends to incarcerate the population (Middle East Report, 1999).

The legacy of populism has also contributed to the tendency among many ordinary people to seek individualistic solutions to their problems.[28] More often than not, families of different social strata tend to compete when resources are scarce. This is more evident in the new and heterogeneous communities (such as Dar es Salaam, Madinat Al-Nahda and Kafr Seif in Cairo; and Islamshahr and Khak-e Sefid in Tehran) than in the old city quarters where the relative homogeneity of inhabitants and long-term residence have produced a spatial identity. The coexistence of identifiable strata in a community, such as old-timers and newcomers, those with and without security of tenure, and different ethnic groups, often sharpens competition and leads to conflict.[29] Consequently, with solidarity being intangible among the people, recourse in the mighty state—this provider and punisher—becomes an alternative way to achieve their goals. Many of them know, however, that the bureaucracy is unable or unwilling to respond formally to the growing demands of the urban poor, and they thus tend to seek informal, individualistic and even opportunistic ways of cultivating connections (*wasta* or *parti*), including bribing officials. "The best way to get whatever you want done," stated a resident of Sayyeda Zeinab district of Cairo, "is to pay a bribe to any of the assistants of any of the area's big politicians and they will do for you whatever you want" (El-Karanshawy, 1998:11).

A key contributor to such social response is the lack of opportunities for mobilization. The advent of neoliberal economies in the Middle East has not been sufficiently accompanied by a democratic polity.[30] Simply put, most governments in the region are still apprehensive about losing political space and so tend to restrict independent collective mobilization. In many states, public demonstrations and gatherings are illegal. The restrictive "Emergency Law" in Egypt, with a relatively more liberal regime, has remained in force since the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981. As a street vendor in Cairo's Madinat al-Nahda reminded us, "If I call my

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27 For some of these discussions in the Egyptian context, see Bayat, 1993.

28 This segment draws heavily on my article on Egypt in Bayat, 1996.

29 As was the case in the poor Cairo community of Kafr Seif, where villagers, newcomers, shanty dwellers and tent dwellers lived side by side. Similar problems along ethnic lines could be observed in the Khak-e Safid squatter settlement in Tehran. In Kafr Seif, villagers feared that the shanty dwellers and the tent dwellers might jeopardize their own insecure position and the latter groups kept quiet so as not to be noticed by the municipality. And in Khak-e Safid, non-Azeri people would accuse Azeri settlers of being involved in illicit activities, such as drug dealing. For a report on Kafr Seif, see Abdel Taher, 1986. For Khak-e Safid, see Khosrowkhavar, 1992.

30 See the perceptive article by Al-Sayyid, 1995.

neighbouring street vendor to get together and do something collectively, this would be called mobilization, and I could be taken in for that" (Eid, 1998:88). A Land Centre for Human Rights account of farmers' protests against the new Land Law in Egypt, in 25 villages over an eight-month period, reported 15 deaths, 218 injuries and 822 arrests (Ismail, 1998:136).

However, where opportunities arise—when states are undermined and political restrictions removed—we observe an upsurge of participation from below, either out of necessity of self-help or of desire to take responsibility. The collapse of the Shah's regime in Iran triggered a sudden rise of grassroots mobilization in factories (workers councils), farms (peasant councils), universities and communities (neighbourhood councils). And again after years of repression, once the victory of pro-reform President Khatami opened an opportunity, public interest in participation mounted. "We witness," stated a leader of the new Tehran City Council, "a very energetic desire for public participation; we constantly receive requests from young people asking for neighbourhood meeting places and sports fields, offering to maintain and operate the facilities themselves once they are established" (Middle East Report, 1999). The collapse of the state during the Lebanese civil war generated community participation in the Muslim south, which continues today. Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, networks of volunteer and associational groups played a vital role not only in supporting civil disobedience, but in filling the vacuum created by loss of municipal services (Ghabra, 1991). The Palestinian Popular Organizations were the main organs of social provisioning and development in the Occupied Territories both during the Intifada, and after (Hiltermann, 1991).

Once states begin to control popular initiatives, the grassroots level tends to lose interest, with the result that its activism fails to sustain itself. As the supporting environment would be lacking, they fail to experiment and learn new ways of doing things. Thus most of the genuine, popular institutions transform into an extension of the state. Even a 1996 initiative by the Tehran Municipality to set up consultative associations of local leaders in neighbourhoods—to encourage people's participation in local development and to fight "alienation"—did not go very far. For as unelected bodies with no procedures or mechanisms for local participation, they failed to become truly representative of the people.[31] Although grassroots actors may use such official organizations to further their interests, to mature and evolve they must operate within a democratic structure.

Political democracy is instrumental in another way. In a truly competitive polity, political forces are compelled to bargain with and thus mobilize grassroots groups to win their electoral support. This is how the urban poor in Iran became the subject of intense competition between the ruling clergy and various oppositional groups. But things had changed since the 1980s, when the ruling clergy monopolized power, pursuing instead a strategy of mixing repression with redistributive policy. In comparison, a sustained competitive system in Turkey allowed the Islamist Rifah Party (RP) to mobilize the urban masses in the 26 municipalities it controlled, thereby giving the electorates strong bargaining power. Manipulative electoral practices in

[31] For an analysis of the functions of the outcome of the consultative associations, see Tabrizi, 1997.

Egypt render the oppositional parties able to engage only in restricted local campaigns, as in Ezbet Mikawy.

Finally, collective patronage may also unintentionally lead to social and political mobilization when patrons bargain with their poor clients' leaders in their quest for personal/political power. The mobilization of street vendors in Mexico City, through negotiation between the vendors unions' leaders and politicians, is partially the result of this type of political patronage (Cross, 1998). In much of the Middle East (except for Lebanon, or the Istanbul Street car parkers "mafia"), however, patronage seems to work through individual channels and rarely leads to group activities. Favours are granted more to individuals or families (in getting security of tenure or jobs, for instance) than groups; the former can then bargain with their patron for support.

In brief, community activism in the sense of urban social movement seems to be largely a Latin American model rooted in socio-political conditions of this region (with the exception of South Africa and India). Local soup kitchens, neighbourhood associations, church groups and street trade unions are hardly common features of the Middle East. The prevalence of authoritarian states and the legacy of populism, together with the strength of family and kinship ties in this region, render primary solidarities more pertinent than secondary associations and social movements.

## Islamist Movements and Social Development

There is, however, an argument that views the current Islamist movements in the region as the Middle Eastern model of urban social movements. In this view, Islamism, in particular "social Islam", articulates the concerns and struggles of underprivileged urban Middle Easterners. For many, the seemingly disadvantaged background of the radical Islamists (in Egypt) is indicative of the nature of the movements. Others look at the locations of their activities, in the poor areas, to arrive at a similar conclusion.[32]

No doubt Islamist movements, notably that of "social Islam", represent a significant means through which some disadvantaged groups survive hardship or better their lives. Islamist movements contribute to social welfare primarily by direct provision of services, such as health care, education and financial aid, as well as involvement in community development and social networks, most of which are established in local, non-governmental mosques. In addition, Islamist movements tend to foster social competition, wherein other religious and secular organizations are compelled to become involved in community work. Finally, governments, in order to out-manoeuvre the Islamists and regain legitimacy, are often forced to implement social policies in favour of the poor.

Although Islamic social welfare activities have a long history in the Middle East, recent decades have seen an unprecedented upsurge. During the growth of Islamism in Turkey in 1980s, "mosques and their attendant religious associations represented direct channels of neighbour-

[32] See, for instance, Kepel, 1986; Ayubi, 1991; and Ismail, forthcoming.

hood organization and recruitment" (Margulies and Yildizoglu, 1996:149). The Islamist RP continued in the 1990s to focus on grassroots community issues—"garbage, potholes and mud", as was pertinent in Turkey (Akinci, 1999:77). Many RP mayoral candidates even distributed in-kind incentives to secure support. Their grassroots strategy led to massive victory in the 1994 elections, capturing 327 municipalities throughout the country, including Ankara and Istanbul. Since then, mayors have boasted of addressing the problems of congested transportation, water and fuel shortages, inadequate housing, pollution, corruption and the like (Akinci, 1999:78–79). The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a coalition of different Islamist parties in Algeria, captured municipal elections in June 1990 in a similar fashion. When the Algerian National Liberation Front allowed a multiparty system in 1989, FIS activists began to work with existing charity associations (mosque-centred networks), which had been established in the 1980s by religious activists. Supported by the charity associations, the FIS brought their political ideas into the neighbourhoods (Verges, 1996).

In a quite different context, Hezbollah, filled the vacuum created by the absence of the state in southern Lebanon to construct the infrastructure for social development. During the 1980s, Hezbollah began gradually to address social problems faced by the Shi'a community. The movement then developed plans to offer medical care, hospital treatment, electricity and water supply. It also paved roads, built housing, managed sewage systems, set up gas stations, operated schools, nurseries, hospitals and sport centres (Kfoury, 1996). It provided 130,000 scholarships, aid for 135,000 needy families and interest-free loans. Repairing war-damaged houses and attending to the daily needs of the Shi'a population were priority areas of intervention (Majdalani, 1999b:13).

Egypt's "social Islam" has become perhaps the most pervasive in the Middle East. In the last two decades, the shortcomings of traditional top-down planning and implementing development objectives in Egypt boosted the expansion of local and small scale NGOs. Islamic associations, often centred in mosques built and controlled by the people (*ahli* mosques) rather than the state, were quick to utilize the opportunity and grew extensively. They accounted for one third of the total private voluntary organizations (PVOs) in the late 1980s,[33] and at least 50 per cent of all welfare associations, or 6,327 in the late 1990s,[34] offering charity and health services to millions of Egyptians. Today, more than 4,000 religious tax (*zakat*) committees organized in mosques mediate between donors and the needy. Some estimates put the number of beneficiaries of Islamic welfare (health) services at 15 million people (in 1992), compared to 4.5 million in 1980 (Qandil, 1998:145–146). Indeed, it appeared that the mosques came to provide alternative support services to low-income people to compensate for the government's withdrawal of social provisions after more liberal economic policies. As a typical association, the Islamic Community Development Association in Ezbat Zein in Cairo, offered classes on the Koran but also provided a sewing centre, daycare, medical treatment, remedial tutoring, a food co-operative, and septic tank cleaning (Sullivan, 1994:65–68). Others offered video clubs, computer training centres, and similar services to cater to the needs of such groups as high school graduates who are potential

[33] This section on Islamic PVOs in Egypt relies heavily on Bayat, 1998c.
[34] This figure was cited by the current Minister of Social Affairs, Mervat Tallawi, in **Aquidati**, 28 October 1997, p. 17.

recruits of the radical political Islamists. The Ansar al-Muhammadiya Association in the poor community of Imbaba built a mosque, two schools, a kindergarten, an outpatient clinic and an elaborate welfare program (Badawi, 1999:110). Contrary to the common perception, radical Islamists, al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya and al-Jihad, were far less involved in urban community work. As rural and urban guerrillas, their strategy centred on armed attacks, targeting state officials, police and tourism. Nonetheless, they combined political agitation with welfare activities where possible, such as in the poor Cairo quarters of Ain Al-Shams and Imbaba (Mubarak, 1995).

What makes all of these activities particularly "Islamic" is the combination of an alternative to both the state and the private sector, the religious convictions of many activists, Islamic-based funding and, finally, the provision of affordable social services. It is widely agreed that such Islamic community activities often outdo their secular counterparts. The availability of funding in the form of a *zakat* of 2.5 per cent of income from Muslim businesses and activists, various donations (*sadaqat*), a 20 per cent tax (*khums*) levied on the savings of Shi'a Muslims, and external aid (such as from Iran to Hezbollah, and Saudi Arabia to the FIS) render these associations comparatively advantageous. In the early 1990s, the Nasser Bank, which supervises the *zakat* committees in Egypt, reported a *zakat* fund of $10 million (Qandil, 1998:146). Additional advantages include the spirit of voluntarism, as well as legal favour. That is, unlike secular NGOs, which have to clear many bureaucratic hurdles to raise funds, religious PVOs tend to get around the law by obtaining donations and other contributions from Muslim believers in places of prayer (Ibrahim, 1996a and Qandil, 1993b).

In the meantime, the grassroots activities of the Islamists compelled other social forces to enter into the competition, hoping to share political space. The Turkish religious orders (*tariqas*), emulated each other's community activities through mosques and their attendant associations (Margulies and Yildizoglu, 1996:149). Al-Azhar, the institution of the Islamic establishment in Egypt, began to offer social services to the needy similar to those being given by political Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brothers and al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya. Similarly, secular groups (notably NGOs), seem to work hard to offer their own piecemeal alternatives. An estimated five million poor benefited from the health, educational, financial and community services of Egyptian PVOs in 1990 (Ibrahim, 1996a:34). In addition, the governments were also affected, as they feared losing political space to the Islamists. The Egyptian government's measures to upgrade slums and squatter areas in the early 1990s clearly reflected the influence of Imbaba, a slum community in Cairo where in 1991 militant Islamists had created, according to foreign media, "a state within the state". Not surprisingly, west Munira of Imbaba, the stronghold of the Islamists, has been allocated more funding for its development than any other district in north Guiza, on the east side of Cairo. Between 1992/93 and 1995/96, some E£ 372.5 million ($106.3 million) was spent on construction and upgrading in this area (**Al-Ahram**, 1996:12).

Given these activities, to what extent does Islamism represent a Middle Eastern model of urban social movements? To what degree do the latter embody grassroots activism in communities or work collectives? Or how far do the Islamists encourage grassroots groups to participate in their

own affairs, to defend and extend their social rights? Before addressing these questions, it is important to realize that Islamist movements vary greatly in objectives and strategy. Political Islamists call for the creation of an Islamic state (as in Iran, Taliban, radical Egyptian Islamists); others opt for cultural change within the existing polity (many affluent Egyptian Islamist families, some Muslim Brother supporters); still others are concerned with highlighting Islam's welfarist spirit and institutions. While overlap between these versions is conceivable, a distinction between them is equally valid.

I would suggest, nevertheless, that while Islamism may be considered a form of social movement, it does not express *an* urban social movement. The identity of Islamism does not derive from its particular concern for the urban disenfranchised. It has never articulated an alternative urban order around which to mobilize community members. While often seen as deserving welfare recipients, and being guided by leaders, citizens are rarely expected to participate actively in making their communities.

The Islamist movements as such have more extensive aims than simply focusing on the disenfranchised, although many activists work through the poor communities to pursue broader objectives. Not all, however, operate in this fashion. For example, in Iran before the revolution, neither the clergy nor the non-clerical Islamists, such as Ali Shariati, were particularly interested in mobilizing the poor; nor did the poor take an active part in the Islamic revolution. Mobilization of the urban grassroots by the ruling clergy in Iran began mainly *after* the revolution. The clergy lent their support to the poor through the rhetoric of the *mustaz'afin*, first, to disarm the left and the Mujahedin of the latter's pro-lower-class stands; and second, to win over the poor as the social basis of their struggles against the left, liberals and the remnants of the ancient regime. In fact, the mobilized poor contributed significantly to the regime's drive toward populism. However, the honeymoon between the poor and the ruling clergy was over by the time the Islamic state consolidated itself. In the process, the poor were polarized. One segment was integrated into the state structure as members of the revolutionary institutions, such as Hezbollahi groups, Revolutionary Guards, Basij, Construction Crusade and the like.[35] The rest of the poor remained outside, and their struggles for self-development (occupying homes and hotels, land squatting, illegal construction, and striving to secure urban services and jobs) brought them into conflict with the Islamic state.[36]

The Lebanese Hezbollah with its law enforcement apparatus fell somewhere between a social movement and a quasi state. Among other things, the Hezbollah constructed infrastructure for social development, but few of these services were free. It did "not distribute free food for the poor, nor does it waive school fees for school children from impoverished families" (Kfoury, 1996:142). Currently, the Hezbollah and Amal movements control the poor suburban munici-

[35] Hezbollahi refers to the Ansar-e Hezbollah, often violent informal groups organized by some conservative personalities. They are mobilized to disrupt rallies, attack pro-reform demonstrations, and to support pro-conservative rallies. Basij refers to volunteer groups organized by the state during the war with Iraq. They are still used to quell mass unrest when police and Revolutionary Guard involvement proves insufficient. Construction Crusade was initially a large volunteer group, organized in the early years of the revolution for the purpose of rural development.

[36] For details, see Bayat, 1997b.

palities in south Beirut. Despite utilizing discourses of participation and mobilization (vocabularies imposed by the United Nations Development Programme's intervention in the area), their attitudes toward the local people remain paternalistic. They often select (not elect) people for municipality councils and co-operate with those NGOs closest to them (Harb el-Kak, 1999). On the other hand, in tandem with grassroots mobilization, the RP and the FIS adopted exclusivist and divisive measures. The RP-dominated municipalities practiced nepotism and patronage, laid off secular employees in favour of religious ones, favoured contractors who donated money to the RP, and overlooked illegal construction in exchange for donations. Their policy of "cultural purification" tended to divide the communities (Akinci, 1999). Taking a similarly exclusionary stand, the Egyptian al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya in Imbaba forced women to veil themselves; burned video shops and hairdressing salons and beat men who drank alcohol. The Christian residents turned fearful and insecure.

While organized labour in general remained out of the Egyptian Islamists' reach, the latter's relationship with the urban poor has been complex.[37] Contrary to common perception, Islamic social welfare organizations in Egypt are not places for Islamist political activities. They simply act as service organizations. The vast majority have no link to political Islam as such. Only a few were related to the Muslim Brothers and a mere handful to the radical Islamists, notably al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya. The rest operate on the basis of either humanitarian commitment or simple business rationale in a country where the market for "Islamic commodities" (such as Islamic fashion, books, education and entertainment) has been thriving. The explicit political stance emerged not in the welfare associations in poor areas, but in middle-class neighbourhoods, and in professional associations for doctors, engineers and lawyers, who were all allied with the Muslim Brotherhood (Qandil, 1993a and Rosefsky Wickham, 1996). However, the spread of Islamic services and commodities is not restricted to poor neighbourhoods and Muslims, but extends to middle-class and affluent districts and the Christian community as well. Islamic schools are not free of charge and are private institutions, which virtually excludes the poor. In the Imbaba slum, for instance, only a fraction were admitted free of charge (Badawi, 1999). Islamic schools are geared largely toward urban, well-to-do middle classes.

Although it has links to diverse classes, Islamism in the Middle East is primarily the movement of not the disenfranchised but the marginalized middle classes. In turn, middle-class agitators tend to activate youth and educated unemployed people, as well as the socially well-to-do and politically marginalized groups; it is these groups that are considered the main agents of social change.[38] Activities among the poor are largely limited to the provision of social services, often charity, and mobilization during elections where free balloting takes place. In exchange, the Muslim poor in the cities approach the Islamists in pragmatic terms. Many people who have no direct interaction with the Islamists remain confused as to their intentions. Others who benefit from their activities appear both appreciative and apprehensive. There is no evidence suggesting that the urban poor as a whole offered ideological allegiance to the Islamists or to the governments that fought against the latter. Islamist movements, therefore, are distinct from the

[37] This section draws heavily on Bayat, 1998a.
[38] For an elaboration on this issue, see Bayat, 1998a.

Latin American Liberation Theology, which has the strategic objective of "the liberation of the poor"; interpretation of the Gospel follows from this point of departure (Bayat, 1998b). However, Islamist movements in general have broader social and political objectives (such as an Islamic state, law and morality) than simply the *mustaz'afin*, and secular issues such as social justice for the poor follow only from the establishment of Islamic order—the most noble objective (Al-Karadawi, 1985). In addition, what most Islamists share is a particular moral vision of society, which is repressive in terms of gender relations and intolerant of religious minorities and modern/secular forces with a stake in building a non-religious democratic polity. Ideological monopoly disrupts any process of pluralist democratization, and frustrates any true participatory culture, which is essential for sustained social development.

## NGOs

The remarkable expansion of Islamic welfare associations in the 1980s and 1990s is as much a reflection of the Islamization trend as the explosive growth of NGOs in the Middle East in general. The notable gathering of some 700 NGO delegates from almost all Arab countries—in Cairo in May 1997—to follow up on discussions of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development reflects the growing significance attached to this sector.

Associational life is not new in the Middle East. Many countries in the region have a long history of philanthropic activities. Early nineteenth century associations were religious, drawing on either the Islamic notions of *zakat* and *sadaqat*, or the Christian value of charity. They were followed in the early twentieth century by largely secular welfare and charitable associations. A few of these were also used to cover for anti-colonial campaigns. Many of the welfare associations were run by aristocratic families, notably women, who aimed through such associations to be active in the public sphere at a time when it was the exclusive domain of men. Although the legacy of associational culture has continued to the present, today's NGOs are of a different breed and follow different logic.

In 1999 there were more than 14,500 registered NGOs in Egypt, up 10 per cent from 1990. Tunisia follows with 5,000 NGOs, of which 10 per cent are charity based. The number of NGOs in Lebanon grew from 1,586 in 1990 to more than 3,500 in 1996, for a population of three million (Majdalani, 1999c:14). Jordan had only 112 NGOs in 1980, but now has some 800, most of which were established in the 1990s (Majdalani, 1999a:2). The Palestinian Indigenous Ahli Organizations increased from 1,000 (including 800 in the Occupied Territories and some 200 in Israel) (Nakhleh, 1991) in the early 1990s to 1,800 in 1999 (Cairo Times, 1999a:21) A number of them were registered with either Israeli or Jordanian authorities. But perhaps the more important ones, known as "mass-based organizations" were largely unregistered. Some accounts put the number of Iranian NGOs at 15,000 (Ebtekar, 1998:10), although this is likely an exaggerated figure. During the 1980s, in the course of the war with Iraq, many informal people's associations were set up. Yet due to the predominance of populism and "closed door" policy, Iran's record of development NGOs is insignificant when compared to other Middle Eastern countries. The state is still the agent of development, and many relief and welfare activities are carried out by

combined government/non-government organizations, notably Imam's Relief Committee, Foundation of Martyrs, Construction Crusade, Housing Foundation, and the Volunteer Women's Community Health Workers' Organization. However, a new trend of professional, women's, environmental and welfare NGOs started in the 1990s. For example, the network of women's NGOs includes 58 organizations.[39] The new thinking, in President Khatami's era, is that local councils should be turned into the locus of popular participation, while NGOs take charge of delivering services and charity (Middle East Report, 1999).

NGOs in the region are divided into four types, based on the rationale, philosophy or impetus behind their activities. The *religiously motivated* associations are organized by mosques and Islamic figures, or churches and Christian networks. They are inspired by religious obligations or religio-political factors. *Classical welfare associations*, run mostly by upper-class families, have now incorporated some "developmental" functions, such as income generation, training and community upgrading. *Professional NGOs* are managed largely by upper-middle-class professionals and at times by development experts who are driven by their training and humanistic urge, or simply by material self-interest. And finally, there is a host of *state-sponsored* "NGOs"—such as Egyptian community development associations or the Iranian "Foundation of Dispossessed"—which are effectively an extension of the state. All together, these four types of NGOs are active in the diverse fields of human rights, women's issues, welfare, culture, business and development. The focus here will be on welfare and development NGOs that target disadvantaged groups.

Several factors contributed to the spectacular growth of NGOs. First, as elsewhere, there was a need in the region's poorer countries (such as Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia) to fill the gap left by the states' inability and unwillingness to face the challenge of social development following the introduction of neoliberal policies. We should bear in mind that population growth and urban migration had already placed heavy pressure on urban social services. Where the state was absent or defunct, as in Palestine and Lebanon, organized self-help filled the vacuum. The second factor was the flow of foreign funding resulting from new donor policies that extended aid to the NGOs rather than the states. The external funding not only encouraged the establishment of NGOs, it also often influenced their activities. Thus, for example, when there was money for human rights activities, then human rights organizations would be set up. Third, there seems to be a unique consensus on NGOs by almost all sides of the political spectrum—neoliberals, the World Bank, governments, as well as liberal and radical opposition groups. Conservatives want to shift the burden of social provisioning from the state to individuals. For conservatives, NGOs also act as a safety net to offset the possibilities of social unrest caused by the repercussions of neoliberal policies. In the view of Prince Tallal Abdul-Aziz Aale-Saud of Saudi Arabia, "NGOs are the central component of development".[40] NGOs "have replaced class

[39] The Consultation Workshop on Iranian NGOs held in Bushehr, Iran, 26–27 February 1998, in which many government officials participated, indicates a rising interest in the sector. For a review of women's NGOs in the Middle East, see Moghadam, 1997.

[40] Stated in the Regional Follow-up Conference of Arab NGOs, held in Cairo, 17–19 May 1997.

struggle and socialism", according to a prominent Arab NGO advocate.[41] Middle Eastern liberals and the left also support NGOs for the latter's perceived role as agents of social change from below, contributing to development and democracy. Thus for a Palestinian activist, "The most important role of NGOs in a future Palestinian self-authority, is to accelerate the speed of change, to mobilize the rural population and to democratize the society" (Istanbuli, 1993:12). Because of their small size, efficiency and commitment to the cause of the poor, NGOs are seen as true vehicles for grassroots participation in development. Consequently, they serve as a bulwark against the creeping spread of Islamic fundamentalism by offering an alternative to the Islamist agendas.[42]

How effective are the development and welfare NGOs in facing the challenge of social development in the Middle East? Most studies confirm that the sector is "a vital component of the nations' social safety net and important provider of valued social services".[43] Given the growing privatization of health care and education, these provisions hold crucial value for people at who could otherwise hardly afford the increasing costs. In a sense, they assist the declining public sector, on which millions of citizens still rely. In my own research in Cairo, for example, NGO premises served (usually free of charge) as places for daycare, medical assistance, family planning services and recreation, and vocational training like sewing, doll making, repairing electrical appliances and the like. One association offered small credits that could help make hundreds of single mothers self-sufficient by assisting them to set up vending enterprises in the locality. NGOs' headquarters also act as a place of sociability, where local poor families can gather outside their homes to associate with other poor, while benefiting from learning such social skills as how to talk in public or behave "properly". An estimated five million poor people benefit from such associations (Ibrahim, 1996a). Egypt's 3,000 CDAs aid some 300,000 people through implementing programs in health care, food production, women's projects, family planning, income generation, child development and youth.[44] In Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Sudan, where the state has been either absent, defunct or in deep crisis, NGOs play a vital role in survival, emergency aid and relief. In the words of a Palestinian activist, the new professional PVOs are extremely vital since they provide "the mechanisms for building and sustaining the organic fibre of the Palestinian infrastructure on its land" (Nakhleh, 1991:17). In 1994, according to the World Bank, NGOs in Palestine accounted for 60 per cent of primary health care services, 50 per cent of all secondary and tertiary health care services, 100 per cent of programs for disabled people and preschool children, and a sizeable proportion of the country's agricultural, housing, small business credit, and welfare services (Cairo Times, 1999b:21).

Social development, however, is more than survival, relief and safety nets—and total dependence on charity or precarious foreign aid.[45] Furthermore, in the current development discourse,

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41 At the conference (see preceding footnote), this advocate argued that the private sector in the Arab world is dependent on the West, and so it cannot tackle the problem of development. The gap between the rich and the poor has widened. There is a danger of political violence. NGOs were proposed as a solution to these social problems.

42 These points are drawn from Bayat, 1997a.

43 See, for instance, LaTowsky, 1994. Most of the research reports that I have reviewed offer similar conclusions. All references are cited in the Bibliography.

44 Egyptian Federation of Community Development Associations, 1990.

45 Egyptian NGOs, for example, made only E£ 3 million (less than $1 million) local income in 1991; and the Ministry of Social Affairs could support no more than 35 per cent of all PVOs, often unevenly. According to a different study,

social development means not only fulfilling basic needs; it also involves achieving social/ economic rights and self-sustenance. According to Anisur Rahman, this requires "creating a condition where people can think, use their abilities, and act, that is, to participate". Ideally, he continues, an "NGO should work so as to make itself progressively redundant to any group or set of groups with which it has been working intensively" (Rahman, 1993:67–73). How mobilizational are the Middle Eastern development NGOs?

NGO advocates have invariably complained about the absence of a spirit of participation in these organizations. Despite recent trends to establish professional and advocacy associations, Jordanian NGOs remain largely "charity driven" (Majdalani, 1999a). Activists are hoping that they adopt an "enabling approach".[46] Lebanese NGOs still carry the legacy of war, being active mainly in the field of emergency relief; like their Palestinian counterparts, they depend heavily on external humanitarian assistance (Sayyah, 1993). Only recently has there been a clear shift from relief and humanitarian assistance to developmental associations (human rights, women, democracy) (Majdalani, 1999c:14). The charitable societies in Palestine have managed to alleviate (in the areas of relief, health, education, and culture) the pressure generated by daily needs. However, they play a "preventive role, at best, by maintaining basic social care, but they do not perform a developmental role in the full sense of the term" (Nakhleh, 1991:50). Concentrating mainly on services, and ignoring productive activities, has pushed the Palestinians to further dependence on the Israeli economy (Nakhleh, 1991:50).

Several accounts of NGOs, notably the traditional welfare associations, in Egypt and a few other Middle Eastern countries, point to their largely paternalistic attitudes and structure.[47] Paternalism is reflected in local NGOs' top-down internal organization, and in their relationship with beneficiaries. Major decisions in NGOs are made by one or two people, with rare participation of the staff, including the extension workers. In turn, the staff are motivated not by altruistic incentives, but pecuniary rationale. With the dearth of volunteerism, the NGO work of status-conscious but poorly paid employees appears no more than a dull job experience.

Paternalistic NGOs perceive their beneficiaries more as "recipients of assistance" than "participants" in development. For these "favours", the NGOs often expect loyalty, support, and service. Beneficiaries are not to question the adequacy and quality of services, nor the accountability of NGOs; this would mean "interfering" in NGOs affairs. It is not the target groups, but rather NGO leaders and donors, who define needs and priorities. Project duplication, a common problem in Middle Eastern NGOs, results not only from inadequate co-ordination, but also from ignoring the specific concerns of beneficiaries. Competition and factionalism among the PVOs, and the variations in donors' (often intermediary NGOs) policies that prevent co-

total state aid to PVOs provided less than 10 per cent of sector revenues, and foreign aid only 5 per cent. In other words, these PVOs must depend on themselves for survival. Where internal sources are scarce, as in Iraq, Palestine, or Lebanon during the war, dependence on outside funding becomes vital. See Ibrahim, 1996a.

[46] See the interview with Curdis Rhodes of the Near East Foundation in Jordan in **Economic Perspectives**, No. 11, February 1993, p. 7.

[47] See Bayat, 1997a. For others, see Ibrahim, 1996b; Delta Business Service International: Khattab and Associates, 1981; Karanshawy, 1998; Khafagy, 1992; and Laurent and Galal, 1995. On Jordan and Lebanon, see Majdalani 1999a and 1999c.

ordination of development strategy, only add up to the problem of duplication. Indeed, local associations are often subjected to clientelistic relations with intermediary NGOs, who extend funds to the former.

Professional NGOs, which increased in number in the 1990s, seem to have overcome some of the administrative and attitudinal shortcomings of the more traditional welfare associations. They attempt to practice participatory methods both internally and in relation to their clients, placing emphasis on professionalism, education and efficiency. A number of women's, human rights and advocacy NGOs reflect this trend (Schaefer Davis, 1995). However, certain features of professional organizations—hierarchy of authority, fixed procedures, rigidity, and the division of labour—tend to diminish the spirit of participation. Rima Hammami has shown in the case of Palestine that local activism and mass organizations before the peace process were mostly mobilizational, that is, activities were initiated, decided on and carried out with grassroots involvement. However, after the Palestinian National Authority was set up the conditionalities of foreign funding turned NGOs into professional, elite organizations, with particular discourses of efficiency and expertise. This new arrangement tends to create distance between NGOs and the grassroots of society (Hammami, 1995:51–63).

Apart from their internal problems (paternalism and administrative inadequacy), government surveillance poses a real obstacle to the autonomous and healthy operation of NGOs. In general, as with grassroots associations, states in the region express a contradictory position toward NGOs. They lend them support on the condition that the NGOs reduce some of the states' burdens of social service provisioning and poverty alleviation. Indeed, the late 1990s witnessed growing recognition by the states of the voluntary sector's contributions to social development. This recognition is manifested in new and more favourable NGO laws and in public expression of support for NGOs (as in Egypt, Iran and Jordan). Yet, the governments also fear losing political space, especially when NGOs turn oppositional. The professional associations (in Egypt, Iran, Jordan and Palestine) are often drawn into politics, compensating for the absence or inadequacy of political parties. Consequently, the governments, while permitting associational life, impose strict legal control by screening initiators, monitoring fundraising, and unilaterally outlawing non-conformist NGOs. In a sense, then, a state's economic weakness encourages voluntarism, while its political weakness discourages it. In Iran the government lacked the financial resources to bring down population growth (3.4 per cent in late 1987) and so encouraged some 20,000 women volunteers who managed to achieve successful family planning and primary health care programs in cities (the growth rate dropped to 1.4 per cent by 1996). However, the government has fiercely rejected the women's demands for an association.[48] Such conditions give rise to controlled mobilization. It is therefore to be expected that, in practice, some NGOs may be favoured over others. For instance, associations run by well-connected, retired high officials (whose organizations may entitle them to financial gains, loans, land and foreign funding) are given more consideration than women's and human rights associations or

[48] See the interesting report by Hoodfar, 1998.

advocates of the poor.[49] Therefore, it is crucial not to approach the NGO sector as a homogenous entity. As with the concept of "civil society", class and connection intervene to stratify the private voluntary sector.

These handicaps are partially cultural/attitudinal (such as the paternalistic approach to development and status orientation), and partially structural. Unlike trade unions or co-operatives, an NGO's beneficiaries are not necessarily its members and thus beneficiaries cannot hold an NGO accountable for inadequacies. The same relationship exists between local NGOs and donor agencies, with the result that NGOs are not accountable to their beneficiaries, but to their donors.[50] Mahmoud Mamdani is perhaps correct in saying that NGOs undermine the existing clientelism, yet simultaneously create a new type.[51] The question, then, is whether NGOs are structurally able to foster grassroots participation. Maybe we expect too much from NGOs, as suggested by Neil Webster (writing on India). Maybe we attribute "these NGOs with development qualities and abilities that they do not in fact possess" (Webster, 1995:407–433). Whatever our expectations, the fact remains that self-activity—collective or individual mobilization—remains a crucial factor in poor peoples' elevation to a place from which they can meaningfully manage their own lives. In the Middle East the existing forms of activism in the communities—or through labour unions, social Islam or NGOs—do contribute to the well-being of underprivileged groups. However, they fall short of activating and directing a greater number of people for sustained social development. The socio-political characteristics of the Middle East instead tend to generate a particular form of activism—a grassroots non-movement which, I think, has far-reaching implications for social change. I call it the "quiet encroachment of the ordinary".

## Quiet Encroachment

The notion of "quiet encroachment" describes the silent, protracted and pervasive advancement of ordinary people on those who are propertied and powerful in a quest for survival and improvement of their lives.[52] It is characterized by quiet, largely atomized and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action—open and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology or structured organization. While quiet encroachment is basically a "non-movement", it is distinct from survival strategies or "everyday resistance". First, the struggles and gains of people at the grassroots are not made at the expense of fellow poor or themselves, but of the state, the rich and the general public. For example, in order to light their shelters, the urban poor tap electricity not from their neighbours, but from the municipality power poles; to raise their living standard they do not prevent their children from attending school and send them to work, but rather they squeeze the hours of their own formal job in order to work a second job in the informal sector.

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[49] This is the case in Egypt, for instance. These points were brought to my attention in an interview with Hasan el-Banna, an official specializing on NGOs in the Ministry of Social Affairs, 1996.

[50] For more detail, see Lindberg, 1995:57–58.

[51] See Mamdani's comments in I. Lindberg and A. Sverrisson (eds.), **Globalization, Democratization and Social Movements**, Research Report No. 35, Lund University, Sweden, 1995:61.

[52] For these theoretical segments, I have relied heavily Bayat, 1997b, Chapter 1. See also Bayat, 1997c.

In addition, these struggles should not be seen as necessarily defensive, merely in the realm of "resistance", but as cumulatively encroaching, meaning that the actors tend to expand their space by winning new positions to move on to. This kind of quiet activism challenges fundamental aspects of state prerogatives, including the meaning of "order" and control of public space. But the most immediate consequence is the redistribution of social goods via the (unlawful and direct) acquisition of: collective consumption (land, shelter, piped water, electricity); public space (streets, intersections, parking areas); and opportunities (favourable business conditions, locations and labels).

Post-revolution Iran experienced unprecedented colonization, mostly by the poor, of public and private lands, apartments, hotels, sidewalks and public utilities. Between 1980 and 1992, despite the government's opposition, the land area of Tehran expanded from 200 to 600 square kilometres; well over 100 mostly informal communities were created in and around greater Tehran. The actors in this massive informal economy extended beyond the typical marginal poor to include the new middle classes, educated salary earners whose public sector position rapidly declined during the 1980s. In a more dramatic fashion, millions of rural migrants and the urban poor in Egypt have quietly claimed cemeteries, rooftops and public/private lands on the outskirts of the city, creating largely autonomous communities. Greater Cairo contains over 111 spontaneous settlements (*ashwaiyyat*), which house more than six million people who subdivided agricultural lands and put up their shelters unlawfully. Throughout the country, 344 square kilometres of land has undergone occupation or illegal construction, mainly by low-income groups. Between 1970 and 1981, some 84 per cent of all housing units were informally built. To these informalities is added "vertical encroachment"—the addition of rooms or balconies, and using the extra space on building rooftops to erect shelter. The capital for this type of construction comes mainly from the *gamaiyyat*. Poor people also co-operate in unlawful schemes to create housing. A prospective tenant borrows "key money" from a *gamaiyya* and gives it to a plot holder who uses it to build a house. The plot holder must then rent the structure to the provider of the key money. The plot holder becomes a homeowner, and the tenant finds a place to live. Both break the law that allows only one year's advance payment of rent.[53]

Once settled, the poor tend to force the authorities to extend living amenities, for collective consumption, to their neighbourhoods by otherwise tapping them illegally. Many poor in Cairo, Istanbul, Tehran, Tunisia and other cities, illegally access running water and electricity by extending water pipes to their domiciles, connecting their homes to electricity poles, and sharing or manipulating meters. For instance, illegal use of piped water in the city of Alexandria costs an average of $3 million a year. A cursory look at communities such as Dar es Salaam, Ezbat Sadat, Ezbat Kheirullah, Ezbat Nasr, and Basaatin in Cairo, and similar neighbourhoods shows that this is a widespread phenomenon. In late April 1996 in one raid alone, the municipality cut off 800 illegal electricity lines in Cairo's Dar es Salaam and Basaatin communities.

This informal use of collective services leaves governments little choice but to selectively integrate the informal settlements, hoping to commit residents to pay for services they have

[53] For a more detailed description, see Wikan, 1997.

thus far used illegally. Securing property and community tax is another consideration. While the poor welcome the extension of provisions, they often cannot afford to pay the bills. Therefore, it is not uncommon to see re-informalization springing up on the fringes of the new formalized communities (as in Tehran's Islamshahr and Cairo's Izbet al-Hajjana).

In the domain of work, "street subsistence workers" quietly take over public thoroughfares to conduct business in the vast parallel economy. The streets in the commercial districts of Middle Eastern cities are colonized by street vendors encroaching on favourable business opportunities that shopkeepers have created. Cairo has well over 200,000 street vendors and Tehran had some 150,000 until recently. Informality means that the actors generally escape the costs of formality (such as tax regulation) while benefiting from the theft of imported goods, brands and intellectual property. With capital of $6, a Cairene vendor can make up to $55 a month.[54]

Thousands of poor people (in Cairo and Istanbul, for instance) subsist on tips from parking cars on streets that they control and organize in such a way as to create maximum parking space. They have turned many streets into virtual parking lots, which they privately control by creating working gangs with elaborate internal organization. Establishing alternative transportation is another way to make a living. Ezbet Khairullah (in Cairo) typifies thousands of neighbourhoods in the region where vans carry passengers without even having registration plates. A newspaper reported this community as one where "no official has ever entered since its establishment" in the early 1980s (**Al-Wafd**, 1997:3). The logic behind these types of encroachments is reflected in the words of a Cairene street vendor: "When dealing with the government, you have to take the proverb, 'what you can win with, play with'" (Eid, 1999).

Governments have mixed feelings about quiet encroachment. On one hand, they see the people helping themselves by building shelters, gaining access to services and creating jobs. On the other hand, they realize that these activities are carried out largely at the expense of the state, private property owners and the general public. Equally important, the poor tend to "out-administer" the authorities by establishing a different public order, acting independently, and often tarnishing the image of modernity the nation seeks to portray. "We are not against the vendors making a living," says the chief of Cairo's security department, "but not at the expense of Egypt's reputation. They spoil the picture of Cairo, they block the streets, they crowd the pavements" (**Al-Ahram**, 1997:12).

Yet the encroachments are tolerated in practice so long as they appear limited. But once they go too far, governments often react. Post-revolutionary Iran, for instance, saw many bloody confrontations between security forces and encroachers. Daily police harassment is a common practice in many Middle Eastern cities. Nevertheless, the frequent offensives against squatters and street vendors often fail to bring a result. The actors either resort to on-the-spot resistance (as in Iran) or, more commonly, resume their activities quietly following each tactical retreat (as in Egypt). For example, when the municipal police make the rounds to remove street vendors—in which case the vendors suddenly disappear—the vendors normally return to their work once

[54] See **Ru'ya**, No. 8, Cairo, p. 20.

the police are gone. "Everything we are doing is useless, because the solution is not long-term," says an Egyptian official (**Al-Ahram**, 1997:12).[55] Iranian authorities became even more frustrated when their "anti-vending squads" failed to clear the public spaces. Confronting quiet encroachment is particularly difficult for the more vulnerable governments. The municipalities, using carrot-and-stick tactics, may indeed manage to demolish illegal settlements, drive vendors off the main streets, or track down unregistered vehicles. Nevertheless, they have to yield to the actors' demands by offering alternative solutions. Where removals or demolitions have actually been carried out, the dispossessed have been offered alternative street markets, housing or regulated taxi service. Only 13 out of a total of 81 squatter settlements in Cairo (excluding Guiza) have been identified for demolition (for safety reasons); the rest are scheduled to be upgraded (**Al-Wafd**, 1998:3).[56]

So, quiet encroachment is not the politics of collective demand making, of protest, but rather a cluster of individual direct actions. It is accentuated under the socio-political circumstance characterized by authoritarian states, populist ideology and strong family ties. The authoritarian bureaucratic states render collective demand making both risky (because of repression) and less effective (owing to bureaucratic inefficiency); populism tends to obstruct the public sphere and autonomous collectivities, making primary loyalties the more functional mechanism of survival and struggle. Yet the encroachment strategy generates, in the long run, a reality on the ground that states often find no option but to come to terms with. In the end, the poor manage to bring about significant changes in their lives, urban infrastructure and social policy. It is precisely this centrality of the agency of the urban grassroots that distinguishes "quiet encroachment" from any incremental social change that may result from urbanization.

While this kind of activism represents lifelong, sustained, and self-generating advancement, it is largely unlawful and involves constant risk of harassment, insecurity and repression. As a fluid and unstructured form of activism, quiet encroachment has the advantage of flexibility and versatility; but it falls short of developing legal, financial, organizational, and even moral support. The challenge is to merge the mobilizational element of quiet encroachment, the institutional capacity of NGOs, and the consent of the authorities. The Street Food Vendors' Organization (SFVO) in the Egyptian city of Minia, displays such a possibility. A number of NGO activists helped 700 vendors organize and gain the support of the local authorities. Once it was set up, SFVO launched a credit fund, improved hygiene, introduced bulk purchase of foodstuffs, provided group health insurance, helped to ease registration with the state bureaucracy, and eliminated police harassment. This successful experiment has inspired similar initiatives in other cities.[57]

But the poor's encroachment on the propertied and powerful, the public and the state is surely not unlimited. The grassroots might be able to secure many necessary provisions, jobs, and urban services—and these are certainly crucial. But how can they obtain schools, public parks, health insurance, and security at home and work, which are linked to larger structures and

[55] The chief of Cairo's security department was referring to the spread of street vendors in Cairo.
[56] On Iran, see Bayat, 1997b. On Egypt, the information is based on my research in Bayat, 1997a.
[57] See Pugh, 1994. A more detailed report is Tinker, 1993.

processes? One should perhaps begin by recognizing both the potential and limitations of grassroots activism, as well as the necessity of state involvement in redistribution matters on a larger scale.

## Conclusions

Resorting to coping strategies and urban riots were the early reactions to the effects of neoliberal policies during the 1980s. In the Middle East, these seem to have given way to more institutional methods of dealing with austerity. Apart from state social control, safety nets provided by social Islam and NGOs have played a significant role in this shifting approach. With political Islam having been undermined (institutionalized, co-opted or curbed) by the end of the 1990s, it seems that, notwithstanding their flaws, social Islam, the creation of NGOs and quiet encroachment represent the dominant forms of activism that currently contribute to improvements of some aspects of people's lives in the Middle East. While, quiet encroachment has a longer history, the spread of Islamism and NGOs assumed a new momentum during the 1980s and especially the 1990s, when implementation of neoliberal economic policies began. The growth of these types of activism (along with new social movements associated with women and human rights) coincides with the relative decline in the more traditional class-based movements—notably, peasant organizations, co-operative movements and trade unionism. The transformation of rural social structure, de-peasantization and growing urbanization erode the social bases of peasant and co-operative movements. The weakening of economic populism, closely linked with new economic restructuring, on one hand results in the decline of public sector employment that was the core of corporatist trade unionism. On the other hand, it leads to fragmentation of the workforce, expressed in the expansion of the urban informal economy. It is true that state bureaucracy (as a segment of the public sector) remains weighty, however, its employees, unlike workers in industry or services, have largely been unorganized. Indeed, a large part of these low-paid employees survive by working second or third jobs in the informal sector.

In the meantime, growing economic informalization and expanded urbanization in the Middle East are causing a shift in popular needs and demands. The growth of informality means that struggles for wages and working conditions (the typical focus of traditional trade unionism) are losing ground to broader concerns of jobs, informal work conditions, and affordable living. Conversely, rapid urbanization increases the demand for urban collective consumption—decent shelter, electricity, piped water, transportation, health care and education. The desire for citizenship, expressed in community membership and developmental rights, is one that traditional trade unionism is unable to address. And the scope of social Islam and NGOs, despite their contributions to social welfare, is also limited in terms of fully realizing such a goal. Therefore, the task falls to community movements, which tend to be feeble in the Middle East. However, there were signs in the late 1990s that Middle Eastern governments were cautiously recognizing the activities of some civil society organizations, notably NGOs. This change of attitude is manifested in activities such as: new NGO laws being ratified in Egypt in 1999; a more publicly positive attitude in Jordan; and in Iran the sponsoring of NGO/government activities by state agencies (the Ministry of Health), as well as the inclusion of clauses in the Third Development

Plan (1999–2001) that encourage NGO formation and popular participation. Yet these measures are still far from "enabling" civil society organizations from above, and encouraging social development from below. Hence, it is mainly to the strategy of quiet encroachment that the urban grassroots population in the Middle East resorts in order to fulfil its growing needs.

Thus emerges a salient feature of grassroots activism in the region (aspects of which may also be observed elsewhere): it is characterized less by demand-making movements than by direct actions, be they individual, informal, or institutional. Hence, largely because of the inefficient and authoritarian nature of the states, people are less inclined, for example, to join together to *demand* housing, but instead proceed to acquire it directly. Mosque associations do not usually mobilize people to *demand* welfare, but attempt to offer it to them directly. People usually exert collective pressure when their existing gains are threatened. In this process, the intervention of advocacy NGOs (such as those concerned with human rights, women's issues, or democracy) to publicize grassroots causes often contributes significantly to their success.

These claim-making acts, collective or individual, have both practical and policy implications. Through direct action, people make themselves heard; they create realities on the ground that the authorities sooner or later have to come to terms with. Thus on 1 May 1993, a year after the Imbaba incident in Egypt, President Mubarak authorized that "there be an immediate implementation of a national program in upgrading the most important services and facilities in haphazardly built areas in all governorates". A national five-year plan was announced covering the period from 1993 to 1998, costing E£ 3.8 billion ($1.08 billion). By 1996, 127 of 527 zones targeted were "fully upgraded" (**Al-Ahram**, 1996:12). Joan Nelson's (1988) contention that because the poor are never organized well enough they fail to exert influence on national policies, is true. Yet the result of poor people's individual direct actions may be improvement from below and policy change from above.

In conclusion, in the experience of the Middle East, "pressure from below" is highly relevant to social development. Given the gradual retreat of states from their traditional social responsibilities, the Middle East's poor would have been in worse conditions had grassroots actions been totally absent. Yet, grassroots activities do have limitations—both in terms of internal constraints on how much can realistically be achieved, and in relation to constraints dictated by the state. It is a mistake to leave the task of social development to initiatives from below. A bigger mistake is to give up on the state, in particular its crucial role in distribution matters on the larger scale. Yet, imagining policy changes and improvement in people's lives without their pressure or direct action seems no more than an illusion.

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