



#civsoczine

# WHAT COMES NEXT?

[www.arsehsevom.net/zine](http://www.arsehsevom.net/zine)



# ABOUT ARSEH SEVOM

Human rights organizations and defenders in Iran have found themselves under attack, while abuses of basic human rights have continued. The unrest since the flawed 2009 presidential election has resulted in random and targeted arrests along with a shifting legal landscape that endangers academics and civil society activists in particular. Despite this, we are currently witnessing a transformation of civil society into a growing and creative civil rights movement.

Arseh Sevom (Third Sphere, which refers to the role of civil society) is a non-governmental organization established/registered in 2010 in Amsterdam, aiming to promote peace, democracy, and human rights. The organization's objective is to help build the capacity of organizations and encourage the development of a vigorous third sphere of civil activities. Arseh Sevom is non-partisan and independent and focuses on peace, democracy, and human rights.

Arseh Sevom believes that cooperation among

civil society organizations is key to building a strong and coherent civil rights movement that can thrive and succeed. It aims to become a hub for organizations and individuals working together towards the common goal of free, open, and peaceful communities.

Arseh Sevom promotes the advancement of rights for people of all beliefs, genders, ethnicities, non-violent political affiliations, and more. To make the transition to a more open society, it is important to address the cultural and political roadblocks to the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Arseh Sevom aims to further the efforts of Iran's civil rights movement by working with its leaders to build capacity and address future needs and developments. The group also plans to develop advocacy tools to address the attitude to human rights among intellectuals, activists, and the general public.

## SUBMIT TO THE CIVIL SOCIETY ZINE

The Civil Society Zine is published 4x a year. Each quarter, we focus on a theme. We accept posts that range from 400 words to 4000 words. We are looking for pieces that are provocative, insightful, and filled with ideas. These posts do not need to focus on Iran or the MENA region. In fact, we would love to hear from people with a wide variety of perspectives and experiences. For more information, visit the website: <http://www.arsehsevom.net/zine/?p=104>

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[www.arsehsevom.net](http://www.arsehsevom.net)

## #CIVSOCZINE: WHAT COMES AFTER THE GIANT IS SLAIN AND THE MONSTER HAS LEFT? WHAT COMES NEXT?

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*The stakes  
are clear.  
They are  
rooted in re-  
spect for fun-  
damental  
human  
rights.*

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# Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

The term “Arab Spring” has always felt ominous to me rather than optimistic. After all, we all know what happened after the short-lived Prague Spring<sup>1</sup> of 1968, which was brutally squashed. As I write this in November, 2011, we read that more than 32 people have been killed in clashes in Cairo’s Tahir Square<sup>2</sup>. Thousands have been arrested. Amnesty<sup>3</sup> is reporting that people in Egypt who dare to express themselves are being arrested and tried in

<sup>1</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/155500.stm>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.democracynow.org/2011/11/21/tahir\\_square\\_under\\_attack\\_32\\_egyptians](http://www.democracynow.org/2011/11/21/tahir_square_under_attack_32_egyptians)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/egypt-military-rulers-have-crushed-hopes-25-january-protesters-2011-11-22>

military courts.

“By using military courts to try thousands of civilians, cracking down on peaceful protest and expanding the remit of Mubarak’s Emergency Law, the SCAF has continued the tradition of repressive rule which the January 25 demonstrators fought so hard to get rid of,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Acting Director.

“Those who have challenged or criticized the military council – like demonstrators, journalists, bloggers, striking workers – have been ruthlessly suppressed, in an attempt at silencing their voices.”

Mubarak may be gone. One Goliath out of the way. The repression that so motivated the people who took to the streets is not. Bloggers like Maikel Nabil<sup>4</sup> stew in prison, go on hunger strikes, and risk their freedom.

Hamza Hendawi<sup>5</sup> of the Associated Press reports:

“We should not have left the streets. We handed power to the military on a silver platter,” said Ahmed Imam, a 33-year-old

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mideastyouth.com/2011/11/01/urgent-statement-from-maikel-nabil-i%E2%80%99m-still-boycotting-the-military-judicature-and-i-bear-the-consequences/>

<sup>5</sup> [http://articles.boston.com/2011-11-21/news/30425643\\_1\\_generals-mubarak-regime-military-ruler](http://articles.boston.com/2011-11-21/news/30425643_1_generals-mubarak-regime-military-ruler)



activist. “The revolutionaries went home too soon. We collected the spoils and left before the battle was over.”

What needs battling now is not one simple monster, but a network of monsters and deeply held attitudes. Some of those held by the very people doing battle for freedom. In the words of the American cartoonist Walt Kelly<sup>6</sup>, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” For many of us, the stakes are clear. They are rooted in respect for fundamental human rights. “There can be no stability without human rights,” was the refrain at a recent conference held by the Crisis Group<sup>7</sup>. The rights that were once seen as luxuries, are now seen as fundamental to security. “We now tell businesses if they want to find stable locations, they need to examine the human rights record,” one official said. Still, many consider human rights a luxury rather than a necessity.

In the second issue of Arseh Sevom’s Civil Society Magazine, called *David and Goliath*, we asked contributors to tell us what comes after all the unity, after the giant is slain, after the monster is gone? What comes next? It was clearly a difficult question; one without a simple answer. The story of David and Goliath<sup>8</sup> is a story of the (perceived) weak against the powerful, of prevailing against the odds, of bravery and leadership. However modern day Goliaths aren’t so easy to dispel with one little pebble.

While we may not have definitively answered the question, “What comes next,” the articles in this Zine share ideas about human rights, the Arab *Anger*, Islamicization, leadership, and women’s rights. These all make important contributions to our search for ways forward, while engaging a variety of voices from a range of experiences and locations.

In this issue we read Davi Barker’s article on 9th century Muslim anarchists, Anita Hunt’s suggestions for building community organizations, and an interview with Amnesty Switzerland’s Antonia Bertschinger.

In *A letter from an Arab woman to her Iranian*

6 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt\\_Kelly](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Kelly)

7 <http://www.crisisgroup.org/>

8 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goliath>

*friend*, Amal Hamidallah-van Hees addresses the fears and hopes of Arab and Islamic women watching the changes in their region. “We are watching with our eyes wide open,” she writes. A Lebanese human rights activist asks, “Are we capable of managing the diversity we have?” In an interview with Iranian women’s rights activist Mahnaz Afkhami, readers are reminded of the long arc of the women’s rights movement and how resilient it has been even in the face of oppression. She tells writer Hooman Askary, “The green movement in Iran is the continuation of what had been started nearly a century before and gone through ups and downs, changes and evolutionary and revolutionary transformations.”

Peace-worker, Jasmine Nordien tells us, “...I no longer wanted to monitor the society I did not want to live in. I wanted to build the kind of society that my children and grandchildren would group up in.” Arturo Desimone interviews Tunisian activist Ghassen Athmni who checks our optimism and reminds us that difficult times are coming as the nation struggles with democracy. “What the activists have done is more a revolt, a rebellion of civil society than a revolution, he tells us. We also hear from Eric Asp the pastor at Amsterdam50 plus more!

We encourage submissions to the Zine and to Arseh Sevom. The theme for the Spring 2012 issue is security, crime, and human rights. In Summer of 2012, we will investigate justice, truth, and reconciliation.

We have a special thanks to Kamran Ashtary for art direction. Tori Eggherman created most of the illustrations. I also want to thank Tessa Kersten for her critical eye.

We look forward to your comments and contributions. Join the conversation. Leave a comment or join us on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/arsehsevom.en>). Thank you,

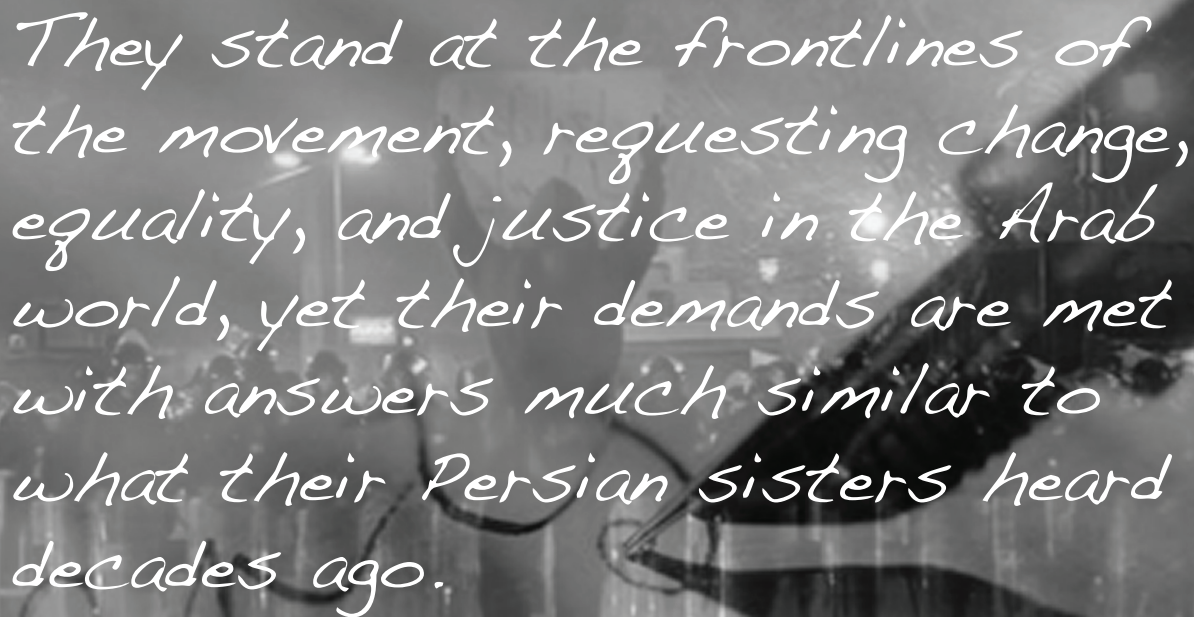
Tori Eggherman

Amsterdam

November 2011







They stand at the frontlines of the movement, requesting change, equality, and justice in the Arab world, yet their demands are met with answers much similar to what their Persian sisters heard decades ago.

## A letter from an Arab woman to her Iranian friend

Dear friend, you who came from so far; this long way, just to remember your beloved one – your country, your culture, your world, and nation with its diversity and richness. The longing and love you have for your world and culture inspires many. The link to the land, to its nation and community is similar to the link that Arabs have with their identity and community. As a proud Arab Muslim woman, I feel the same way as you. Struggling for dignity, recognition, but also missing my world – a lost world!

...

### I. FAILURE AND DISAPPOINTMENT

**We had the chance to build the first democracy in the Islamic world, but we failed and failed**

*This is an excerpt of a text given as a speech at the twenty second international conference of the Iranian Women's Studies Foundation (IWSF). Amal Hamidallah-van Hees, director of Bridging the Gulf, addresses the fears and hopes of Arab and Islamic women watching the changes in their region. "We are watching with our eyes wide open," she writes, noting that many lessons were learned by the revolution in Iran. She urges women to engage with politics and Islam. "We will claim our space, even the religious one." For the complete text, visit Arseh Sevom online: <http://www.arsehsevom.net/zine/?p=210>.*

by Amal Hamidallah-van Hees

badly. Mass murders took place; members of left-wing groups, which included many female leaders, lost their lives. We were watching with our eyes wide open, surprised at the scale of violations. Yet there was no condemnation from the Arab world. At that time the Arab streets were weak, and we had no social media – not even the internet – and yet the terrible news was reaching the outside world. The Arab world was quite shocked as dreams turned into nightmares. All our dreams died with the Islamic revolution. This situation became worse as the Islamic revolution started its expansionist endeavours, impeding all the efforts of both Iranians and Arabs to build networks and work for the best of their societies whether in the field of democratic change, women's rights or society strengthening. Until now, both regions have been very sceptical about network-forming that involves both societies. Activists in the Arab world who seek to bridge or bond with their Persian counterparts are perceived as 'Iranian proxies' or 'Western agents'. To Iran, all that is coming from the outside is viewed as a 'foreign conspiracy' aimed at destroying Iranian identity...

### Women at the frontlines

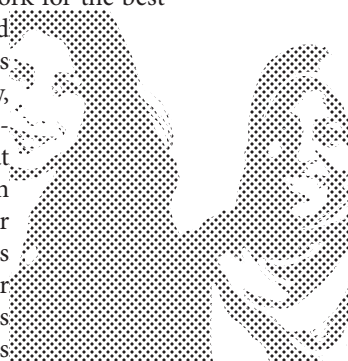
...When we compare post-revolution Iran to what is going on presently in the Arab world, we note that the position of women is very similar to that of Iranian women in 1979. They stand at the frontlines of the movement, requesting change, equality, and justice in the Arab world, yet their demands are met with answers much similar to what their Persian sisters heard decades ago:

"Now is not the time for women's rights, etc... Once there's democracy, there will be democracy for everyone"

Yet history has taught us that **women are too patient**. Our rights never materialise or become a

priority. We only get broken promises with nations destroyed and divided as never before. What has happened to Iranian women will forever remain engraved in our collective memories! Like an ugly scar marring the beauty of innocent faces longing for brighter days. Just like our faces, our societies which were just recovering from dominations soon became disfigured and unrecognisable for many of us, especially our grandparents. We will never forget!!! We were with you in 1979, and your history is part of our collective memory!

Women are Good for Revolution,  
but Revolution is not  
Good for Women



*We will claim  
our space, even  
the religious  
one.*

...The uprisings sweeping the Arab world have toppled not only the status quo but also the old stereotypes of Arab women as passive, voiceless victims, and civil society as pointless, pictured as a bad caricature of a toothpick trying to defeat a tank. It hurts when you are confronted with such cheap statements and believe me I have been confronted with such statements on several occasions.

Consequently the world is surprised; and this reaction is similar to their surprise at the Iranian uprising in 1979, which was mainly dominated by the involvement of youth and women.

**Over the past few months, the world has seen women and youth marching in Tunisia, shouting slogans in Bahrain and Yemen, braving the eruption of tear gas in Egypt, and blogging and strategizing in cyberspace.** In Libya and Tunisia, female lawyers were among the earliest anti-Gaddafi and Ben Ali organizers in the revolutionary movement. Arabs were also surprised that the Western media was shocked! Indeed they were shocked to find women protesting alongside men. However, there is another bitter reality: women are good for revolutions, but historically, revolutions have never been so good for women, and the situation in the



Arab and Islamic world is no exception. We saw it during the Iranian revolution in 1979; we saw it in Iraq and in Palestinian occupied territories, and it is the irony of our history. In Iran, women came out in force to march against the Shah in 1979; Ayatollah Khomeini rewarded them by curbing their rights and requiring that they wear the veil in government offices.

## Women are left alone to fight

We are watching a similar scenario taking place presently with our eyes wide open; as Tunisians and Egyptians hammer out the nature of their nations' future. Women are being required to fight for their rights for the second time this year as they are excluded from the post-revolution movement and ongoing negotiations targeting upcoming elections, power sharing, etc. Women are not even part of the constitutional committee in Egypt, which was tasked with coming up with constitutional amendments after the fall of Hosni Mubarak (the committee did not include a single woman).

Women are being required to fight for their rights for the second time this year as they are excluded from the post-revolution movement and ongoing negotiations targeting upcoming elections, power sharing

What will be the trend in the coming decade? Especially with the winds of anger sweeping the Arab streets: will women be extra-victimised and targeted by all belligerents? Or are we going to succeed in regaining the place we were meant to occupy? With full membership of our societies, serving as pillars of our communities, the guardians of equity, justice, equality, and peace? I can tell you this affirmatively – YES we can and we have no choice!! It is up to you, to us to assert ourselves!!!

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When Tunisian women's groups held a post-revolution rally to demand equality, hooligans disrupted the gathering, yelling: "**Women at home, in the kitchen!**" On March 8, a march in Cairo to commemorate International Women's Day ended in violence when bands of men inspected protesters and asked the women present to return home; and the bands were trying to scare women out of public space. Who is responsible for this? No one can tell you for sure, but all will confirm that they are neither democratic nor women-friendly elements!

**In the Islamic and Arab world, women's rights have become a key symbol for a political game: when you try to promote women's freedom to study, work, and travel freely, you have automatically aligned yourself with liberal (Western) forces; jeopardising the whole process of women's emancipation and empowerment from within.** On the other hand, when you curtail women's freedom

## II. THE SURPRISE AND HOPE

The Arab anger may have taken the region's leaders and the world by surprise, but not those of us who were on the inside watching events unfold. We knew and warned about such an outburst. Women linked to emancipation movements both from the inside and outside were aware of the way things were changing. **We learned how to let things evolve from inside without jeopardising our causes. Moudawanah (Moroccan family law) and other changes brought to family laws in Islamic countries were translated into Persian and Persian texts into Arabic. The work of Emad Baghi on the death penalty in Islam was translated from Persian into Arabic, etc.**

Personally, I was involved in this process, and I can tell you there were challenging times at different levels. But we have learned a lot, and our solidarity, the feeling of common shared values and the dream





of a better future kept us going.

The difference between past and present experiences is that now, women in the Islamic and Arab world have learned a lot from past failures. We are increasingly educated, organized and networked. As Muslim women, we are using sources such as the Koran and international human-rights laws. We have begun to question the prevailing political, social, and religious status within our societies. **We have learned from our past failures.**

### Claiming our space

We are Muslims, we are Persians or Arabs, we are Turkmen or even Pashtu ... No matter our ethnic affiliation or background, one thing is certain – no one has the monopoly regarding the truth, especially when it comes to the interpretation of the holy texts. We will claim our space, even the religious one. Enough harm has been done in the name of religion, and our religion is innocent of such deeds committed in its name. Women were leaders, even

judges from the time of the prophet (pbuh). Human rights and women's rights are enshrined in our core values and Islamic faith. Please let me tell you one truth, probably my truth, and it says a lot about me! I must confess, it may surprise many among you:

**There is no incompatibility between modernisation and Islam, both can go hand in hand, so please do not fear religion and do not fear to engage with religious leaders to foster positive social change and human rights dialogue, even if religion will be the frame.**

### Challenging intolerance

Yes Arab and Muslim women, we started challenging intolerance and injustice at home and at the mosque, we learned from past experiences (mainly the Iranian experience), and we are better equipped to go out and protest injustice. So we should not be afraid of political Islam. To be honest with you, I am sure political Islam will be part of the future political landscape in our region. I am not defeatist but realistic. We should build alliances to advance our cause, alliances among us as a movement of women with Islamic roots. Stigmatising, shaming, blaming, or even rejecting our faith will not aid change from within. **You cannot insult or shame the faith of nearly one-third of the world's population and ask them to embrace your cause:** this will only lead to another unnecessary holy war. We are fed-up with such wars that have brought nothing good to our nations except stagnation and disintegration. No matter the rationale behind shaming and blaming, even if it can be justified, our communities; conservative by nature will be on the defensive, in defense of their faith, which is the only element they have kept throughout their history. There is a better way, and in this way our communities might be better stimulated to embrace change and accept positive changes. If we succeed to win their hearts, their minds will follow, paving the way for positive behaviors as well.

We need to work from within. Islam is our cement and the strongest binding factor. Islam is part of our identity, whether we are Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen, Hazara, Balushi, Sunni, Shiaa, Sufi, liberal



secular leftists, practicing or non-practicing. We are all aware that change is needed, and we cannot deny that part of our identity. Furthermore, the world cannot deny us our identity; change will happen from within, including all the aspects of who we are, and we are the ones to accept the change and make it compatible with our core values and identity.

### Our path is dignity, we have no choice

May we please conclude with these encouraging words because our path is still long and we are at the very beginning. We walked a long way since we split ages ago; since the first schism that impacted us forever. But those are historical facts and truths that we cannot change. Let history be history, and let the future be a common project where we can find each other for the benefit of us and human kind – bringing wealth, equity, equality, justice, and democracy to our societies. We are one! No matter our diversities. Only unified can we make a difference! We have no choice. We have to continue our path, the path of dignified life; with love, respect and dedication. I am ending by dedicating the beautiful words of Mawlana Jallalu Din Rumi to you all. It is a poem for a dear friend, a beloved one. Let us dream of our friendship, cohesion, peaceful and coherent society; let us dream of our beloved land and community with Mawlana Mawlana Jallalu Din Rumi:

*My dear friend  
never lose hope  
when the Beloved  
sends you away.  
If you're abandoned  
if you're left hopeless  
tomorrow for sure  
you'll be called again.  
If the door is shut  
right in your face  
keep waiting with patience  
don't leave right away.  
Seeing your patience  
your love will soon  
summon you with grace*

*raise you like a champion.  
And if all the roads  
end up in dead ends  
you'll be shown the secret paths  
no one will comprehend.  
The beloved I know  
will give with no qualms  
to a puny ant  
the kingdom of Solomon.  
My heart has journeyed  
many times around the world  
but has never found  
and will never find  
such a Beloved again.  
ah I better keep silence  
I know this endless love  
will surely arrive  
for you and you and you.*

Poem translated by Nader Khalili

*Amal Hamidallah-van Hees (A Letter to an Iranian Woman from Her Arab Friend) is the director of Bridging the Gulf Foundation for human security in the Gulf region. Van Hees has a long history of working in the field of democracy, agency and participation, peace and security, human development, economic justice, gender and human rights mainstreaming in the MENA region. She has worked as a lecturer at American Webster University, with Amnesty, International (Netherlands), UNESCO, and Mamma Cash. She has participated in different international panels and debates, written various articles, and conducted research, monitoring and evaluation in the field of NGO work, civil society strengthening, and capacity building.*





50 JAHRE  
**AMNESTY**  
INTERNATIONAL



# “One Has to Do All One Can for Human Rights”

*In this interview with Arseh Sevom, Antonia Bertschinger tells us of her work at the Swiss section of Amnesty International. She tells us how she came to be involved with human rights work. Bertschinger came to the work via her interest in Afghanistan. She studied Persian in university and worked in the Kabul Museum in Switzerland. “I loved working there because it helped me learn so much about Afghanistan. This did some awareness raising for me to learn what it's like to live in a country where all the rights are violated, especially women's rights, and which had such a long war, and so many other disasters. She ended up working in the Foreign Ministry in Iran rather than win Afghanistan, however. It was there that she met so many people working to build a better society and for the protection of human rights. Bertschinger asks of her own home in Europe, “How can we ever forget*

*that human rights and the rule of law are the basis of our good life?”*

*Arseh Sevom Interview with Antonia Bertschinger*

## BACKGROUND OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Fifty years ago, a British lawyer named Peter Benenson was outraged by the arrest in Portugal of two students. **Their crime was toasting to freedom**, a word which was forbidden at the time when the nation was under dictatorial rule.

Benenson was shocked and published an appeal in a newspaper on the 28th of May 1961, calling for people to write to the Portuguese government to plea for the release of these two students. This appeal became the foundation for the organization that came to be known as Amnesty, International.

For the first ten years Amnesty was primarily focused on letter-writing campaigns for prisoners of conscience. Later, the group began focusing on topics such as abolition of the death penalty and torture. As they grew in members, they began to expand their work to address women's rights,



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the rights of indigenous people, and the rights of sexual minorities. **Today Amnesty works for all the human rights enshrined in the universal declaration of human rights.**

Amnesty is currently **present in 51 countries and has over three million members** who are mostly volunteers. They still write letters and raise awareness about human rights.

Arseh Sevom spoke with Antonia Bertschinger, a member of the management team of the Swiss section of Amnesty International and the Iran expert for the Swiss section.

Amnesty International Switzerland has over 50 people working in four offices and 45,000 members. Antonia is responsible for the active volunteers. Her team supports people who want to work for human rights.

## INTERVIEW

**AS: You and your team support the volunteer activists?**

AB: Yes, that's right. We try to help them with structures. If they are organized into groups, we try to keep them in a good group and do some capacity building in project management and of course in content. **For each Amnesty campaign or area of ongoing work we do units of human rights training so they can learn more about the death penalty, or about poverty, or about slums, or about women's rights, or whatever it is.** We also have these e-activism possibilities. We are at the beginning now, we have a facebook page with over 12,000 members. We have an SMS strand where people receive messages and by answering can give a signature or give money.

**AS: Can you expand a bit more on the work you do?**

AB: In the early times, the volunteers' work consisted in letter writing for prisoners of conscience. The international secretariat in London did all the research on the prisoners and then would assign three people to each group. These three would usually be one from the West, one from the East — because

this was in the time of the cold war, of course — and the third one from a non-aligned country. Many of these groups came into existence in the 60s and 70s and many still exist. Their members are between 70 and 80 years old now. Those people are obviously not used to working online, so they have a different source of distribution. **We have urgent actions and letters against forgetting, which these groups participate in. The older groups choose the prisoners they want to work with and distribute letters to others and then post them.**

There are other groups who have come into existence later who do other things such as street theater, discussions, and supporting any campaigns. For instance, **we have a violence against women campaign in Nicaragua, and we are all drawing little butterflies which we will send there to support the campaign, as a sign of solidarity with Nicaraguan women's organizations.** You have young people's groups who are going into schools and getting the children to draw the butterflies.

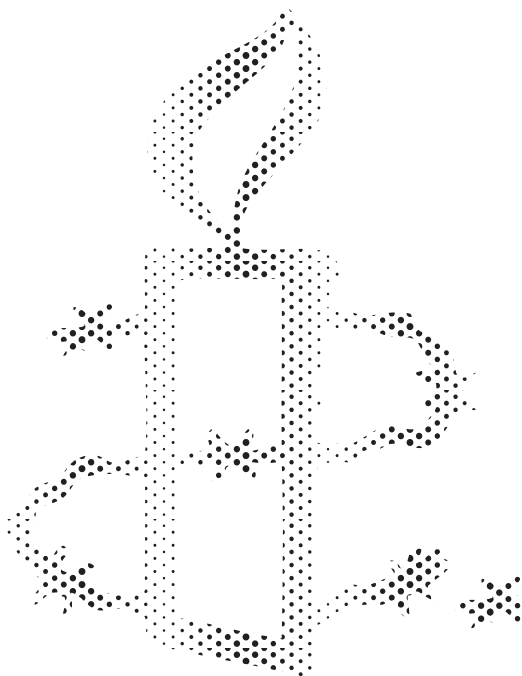
**It's not easy to find new members.** It's a difficulty of generations. I mentioned older groups who have been doing this for forty years and do not want to change their way of doing things, and the young people think there's nothing more boring than writing a letter, especially on paper. They don't even understand the concept of sending a letter through the post.

We have to try to support all of them, like sending the paper letters for the older people and giving good ideas to the younger people.

**AS: How is Amnesty working to bridge the gap of generations and appeal to younger people?**

AB: The aging of Amnesty's volunteers is not simply a problem of the Swiss section. It is a problem all over, especially Western Europe. **There is a generation change.** Also, we are always asking ourselves which kinds of actions have the most impact. We know that the letter-writing campaigns are still very effective. If someone is arrested and in danger of being tortured and 300 letters arrive at the prison, it helps them. This is something we still encourage people to do.





At the same time, we have had successes with electronic signatures. We don't know if this is the kind of activism we want to focus on the future. Should we concentrate on this? Or should we get people to write letters on paper? This is something we always need to ask ourselves. Maybe it depends on which country you are working on, and it is not easy.

Our organization, which is a worldwide one, is trying to grow in the South, like in Africa and Asia and South America. **It is also important that in the countries where many human rights violations appear we have a strong presence.** This is becoming more and more important. I should say we are strong, but trying to find our way in the 21st century.

**AS: Can you tell us about your work with Iran?**

AB: **Amnesty has a great, professional team in London working on Iran.** They prepare the reports, prisoner files, campaigns and materials for campaigns and then individual sections are called upon to implement those actions. The Swiss section

is organized so that country work is done with volunteer experts. I am one of those experts, focusing on Iran, in addition to my paid work as head of the activist support department. I am working to build a network right now. Many people in Switzerland are interested in Iran and would like to do something.

**I would encourage anyone working on Iran to send as many letters as they can to Iran.** Iran is a country with a lot of urgent actions. Every other week, or every week there is a case where we are called on to send letters to protect someone from torture, or ask for their release, or stop an execution.

There is one problem, many people who want to work on Iran here are Iranians and they do not want to work in their own names. They want to continue to travel to Iran and once they sign a letter and send it to the judiciary or the Iranian embassy in Switzerland, they will, of course, be on a list, and they won't be able to go back. So **I am encouraging them to find Swiss friends who can send the letters for them or allow them to use their names.** Once the network has grown, and we find common interests within the network we might try to arrange discussions or film screenings to raise awareness among the Swiss public about issues in Iran and how they can be influenced. This is one part of the work.

Another part is being called on as an expert. I am called on for interviews or to speak at side events at UN conferences in Geneva. This is always done in collaboration with the team in London. Of course, I am in constant contact with them.

I also help with translations for the Iran news on the Iran page on our Swiss Amnesty website.

**AS: I love the idea of having Iranians outside the country find friends to sign letters for them. How did you personally become involved in human rights work?**

AB: I studied philosophy in university. **I always knew I wanted to work in an international environment and had some vague notion of humanitarian or human rights work.** My studies were quite idealistic and humanist and removed from political reality. **One thing that has really shaped me in all these years is a kind of intellectual strictness, the**





**ability to find a principle and think it through to the end.** I think this is really important in human rights work. This developed in my thinking and even in my personality removed from actual human rights work.

It was 2001, I was working on my PhD and the Taliban fell in Afghanistan. I had always been interested in Afghanistan, and I thought, wow, I could go to Afghanistan and maybe I could work there. Before that my interest was theoretical. Obviously I could not work there because of the Taliban. **After the Taliban fell, I enrolled in Persian class in university, and I started to work on Afghanistan from Switzerland. I read everything there was that I could find.** I worked as a volunteer at a museum on Afghanistan near my hometown, which had an amazing collection of historical artifacts. Actually, the Kabul museum had been evacuated and much of its collection was in this museum in Switzerland. There was a huge collection of newspaper clippings and videos, and television news broadcasts. I loved working there because it helped me learn so much about Afghanistan. **This did some awareness raising for me to learn what it's like to live in a country where all the rights are violated, especially women's rights, and which had such a long war, and so many other disasters.** This sharpened my interest on a concrete level.

After I finished my PhD work in 2003, I wanted to work in Afghanistan, but no one would employ me. I was quite frustrated. I had applied for so many jobs with the UN and with NGOs in Kabul and in Afghanistan, but nothing worked out. I was very lucky to get an internship in the Swiss ministry of foreign affairs in the human rights section, and I knew immediately this was what I wanted to do. Human rights work is theoretical and normative. You have a normative framework, and everybody has to keep their promises. **All the states which have ratified the UN conventions and covenants are bound to follow the rules and respect the rights of their people.** There is no compromise and this goes back to the intellectual strictness.

**On the other hand, humanitarian work is different. It's like the fire brigade.** If there is a disaster you go and you try to help as much as you can. This

is great. I would have loved to have joined the ICRC or another humanitarian relief organization. But this is not systematic work, it's something you react to. You go and you help the people, but then you leave and maybe the legal framework or the government has not changed.

Development work is also different. You have to go to a country where the people are poor and maybe the government does not respect the people's rights very much or is corrupt, but obviously while you are there you really have to do the best you can for the people. It absolutely does not help to insult the government by telling them your work is bad and you are corrupt and you can't do this. Once you tell this to a certain government, maybe it will kick you out, and you can't do your project. All this does not apply to human rights work. **In human rights work, you are actually obligated to tell a government, listen you are infringing on these and these rights.** You are violating these and these rights. You are bound to keep these rights by signing this covenant or convention thirty years ago. This appealed to me very much.

I worked at the MENA desk at the ministry. This means I wrote reports and analyses on 22 countries in the Middle East and North Africa, and especially Iran. Iran was one of our focus countries because we had a human rights dialog with Iran. Then the ministry sent me to Iran actually to work for this human rights dialogue. I became even more interested because I was on the spot, and I knew so many people who were engaged in the struggle for human rights. Of course, I had such a huge admiration for them, and I just tried to do my best to help them.

**Now I can't even separate my intellectual motivation, or my moral motivation, from my personal motivation, which means I have to help my friends.** They are all together making me more and more radical every day. I can't imagine working for anything else than human rights right now.

**AS: I find it interesting that your friends are making you more and more radical every day. I find the same is true for me, but not in the traditional way.**



AB: Nor for me. I am a political person, maybe rather left wing, but I don't care about party politics or a party agenda such as the end of capitalism or any such thing. I care more and more about the rights of people and also something more ignored in Europe these days is our own rights. **How can we ever forget that human rights and the rule of law are the basis of our good life?** Nobody ever talks about it, and it is in danger more and more everyday. No one ever talks about, I find. This makes me more and more radical: working for the rule of law and human rights, not for a political party. They are all compromised in one way or another. But for human rights. One has to do all one can for human rights.

*Antonia Bertschinger* (*"One Has to Do All One Can for Human Rights"* [http://www.rotpunktverlag.ch/cgibib/germinal\\_shop.exe/showtemplate](http://www.rotpunktverlag.ch/cgibib/germinal_shop.exe/showtemplate)) has a PhD in philosophy from the University of Basel, Switzerland. She is a former Human Rights Advisor for the Embassy of Switzerland in Iran and currently the Head of Membership & Activism at the Swiss section of Amnesty International. Antonia published a book about Iran in which she seeks to explain Iran's history and culture to a general public. She has written on Iran and human rights for several Swiss newspapers.





# How to Organize a Community

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*In this piece, activist Anita Hunt (AKA Liss of Lissnup) gives some pointers on building a neighborhood organization. A good issue, the author tells us, will “be areal improvement in people’s lives; be non-divisive, and develop a sense of power for the group.”*

by [Anita Hunt](#)

All neighborhoods are different, with different players, problems, and possibilities. This outline is intended to serve as a compass to point your group in the right direction. Bringing together a diverse group of people to achieve a common goal is a difficult task, which requires a variety of social skills and great investments of time and other important resources. Whenever possible it is advisable to utilize the services of an expert community organizer to assist in getting your neighborhood organization started. Grassroots organizing builds community groups from scratch, developing new leadership where none existed and organizing the unorganized.

It is a values-based process where people are brought together to act in the interest of their communities and the common good.

## WHY ORGANIZE?

Power is not only generated through successful protest-based campaigns. Community organizing groups can also gain recognition similar to the way unions gain recognition as the representatives of workers for a particular business or trade. In this way, representatives of community groups are often able to bring key government officials or corporate leaders to the table without engaging in “actions”, through the power of their reputation. As the famous community organizer Saul Alinsky said, “the first rule of power tactics” is that “power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have.” The development of durable “power” and influence is a key aim of community organizing.

**Community organizing starts with the recognition that change can only come about when communities come together to compel public authorities and businesses to respond to the needs of ordinary people.** It identifies and trains leaders in diverse communities, bringing them together to voice their needs and it organizes campaigns to ensure that these needs are met.

## STEP ONE – LISTEN TO OTHERS

Discover common interests through one-on-one meetings, surveys, etc. To get started, you will need a small group of committed neighbors who share the same point of view regarding the needs of the neighborhood and share your willingness to form a neighborhood association to address neighborhood issues. This small group of individuals is referred to as the Core Group.

The final number of people in your Core Group will depend on whose input you feel will help best define the important the issues that neighborhood residents will rally around. It is important for members of this Core Group to be able to work well together and share a common vision regarding important issues affecting the neighborhood. Members of the Core Group should feel a need to form a neighborhood association to address neighborhood issues.

As far as possible, try to reflect the whole community in your core group membership either through membership, kinship or representation. Inclusiveness is essential to avoid being seen as “elites.”

*Note: Don't have more than 10 people in the Core Group*

**Before you begin asking people to organize, you have to convince them of the benefit of forming a neighborhood association.** Some of the points to be made are that neighborhood associations:

- Facilitate meeting the neighborhood's common goals
- Empower a neighborhood to control what happens in the area
- Provide the neighborhood with an effective communication link with local authorities and other influential groups
- Help members work for the preservation and improvement of the neighborhood
- Let members take part in the

decision-making process that directs the neighborhood's actions

- Can plan social activities for the neighborhood
- Offer an “umbrella” under which many seemingly separate concerns can be grouped and strengthened by collective support.

Some examples of interest groups to be considered for the selection of neighborhood residents to be represented in the Core Group are:

- Homeowners selected to represent each block or street
- Business owners
- Apartment residents, managers, owners
- Church leaders
- School teachers or administrators
- People whose views are respected by other members of the community.

When you have a commitment from five to ten people, move to Step Two.

*Tip: If the Core Group gets too large, it will become unmanageable and result in low productivity.*

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## STEP TWO – HAVE AN INFORMAL MEETING

Meet with the Core Group identified in step one. Try to set up a meeting at a comfortable place, such as someone's home. Do this quickly, before your contacts lose interest. The first meeting of the Core Group is very important. It sets the tone for future meetings. It is important to be organized. Have a tentative agenda prepared. Try not to let the meeting drag on. An hour is usually a good time frame for most meetings. If possible, present all of the members of the Core Group with a copy of the agenda a week before the meeting.

Suggest and agree short term plans together. How can you involve more people in deciding what should be done in the neighborhood? After the Core Group has defined key goals and tasks, the size of

the organization will naturally expand as committees and task groups are developed to achieve the goals of the neighborhood association.

This is also a good time to begin inquiring about sources of seed money and other types of resources available to assist your group with such things as printing flyers, record-keeping, and to assist with the cost of mailing or distributing information to the community. If you are organizing a community where financial hardship is a significant issue, consider searching out sources of funding from charitable organizations, or wealthier communities, such as ex-patriots.

During this initial meeting the group will need to:

**Choose a temporary chairperson** – A good organizer will always place achieving the goals of the organization above being elected to be the chairperson. So if the group decides to select someone other than the person who convened the group, that should not deter the conveyor from being an active participant in the ongoing process. There will be many other opportunities to utilize one's leadership abilities. This role needs to be temporary because the community should have a voice in selecting permanent leadership.

**Determine the boundaries of the neighborhood** – An important step at the beginning of a neighborhood plan is to determine the neighborhood's boundaries. Typical boundaries may be determined by roads or natural features along the border of the neighborhood. A review of a location map and a tour around the area may suggest logical boundaries for a manageable sized area.

**Develop a complete list of neighborhood residents** – Once boundaries have been determined, a complete list of residents and property owners should be obtained. The list should be kept current throughout the process to allow every neighbor to become involved. In order to get a complete list, you may need to go door-to-door.

**Discuss each person's ideas concerning the problems and needs of the neighborhood** – Select an issue the neighborhood will rally around. This issue should be easily understood, and stated in a

manner that can be easily communicated and understood in press releases, in newsletter, on pamphlets and brochures, and passed along by word of mouth.

**Discuss goals, projects and concerns** – It is very important that the initial goals of the group be small and easily achievable. Nothing breeds success like success. If you find that the group has reached a stumbling block and does not seem to want to move forward often the cause will be that the goals are too large and too difficult to achieve.

**Begin discussions on ways to achieve goals** – To begin with, a quickly drafted list of potential actions and tactics is a good way to focus attention and energy. Try not to let this spiral out of control into a rambling discussion about the pros and cons of individual activities, and avoid letting any one action dominate the discussion too early in the planning process or your organized community could be transformed into a protest group with no agreed aims, structure or methods.

**Identify and recruit additional leaders** – Identify other potential leaders in the neighborhood. The importance of a pool of qualified leadership is often overlooked as a neighborhood association develops. Strong leadership gives an organization guidance, stability, and continuity from year to year, motivation to take action, and unity of purpose. The task of recruiting and developing leaders has to be an ongoing activity through the lifetime of any neighborhood association.

**Determine special skills, talents and willingness to participate** – Identify any special talents, expertise, skills, helpful resources and/or any special areas of interest any member might possess. Also determine each Core Group member's willingness to participate and help.

*Note: Some group members might not be able to attend meetings, but possess a special skill that can be of use to the group without their attending meetings. Be sure to be flexible and afford members a variety of ways to participate, while making sure to keep the flow of communication between attendees and non-attendees equal so that no one feels excluded.*



### Determine a convenient frequency, time and location for members to attend regular meetings

– The Core Group will need to meet several times before it will be ready to hold a meeting with the entire neighborhood. The Core Group should meet together as many times as needed to formalize an organizational strategy before the first meeting of the entire neighborhood. Once the entire neighborhood is involved the Core Group will want to continue meeting as an advisory board for the newly formed neighborhood association.

#### Some general points to keep in mind are:

- Your contributions to the neighborhood are your abilities and skills to organize. Therefore, try to delegate other responsibilities.
- You should search continually for many “potential” leaders, not just one or two.
- Leaders can become burned out. Focus on delegation, task-sharing, and have deputies stand in regularly so that they are fully engaged and prepared to step in when necessary.
- Keep your organization open and flexible enough to bring new members and leaders in to your neighborhood association.

The importance of qualified leadership is often overlooked as a neighborhood association develops. Strong leadership gives an organization:

- Guidance
- Stability
- Continuity from year to year
- Motivation to take action
- Unity of purpose

### STEP THREE – HOLD A LARGER COMMUNITY MEETING

Try to agree on common interests and come up with first steps to take on a problem. Schedule a follow-up community meeting, if necessary.

Because you have talked with all of the members

of the Core Group in advance, and they all share a common vision, the discussion should be focused and flow well to accommodate all of the interest of the members of the Core Group.

Follow the guidelines for the Core Group meeting, but add in actions to communicate details throughout the wider community using posters, flyers, word of mouth etc. Your first community meeting could difficult to predict in terms of size, so try to choose a location where a small group won't seem “lost” but with room to expand to accommodate a larger group if your efforts generate a high level of interest. If your planning and communicating skills are well developed, you should have a quite a crowd on your hands, depending on the strength of feeling within the community about the issues you will be addressing.

### STEP FOUR – RESEARCH

Explore issues of concern raised at the community meeting in more detail with the Core Group. Identify stakeholders (government officials, businesses, and residents who likely have a self-interest in the issue). Think about forming sub-committees to spread the workload and allow any local expertise to be put to effective use while keeping everyone interested.

### STEP FIVE – CHOOSE AN ISSUE TO BEGIN WITH

A good issue will:

- Be a real improvement in people's lives
- Be specific and winnable
- Have a clear target
- Be non-divisive for your neighborhood
- Build leadership (many people must be able to get involved doing things)
- Lead to new issues, related to the self-interests of people
- Be consistent with the values and vision of the group



- Develop a sense of power for your group

*Tip: Don't choose an issue that's too big to start with, or you risk overwhelming new, inexperienced members and dooming your project to an early failure.*

## STEP SIX – DECIDE WHAT TO DO ON THIS SPECIFIC ISSUE

Will you use community meetings with officials to gain commitments from them? Will you use the media? How will you seek to involve new people? How will you build the strength of your organization? Make plans based on what you learned in talking with people and in your research. You might decide that you need to do a little more research if something happened that you didn't expect. Do more research and change your plans accordingly.

*Tip: Always keep a written record of your plan and keep it updated. This will provide guidance for your association in later stages.*

## STEP SEVEN – DO IT!

## STEP EIGHT – EVALUATE WHAT YOU DID – LEARN FROM WHAT WORKED AND WHAT DIDN'T

Hold an evaluation meeting with your key people. Did you get the things accomplished that you wanted to accomplish when you began? How did your leadership work? Is there anything you would do differently? Was new leadership developed? Are you different as an organization than when you began? How? If any parts of your plan failed, have an open and honest discussion about it as soon as possible while the events are still clear in everyone's mind, and before any disillusionment has time to take hold. Be positive and objective, and keep the emphasis on learning. Avoid the temptation to blame any one person or team.

## STEP NINE – CELEBRATE YOUR VICTORY

Volunteers who never have fun can get burnt out. So have a party! Invite the media and everyone

who helped you accomplish your goal.

## STEP TEN – BUILD NEW LEADERSHIP IN YOUR GROUP

If you've found any great leaders through your efforts, be sure to give them the opportunity to lead.

A part of your job as a neighborhood organizer is to identify and develop leaders. The task of recruiting and developing leaders has to be an ongoing activity through the lifetime of your neighborhood association. When identifying new leaders for your organization, look for individuals who have shown that they:

- Want to succeed and want their group to succeed
- Communicate well with people
- Can motivate people to take collective action
- Are knowledgeable about the neighborhood, its people and their interests
- Have an allegiance to the neighborhood and the association
- Know how to share power

*Note: Do not try to do everything yourself. Delegate responsibilities to other Group members.*

The following is a list of possible responsibilities which could be delegated to other members in the Core Group:

## CONDUCTING A NEIGHBORHOOD INVENTORY

A neighborhood inventory is a collection of facts about the area including the population, type of housing, land use and other elements unique to the neighborhood. Your area may be eligible for historic designation.



## ISSUE IDENTIFICATION

Issues and concerns can be identified through surveys sent to the residents or through a series of neighborhood meetings. The concerns may deal with crime, physical improvements, transportation corridors, preservation of unique features, rezoning, social functions or other special interest concerns such as neighborhood renovation.

## REVIEW NEIGHBORHOOD GOALS

The draft neighborhood plan should be reviewed and changed as you continue to form.

## PLAN REVIEW AND EVALUATION

The progress of the plan must be monitored and evaluated on a regular basis to ensure its success. Periodic evaluations should be done to recognize successes, detect problems, and suggest improvements in the program.

## NEXT STEPS – CREATE YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD PLAN

Now that you have successfully created a Neighborhood Group and tested the water with an initial action, it's time to use that as a foundation for the future, with a longer term plan. If a neighborhood is viewed as a permanent home for families and as a continuing investment for their future, then steps need to be taken to address changes that will occur. A neighborhood plan is a template that provides a framework for present and future decision making. The health and vitality of a neighborhood depends on the ability of its residents to plan for its future. A neighborhood plan contains broad statements about what the residents would like to see happen (goals) and principles they would like to see followed (policies). It also contains suggestions for strategies on how to reach goals. Remember not every goal requires change. For example, if a community currently enjoys a particular facility they want to keep, the goal is maintaining that aspect, while pursuing changes in other areas.

One-Year Neighborhood Plan Development Guideline:

- Identify one to three issues that are of major concern to the neighborhood
- Form a committee for each issue to spearhead the drive to resolve the issue
- Identify available resources that can be utilized to assist the committee
- Identify strategies and goals
- Agree how often progress will be reviewed, and how it will be measured
- Implement strategies

## FINALLY – GO BACK TO STEP ONE!

Obviously, when you have a group organized, you don't have to create a brand-new group for each issue. However, we always need to keep listening and draw in new people. Some individuals might want to work on a new issue even if they were not interested in previous ones. Remember that, in most cases, the majority of people prefer to hang back and see if your idea is successful before committing time and energy to it. Don't resent these *latecomers*: they are just as essential to the group as the founders, because without their mass support, you are far less effective and less likely to be accepted by the whole community.

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*Anita Hunt, (How to Organize a Community) is an enthusiastic and active supporter, advocate, and curator of human and civil rights news on FaceBook, Twitter, and various other social networking platforms. Known to her large online network of friends and fellow activists simply as "Liss" (Twitter: @lissnup), Anita has created many online advocacy campaigns and websites, a burgeoning portfolio of artwork in support of civil activism, and is the author of several related articles and guides.*



مخاضة شيخاء





# A Rebellion of Civil Society

*In this interview, Arturo Desimone talks to Tunisian student activist Ghassen Athmni. They discuss the democratic future of Tunisia, non-violence, Islamism, and the (then) coming elections. Athmni states, "This is not a revolution born out of pacifist ideology like the ones you associate pacifism with. There is no moral value of non-violence or ending the evil of all wars. The "bloodless" or "non-violent" character of our revolution is more embedded in the North African and Carthaginian cultures. North Africans do not see viability in violence as a road to power, we always prefer to circumvent violence, we walk around it whenever we can to find a better, more silent way."*

## INTERVIEW WITH GHASSEN ATHMNI OF THE TUNISIAN STUDENT MOVEMENT

*In May 2011 I went to Tunisia as part of an initiative organized by the Italian alternative media group Knowledge Liberation Front to meet Tunisian activists and revolutionaries.*

I spoke to Ghassen Athmni as we sat on the Cafe Universelle on the Avenue Habib Bourgiba, under supervision of the two beautiful female student activists Arroï and Malek who did not allow interviews then. Ghassen is a student of history in his twenties. He was named after Ghassen Khanafani, the Palestinian poet who authored *The Land of Sad Oranges* and was killed in a Mossad car-bombing. We spoke in French, I tried to improve my rusty French by reading a Georges Sand book, *Un Hiver en Mallorca* during the trip.

Ghassen is a history student whose interest is in New Criticism and Marxism.

*Interview translated from the French.*

by Arturo Desimone

**A.D.: So explain to me why this revolt is non-violent. You do not seem like you favor Ghandianism or pacifism.**

Ghassen: This is not a revolution born out of pacifist ideology like the ones you associate pacifism with. There is no moral value of non-violence or ending the evil of all wars. The "bloodless" or "non-violent" character of our revolution is more embedded in the North African and Carthaginian cultures. **North Africans do not see viability in violence as a road to power, we always prefer to circumvent violence, we walk around it whenever we can to find a better, more silent way.**

In these societies someone seeking a shift in power will choose the method of conspiracy over aggression. We have a culture of quiet plotting and conspiracy which is the more intelligent way to solve problems of conflict and oppression. This tendency of conspiracy happens not only on the level of political change but on many levels of society, in families for example whenever there are power-struggles concerned.

**A.D: Doesn't this make everyone paranoid, if people are always trying to conspire?**

Ghassen: Tunisians in general are very paranoid, there is a societal tendency towards paranoia because of this mentality of precalculating. This manifests especially now that there are much more reasons to be paranoid. The so-called provisional or "transitory" government has doubled the presence of police forces. **Tunisia before had as many policemen as civilians, this number has increased but now they are less noticeable as they are plain-clothes, undercover cops.**

A.D. : What are the hopes of the Tunisian revolution and where do the revolutionaries now stand?

Ghassen: **What the activists have done is more a revolt, a rebellion of civil society than a revolution.** Now we live under the provisional, or transitory government until the new elections in July. I am sorry that you came to see a revolution but instead you encounter this climate, it must be disappointing. I'm very sorry your wallet was stolen also but that is an unrelated matter. The provisional government has many officials of Zineh Ben Ali's





party, the RCD in it. This is why there is widespread popular hatred towards the provisional government, people do not like or respect this government. The government has secret police that continue the old policies of the previous, they intimidate activists, they surveil, there are accounts of activists taken hostage and being raped by police. Rape of political prisoners was a standard police intimidation tactic throughout the Ben Ali reign. People now feel much more free and able to express their anger, before they said little under this oppression. There is also fear that the provisional government will completely sabotage and hijack the revolution and there is a growing climate of anxiety that our momentum is dying out, is on decline thanks in part to our failure to resist the temporary, substitute-government's strangulations of the civil movement's achievements.

**A.D.: In July there are elections, what is going to happen then? [Editor's note: the elections were postponed until October. Results can be found [here: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15487647](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15487647).]**

Ghassen: I don't know of course. There are now roughly 77 political parties. This is a new phenomenon, before the revolts there was only Ben Ali's RCD and five political parties that had either little say or were under control of RCD. There was a Stalinist-Leninist party, which is a problem. We now have 77.

**A.D.: So you went from a one-party system, to what is potentially a tyrannical chaos of multiple parties**

Ghassen: **So many parties can be a disruptive and problematic factor for Tunisia.** But you have to take into account that 77 parties is actually not to be taken seriously, everyone wants his own party but most of the 77 are subgroups and extensions of a bigger, earlier party. So we could cut these down maybe to fifteen or so major body politics. We are worried about what will happen, the RCD's officials will not win except in the case of massive election fraud as has happened for example in the case of Iran. But the Tunisian people will not tolerate such a fraud, the government is afraid now, we intimidated

its officials and despite the ongoing dirty war, the ex-RCD nomenclature within the provisional government are afraid. The likelihood of problems is perhaps in the growing popularity of Ennahda, the Islamist party.

**A.D.: Are you afraid then that after overthrowing Ben Ali's secular regime you will now have an oppressive Islamist regime voted in?**

Ghassen: **I am secular but we should emphasize there is a difference between the Islamism in Ennahda as opposed to Islamism visible in Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon or Al-Qaeda.** I am against Ennahda but they are campaigning as a party that will accept the secular lifestyles of Tunisians who are not living as Muslims. They claim they are moderate Islamists, with a policy that is inclusive and progressive. You can compare them to the many Christian Democratic political parties you have in Western Europe, which Ennahda resembles much more than Hamas. The secular majority of Tunisians in the urban centers are used to their freedoms and do not take kindly to a threat of Islamism that overpowered countries like Iran.

**Whether Ennahda will keep these promises of tolerance is unlikely,** many Tunisians are afraid Ennahda will eventually attempt to impose prohibitionist regulations on activities like drinking alcohol and irreligious literature. Tunisians especially in a city like Tunis are very modern in their mindset and are highly educated compared to many other parts of the region.

**A.D.: I spoke to an Islamist activist we saw earlier, and had the impression that the Ben Ali regime violently forced people to adopt a secular and modern lifestyles, maybe like Attaturk in Turkey. There is an Islamist rap song, for example, accusing Ben Ali's police of beating veiled women. I do not know enough, can you comment on this?**

Ghassen: Ben Ali's regime was not like Attaturk's. It was not an intellectual dictatorship. **The Ben Ali dictatorship had no ideology, not even a coherent fascist one.** It was a client





state serving Western interests, France and the United States, and it was a police state, notorious for its lack of ideology. Its leaders are notorious for their corruption and stupidity.

**A.D.:** *But the people here are so modernized. During gatherings outside the Kasbah, the Palace De Justice I saw many women judges, women seem very free-spirited and liberated here. How did this emancipation come about, if there have been no enforced policies of emancipation and modernization? If women were this educated can it be that Ben Ali's regime was so backward, or was it more like the Shah in Iran who had some progressive policies?*

**Ghassen:** *Women in Tunisia have an emancipated spirit for many factors independent of Ben Ali's policies.* Let me emphasize that there was no intellectual plan of creating a new future society in the RCD's totalitarianism. Tunisia in terms of female culture differs from the rest of the Muslim countries since ancient history, it is in the culture of Berbers and of Carthage to have very strong and free-willed women. We had the queen Dido, who was famous for her prowess in fighting and leadership. There also Kahenna, the Berber queen who was a great fighter resisting the first waves of Islamicization, of Islamic invasion that eventually overpowered pre-Islamic cultures in North Africa. (Ed. Note: Kahenna was one of four historical Berber queens who were heroic in resisting

*Ghassen Athmni photographed by the author. Photographs © Arturo Desimone*

Arab Islamic invasion.) Most Tunisian women are not to be seen walking around with the veil, now the veil and hijab is more worn than ever unfortunately among a section of the population. This is in part because of the Saudi Arabian regime's propaganda, the Wahabist propaganda and superstitions that have infiltrated and been spread in our society. People embraced Wahabist Islamist superstition due to the regional influence of Saudi Arabia where Ben Ali is now exiled, but also because as you noticed the previous oppressive state was a very secular and openly corrupt one. For this reason a Muslim dissenter can associate the sins of such leaders with their irreligion. Ben Ali did not tolerate Islamist activities for other reasons, but there was no emancipation from a heavily Islamic mentality necessary. There was bullying of religious people over RCD interests, RCD had rivalries with an Islamist party and political movement trying to emerge so of course they targeted its sympathizers. Yes women with headscarves were at some point more harassed but they were not more targeted than other dissenters.

**A.D.:** *Earlier I was in front of the Kasbah, the*

court-house with KLF journalists trying to interview \_\_\_\_\_ (name omitted in this interview), an activist who says he was raped by secret police of the new transitional government, his court case of rape charges against the police is now being tried. He started screaming very dramatically and ran away. It was surprising to see this, why would he be telling journalists in daylight while people are gathered all around him?

Ghassen: This activist may have been raped. It was a very common practice of the RCD to rape political prisoners. But it is not certain in his case I think. **Everyone is an activist these days and wants to show battle scars.** This activist spoke to Al Jazeera weeks before you interviewed him. When he spoke to Al Jazeera about the incident he was not acting like this, he was talking about it calmly. So this is maybe odd. This man was often slandered by official government propagandists, and by the police who accused him of bribing people to demonstrate against the government. They had levelled a charge that this man paid young children 10 euros to join demonstrations. It is clearly a lie of the enemy, but he is also a suspect activist of low intellectual level.

Nonetheless this man was a breakthrough for Tunisian society. **The police collectively humiliated Tunisian dissidents but no Tunisian man before him ever came out making it known in public that he was a victim of coordinated police rapes.** The ethic of shame and male valor prevented these victims from admitting they were sexually humiliated. Since him other young men are coming forward with stories that are in some cases very likely true.

**A.D.: Do you worry about surveillance tactics the provisional government uses towards you as activists?**

Ghassen: **The problem right now is the secret police infiltration.** Do not talk to everyone, do not while you are in Tunisia accept everyone's friendship. *Faire attention.* Earlier we met you with people saying they are activists, this group of activists we saw you with are suspect and we do not trust them. We see these four people at all the demonstrations, but their conduct is too aggressive. They heckle speakers and they never carry signs with them identifying their platform. Many of the activists you

will meet can likely be undercover cops, they might use you to get information about real activists that can harm the Tunisian people and its militants. Be careful while talking to self-described activists.

*Arturo Desimone (A Rebellion in Civil Society and Facebook Interview with Tunisian Activist) is an Argentinean-Aruban writer and activist, born in Aruba, Dutch Caribbean to an immigrant-refugee family. After leaving high school at 15 to work in the black market cigar trade, he took courses in writing and mythology online with the New School of New York. Recently he moved to the Netherlands and currently lives in Amsterdam.*

*His poetry has been published in Brown Critique literary quarterly and he is working on projects inspired by Polish and Tunisian travels and his short period of homelessness. Previous interviewees include activists from Israeli Anarchists Against the Wall (IAAW)*







# Rock the Casbah

*Davi Barker, who blogs for the San Francisco Examiner as the SF Muslim, goes back to the ninth century to speculate on the roots of change in the Arab world. In the work of scholar Patricia Crone, he uncovers political thinkers speculating on the best way to organize society without a caliphate. Consensus, participation, violent overthrow, acquiescence, or anarchy? Barker writes, "Essentially they argued that the Caliph must be agreed upon by the entire community, either unanimously or by consensus, and without this no legitimate Caliph could exist. It was widely accepted that Allah did not impose obligations which were impossible to fulfill, so it was reasoned that there was no obligation to establish a legitimate Caliph."*

by Davi Barker

I came across an article titled "Ninth-Century Muslim Anarchists" by Patricia Crone, scholar of early Islamic history at the Institute for

Advanced Study, Princeton. It came from JSTOR, which is an online archive of academic journals, but it's behind a \$30 pay wall, so email me if you'd like to read my copy.

The article centers around a discussion that was taking place in Basra in southern Iraq in the 800s. There was a general consensus that the Abbasid Caliphate, which controlled a vast empire from Baghdad, had become corrupt and tyrannical. So the question among the scholars became how the Ummah should respond to a leader who had become "all too reminiscent of Pharaoh," as Crone puts it. This article was originally published in 2000 in *Past & Present Journal*. But in light of recent events in the Middle East I think it's valuable to pick up the discussion where they left off.

## ACTIVISTS AND QUIETISTS

The mainstream opinions are broadly categorized as "activists" and "quietists" by Crone. The activists held that **when a leader lost legitimacy it was obligatory to stage a violent**



**revolution** and install a new legitimate leader. The quietists held that **civil war was worse than oppression** and it was obligatory to patiently persevere under tyranny. You had to obey the tyrant, or at the most resist passively. For whatever reason, the quietist position has been the dominant position, even until today, even though it contradicts the opinion of Abu Bakr who said upon his inauguration, **“Obey me as long as I obey God and His Prophet. But if I disobey God’s command or His Prophet, then no obedience is incumbent upon you.”** The quietist position undoubtedly has contributed to the current state of political affairs in the Muslim majority countries. **Unfettered state power is and always will be expanding state power.**

## NINTH CENTURY “RELUCTANT ANARCHISTS”

There was a third category of solutions they were exploring which Crone calls “anarchist” in the general sense, but not in the Western sense. Most Western anarchist thought originates from an imagined egalitarian past before the emergence of the state, and without private property. As Crone puts it, “Western anarchism is in essence the belief that we can return to the condition of innocence from which we have fallen.” Most of the **Muslim anarchists were only anarchists in the sense that they believed that the society could function without the Caliph.** Crone calls them, “reluctant anarchists.” For them anarchism was not a lost ideal they hoped to return to, but the acknowledgment that the ideal, the Medina Caliphate, was lost, and could not be restored.

**They proposed a kind of evolutionary anarchism.** They made no proposal to abolish private property, except to say that the illegitimacy of the ruler spoiled the validity of titles to property, presumably those granted by the ruler. This may be similar to the way some modern libertarians view eminent domain, corporate title and intellectual property as invalid. Predominantly it was factions among the Mu’tazilites, the Kharijites and the Sufi’s who proposed that **if leaders kept turning**

**into tyrants perhaps they’d be better off without leaders at all.**

## RULE BY CONSENSUS

Essentially they argued that the Caliph must be agreed upon by the entire community, either unanimously or by consensus, and without this no legitimate Caliph could exist. It was widely accepted that Allah did not impose obligations which were impossible to fulfill, so it was reasoned that there was

no obligation to establish a legitimate Caliph. Although almost none of them denied the possibility of a legitimate Caliph emerging in the future, but in the mean time alternatives had to be explored. Some pointed out that the Bedouins had got along fine without rulers. Crone writes, “anarchists were clearly drawing on the tribal tradition which lies behind all early Islamic political thought of the type which may be loosely identified as libertarian.”

Crone didn’t specify this in the article, but this view of the Caliphate is consistent with the hadith in which the Prophet informed us that after him would be the Caliphate, then there would be kings, then there would be tyranny. **If you accept this hadith it’s clear the Ummah has progressed from Caliphs to kings, and hard to argue it hasn’t progressed to full blown tyrannies. Viewed this way, any attempt to reestablish the Caliphate by force could only result in further tyranny.** Their specific reasons for arguing against the Caliphate is not particularly relevant to us today since there has not been a Caliphate, legitimate or otherwise, since the collapse of the Ottoman empire. The reality for us is this is less an intellectual exercise and more a practical necessity, especially in light the tenuous hold the current tyrannies hold over their people.

## IF NOT A CALIPH, WHAT?

Their proposed solutions ranged from a radical decentralization of public authority to a complete dissolution of public authority.

For them anarchism was not a lost ideal they hoped to return to, but the acknowledgment that the ideal, the Medina Caliphate, was lost, and could not be restored.





A genre of proposals involved replacing the Caliph with elected officials, the argument being that if you polled enough people you minimized the danger of bias and collusion which had become the signature of the Caliphate. We'll call these proposals "minarchist" in modern parlance. They proposed that people could elect trustworthy and learned leaders within their local communities, the argument being that there could never be unanimous agreement upon one leader of the Ummah and one could not assess the quality of candidates at great distances. These leaders could either be completely independent of one another, or they could be joined together in a federation, the argument being that independent leaders would forever be fighting with their neighbors. **This is strikingly reminiscent of the federalist vs. anti-federalist debate that took place in the American colonies 1,000 years later.**

Some minarchists viewed these elected officials as temporary, only remaining in office when legal disputes arose, or when an enemy invaded. When the problem was resolved they would lose their position, similar to an imam when he has finished leading prayer, and society could return to anarchy. This is very similar to the stateless judicial system in Somalia today.

## ABOLISHING PUBLIC AUTHORITY

Admittedly the minarchist proposals were not really anarchist. They advocated abolishing the form of government to which they had grown accustomed and replacing it with systems with far more public participation. Most of them were proposing new forms of government for which they had no historical precedent. But there were still some who were true anarchists in that they wanted a complete dissolution of public authority. Some argued that a sufficiently moral society would have no need for authority, while others argued that because society

was not sufficiently moral they couldn't have a legitimate authority. Either way they believed that the welfare of society would be best if people were only left alone.

The most prominent group which called for the complete abolition of the state was a minority sect called the Najdiyya. They argued that so long as there was not sufficient agreement to

**They proposed that people could elect trustworthy and learned leaders within their local communities, the argument being that there could never be unanimous agreement upon one leader of the Ummah and one could not assess the quality of candidates at great distances**

establish a legitimate Caliph, there could never be enough to establish law at all. Even consensus (ijma') could not be a source of law in a community where no unified consensus existed anyway. To the Najdiyya every individual was responsible for his own salvation, and entitled their own legal interpretations through independent reasoning (ijtihad). Indeed, any intellectual tradition must be built on this foundation because in order to persuade others to adopt it you must first appeal to their independent reasoning. **They not only demanded political independence but complete intellectual independence because believers were, as the Prophet said, "like the teeth of a comb"**

**and therefore should have no master but God Himself.** Divine law could be conceived of as the natural law, available to all mankind, like fingerprints in the clay of Adam. Crone calls this "radical libertarianism" and as far as I can tell it is one of the first appearances of it in history.

None of the anarchists or minarchists explained how to put their proposals into practice while the state still existed. They merely speculated, leaving it to future generations to implement their radical reform. We may be those generations. None of them proposed fomenting rebellion, happy to enjoy the comforts the state provided its intellectuals. Only the Sufi's avoided material comforts, but their solution was simply to transcend politics and seek meaning in other pursuits, not to revolt.



## FORCED ANARCHY

However, in 817 anarchy was foisted upon them when the government in Baghdad collapsed. A civil war had ousted the previous Caliph and the influence of the new Caliph hadn't been established yet. **Chaos ensued, and the public responded, as many would have predicted, by forming a vigilante group to protect property, maintain commerce and allow the meek to move freely through Baghdad.** This is exactly the kind of spontaneous order we saw in Egypt when police in plainclothes picked fights and looted stores. Civilians self-organized into neighborhood watch programs to protect each other. **We see now what they saw then**, in the absence of public authority there is a natural emergence of order out of chaos without central planning. The Muslim anarchist of the ninth century concluded, as many have in the modern world, "that when people are forced to rely on themselves, they discover talents they did not know they had."

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*Davi Barker was born in California and blogs at the [San Francisco Examiner](http://San Francisco Examiner). During childhood travels he was struck by the wonders of nature — a lightning storm over a primordial desert in Arabia, the cherry blossom petals sprinkling down on the floating markets in Thailand. He spent his adolescence as an outsider. Davi has recently started to understand that alienation is not unique, but a universal similarity that crosses all cultures and religions, caused by our separation from our true self and our separation from nature.*



# The Accidental Leader Questions for Amsterdam50

*Eric Asp, pastor at Amsterdam50, discusses the struggles of unexpected leadership in the answers to questions from Arseh Sevom. "When the founder of the project first left, I was asked, together with another young leader from the church, to step into the role of Pastor-In-Training (learning on the job). We really felt like just a couple of hacks, figuring things out as we went along (which has since become a strong part of our organization's identity). We got a lot of support from others..."*

**Arseh Sevom: How did your organization get started? Do you have an origin story that you tell? If yes, can you spend a bit of time to share it?**

Eric Asp: Amsterdam50 was born out of a movement of churches called the Great Commission Association (GCA), whose primary vision is to develop churches around the world and to reach people with the message of God's love in Jesus Christ.

In May 2001, a team of 30 people from two Great Commission Churches, H20 (a church in Bowling Green, Ohio) and the Rock (a church in Fort Collins, Colorado), joined together to explore Amsterdam and felt God's leading to indeed start a church in the city center. Over the next year, a group of about 40 individuals including people from Holland, England and various places in the United States formed the church planting initiative called "the Amsterdam Project." Between July 2002 and March 2003 the entire team of about 40 people made its way to Amsterdam and started looking for jobs, enrolling in school, and finding housing.

The first church gathering was aboard a boat on the IJ River. Slowly the group grew and began meeting in an apartment on the Leidsekaade. During this time the community began renovations on an attic space ("zolder") in a

historic building on the Leidsekaade, which was to become the meeting place of the church, which was initially named Zolder50. After several months of hard work, the church held its first official



public worship gathering in March 2003. Ever since then, we've been continuing to refine our vision for knowing Jesus, becoming like Jesus, and making Jesus known in Amsterdam.

**All along the way, we've embraced the opportunity to be a church of new beginnings.** The number 50, which we've incorporated into our church's name, means new beginnings: perfect completion (seven times seven), plus one. Starting over again, with freshness and focus. The Old Testament speaks of the year of Jubilee (Leviticus, chapter 25). Every 50th year, a clean slate. Debts forgiven, property restored to its rightful owners, slaves and indentured servants set free, rest for the land and for the people... a celebration of new beginnings. In a similar way, the early Christian church was galvanized by a new connection with God, through the Holy Spirit, on the day of 50 (or "Pentecost," as the Greeks would have said it). 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus, a new beginning with ordinary people being empowered for the extraordinary. The church was born on the day of 50, and the world has been revolutionized as a result. Today, we believe that God continues to work in Amsterdam, offering new beginnings. A newfound community of faith is growing and developing in the city center, proclaiming God's forgiveness, restoration, freedom, peace, renewal. Ordinary people are experiencing the extraordinary, through new life as children of God, redeemed by Christ, filled by the Spirit.

**Arseh Sevom: What was your first significant external challenge?**

Eric Asp: **Rental contracts and opportunistic landlords were our first challenges.** For the first several years, we faced significant financial problems that pushed us to the brink of bankruptcy (on more than one occasion). The pressure didn't let up until a tense agreement, under threat of legal action, was reached for our organization to be released from the rental contract on our original meeting space.

**Arseh Sevom: Your first significant internal challenge?**

Eric Asp: Less than a year into the project, the founder and primary leader for our team experienced some significant personal problems, and he

had to leave relatively quickly to move back to the United States with his family. **His sudden departure left a lot of gaping holes in our ministry: friend and spiritual father, a strong leader with a clear vision, the public "face" and "voice" of the church (both in Amsterdam and in America), oversight of finances and fund-raising...** So when he left, there was a real sense of doubt about the future of the church here in Amsterdam. For awhile, we very seriously considered packing up and moving home, after he left.

**Arseh Sevom: How did you overcome that challenge?**

Eric Asp: When the founder of the project first left, I was asked, together with another young leader from the church, to step into the role of Pastor-In-Training (learning on the job). **We really felt like just a couple of hacks, figuring things out as we went along** (which has since become a strong part of our organization's identity). We got a lot of support from others (GCM, ECA, other churches and individuals both from American and the Netherlands). And in spite of all the chaos and confusion, the church grew stronger, better, and bigger — so we felt reassured that God was still with us, even through all the changes. Shortly after the initial leadership transition, an older, more experienced pastor moved to Amsterdam, with his family, to mentor and support Todd and I in our development as pastors for the church, helping us to tweak the ministry to fit our leadership styles.

**Arseh Sevom: What are the 5 most important things you learned as an individual contributor and/or as organization?**

Eric Asp:

- 1) Humility and dependence on God
- 2) Flexibility and adaptability
- 3) Developing leaders from within
- 4) Listening to people with different points of view
- 5) Cultural sensitivity, without compromising unique personality.



*Eric Asp (Questions for Amsterdam50) is an American videographer/writer/pastor living in Amsterdam, together with his wife and three children. He studied Communications and Creative Writing at Bowling Green State University but has found daily life and a continuous supply of Moleskine journals to be his best teacher. His casual and critical observations on life, love, and faith can be found on-line at [www.ericasp.com](http://www.ericasp.com). His previous submission to the Civil Society Zine can be found [here: Killing the Church with Networking](#).*







## An Interview with Mahnaz Afkhami

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*Hooman Askary reports on his discussion with the former minister of women's affairs in pre-revolution Iran, Mahnaz Afkhami. She links the century long struggle of Iranian women for equal protection under the law to the demonstrations that emerged in 2009 after the flawed presidential elections in Iran. Afkhami states, "The green movement in Iran is the continuation of what had been started nearly a century before and gone through ups and downs, changes and evolutionary and revolutionary transformations."*

By Hooman Askary

For more than three decades, the rare images of women coming out of Iran primarily showed them in the required Islamic hijab, implying absolute compliance and complacency. Disparate accounts seldom raised doubts about the way women saw their role in society. Information and communication technologies altered that image once and for all. The world was able to see different images of Iranian women through the lens of netizens. It appeared that the imagined complacency had never even existed in the first place. In 2009, Iranian women really made the world stop and notice. They

were the pioneers of the national opposition and demonstrations against the Islamic Republic which became known as the Green Movement. That movement soon became personified by a young woman who lost her life to a bullet from the Basiji militia. Unlike most of the national heroes of Iranian patriarchal society, a young woman, Neda, became the face of the nation. She was special because she was not special at all. She was the Iranian girl next door; one worlds apart from the image endorsed by the Islamic Republic.

Almost two generations before Neda and her peers, Mahnaz Afkhami was born. There were not a lot of opportunities available to a girl born in the Iran of 1941. Still Mahnaz Afkhami managed to surprise everyone and have an exceptional career, working hard for the advancement of women in Iran.

A brief glance at Mahnaz's bio would tell you something like this: she started her life as an activist quite early, left Iran for the US at the age of 13. At 17 she joined a trade union. In 1967, she returned to Iran and worked as a university professor. While teaching at the National University of Iran, she founded the Association of University Women and then became secretary general of the Iranian Women's Organization. In 1975, Mahnaz Afkhami joined the cabinet as Minister for Women's Affairs. Her website relates this to her "year of intense activism during International Women's Year (1975):"

To mention a few of those years' achievements, Afkhami and her colleagues, managed to change Iranian laws so that by 1978 women had gained equal rights to divorce and the minimum age of marriage for girls was raised from 15 to 18. Afkhami also initiated and sponsored a package of laws and regulations to support women's employment.

This was all reversed by the success of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamization of the revolution. Khomeini represented tradition against the Shah as the symbol of modernity. In an interview with the author, Mahnaz Afkhami recalled how women's issues were the main source of contention. "Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in February [1979] – before there was any constitution or government or any other radical changes – first of all he annulled the family protection law." Of course, the changes brought about by the Islamic Revolution in Iran not only affected Afkhami's life's work, but also her own life. While on a mission in the USA, a death verdict in absentia was issued against her on the charge of "Corruption on Earth and warring with God." That was the infamous charge brought against many high ranking royal officials including Amir Abbas Hoveyda, the former Prime Minister. Thus began Mahnaz's life in exile.

Even in exile she didn't cease working towards her goals both in her homeland and around the world. The clerics in Tehran were becoming more reactionary, beginning with the introduction of compulsory hijab for women, banning women from participating in certain roles in society, closing down universities for more than 2 years while revising all pedagogical materials to endorse a specific ideology favoring their theocracy, and banning music and dancing. During those dark days, Mahnaz carved out a new role for herself as an activist determined to advance women's rights – this time in the scope of the world. She continued assisting her compatriots in Iran to preserve their achievements while resisting the devastating effects of the revolution. Soon after the revolution, she established the Foundation for Iranian Studies in 1981. She became associated with many human rights organizations; served as vice-president of "Sisterhood Is Global" Institute for 10 years; joined the advisory board of "Women's Division of Human Rights Watch" and

in 2000 founded a new organization—Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace (WLP). Mahnaz has penned multiple books, articles, and booklets which have been translated into several languages and used in universities, women's NGOs, and international organizations as references.

It is now almost 40 years that Mahnaz Afkhami has been fighting for women's rights and against all sorts of gender apartheid, as she writes, "in the name of tradition, religion, social cohesion, morality, or some complex of transcendent values." The question remains whether or not her campaigns inside Iran have had any effect on the lives of women? Did all of the achievements vanish overnight in 1979 when the mullahs took over?

Afkhami believes that the movement never stopped and says, "**The green movement in Iran is the continuation of what had been started nearly a century before and gone through ups and downs, changes and evolutionary and revolutionary transformations.**" She describes the current situation in Iran as "another stage in an ongoing movement."

Sima, a retired Iranian woman in her late 50s, also believes that the achievements Iranian women have made in recent years, under immense pressure and persecution, are the continuation of an enduring movement which started before the revolution and never stopped. She considers the enlightenment process and women's resistance so effective that, if not there, "Iran would be another Afghanistan with an even worse situation for women."

Another Iranian woman in her late 50s, Maryam, recalls how she received proper education to become a teacher and live independently from her family. She also mentioned that her peers would adopt new cultural norms and shed the hijab "as soon as they got on the buses transferring them from their small hometowns to their colleges in the bigger cities." But as life-changing an experience this process was for women, it also may have contributed to a backlash. Looking back at those days, Afkhami writes on her official website,

Mahnaz Afkhami says she thinks what happened then was "a new experience globally to have



an expression of political religion as an ideology.” She further explains, “It was not only women who were misled by the new slogans and new ways of mobilizing, but also a large number of intellectuals of various groups, [even] policy makers and politicians thinking at the time that this was going to be a democratic and participatory movement; that it was going towards a more human rights oriented and open society, which of course, turned out to be not quite so and even the exact opposite. **The difference between women and other groups was that they were the first to recognize their mistake and they were the first to stand up to the new rulers and show their displeasure with them.**”

Afkhami points to the use of terms with different meanings by Ayatollah Khomeini such as his stance against the idea of “women as sexual objects” – which is also a stance taken by feminists. What he meant, however, was not that women should be seen acting as people with equal rights, but “people wrapped up in black veils and kept away from mischief.” The same was true for “democracy, freedom, and legitimacy.”

What those terms meant to many was not what they meant to Khomeini. The use of cherished terminologies used with different meanings contributed to misleading many.

Today Iran has a mostly educated, but deprived majority raised by the women whose identities were already formed and developed in the pre-revolutionary era. This might be one of the reasons that the ongoing clash of discourses evident in the recent movements in Iran emerged in the first place. Afkhami sees the conflict due to Iran’s “well-developed, sophisticated and modern civil society especially in terms of women’s activism, women’s organization, and women’s mobilization and awareness.” She adds that **when such a modern civil society faces a set of anachronistic laws and system of government there is a constant conflict**; just as the

evident clash between the ideology of the Islamic Republic and the reality of women’s lives. At every step the government has had to be pushed back and to some extent they have been pushed back. Although Afkhami also acknowledges that any further visible steps such as ending compulsory hijab would, in their eyes, question the legitimacy and authenticity of the Islamic regime. The amount of time and energy and resources that have been spent by the Islamic Republic to simply keep head scarves on women’s heads is astounding. They continue to do so because symbolically it is their claim to authenticity. Does that mean that women are pushed back for yet another phase faced with the iron-fisted policies of the clerical regime? Afkhami states, “So far as women are concerned they are doing whatsoever humanly possible against these limitations and harshness and aggression.”

Afkhami and her colleagues are also doing their part. She says they are trying to keep the women inside the country connected to the activists in other parts of the world, especially in Middle East and North Africa. They have translated many

textbooks, manuals, and learning tools and put them on the web. They have also translated their accounts of what is going on in Iran and circulated them among the tens of thousands of NGOs worldwide. As for the new wave of exiles, they have been trying to support them and help them maintain their connections with their constituency inside and to survive outside of Iran.

An old English saying suggests that a daughter ought to be judged by the mother. The pictures and video clips of Iranian girls on the internet seem nothing like those of Mrs. Ahmadinejad’s with her black veil showing only one third of her face. Perhaps this is the context wherein Neda was born and soon became the face of a nation long misunderstood, misinformed and, “mis-led”.

“It seems to me that our main mistake was not that we did not do other things which we should have done. Our main mistake was that we created conditions in which the contradictions related to modernity, progress, equality, and human rights, especially women’s rights, increased and the reaction to our work put perhaps too much pressure on the country’s social fabric.”



*Hooman Askary (Fighting for Women's Rights: An Interview with Mahnaz Afkhami) (MA) is a freelance journalist/researcher and a regular contributor to Arseh Sevom. He is currently conducting research on foreign-based media broadcasting into Iran within the Media and Communication Studies programme of Örebro University in Sweden. He has previously researched Iranian cultural hybridity. During his years as a student back in Iran at the University of Tehran and later at Allameh Tabatabai University he actively participated in student protests and wrote articles under the pseudonym "Koorosh Afshar." As a journalist, Hooman Askary has produced radio reports for RFE/RL Persian broadcast service, Radio Farda.*







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# Questions for South African Peace-Worker Jasmin Nordien

*Arseh Sevom spoke with South African activist Jasmin Nordien about her experiences working in civil society organizations. In this post, we focus on her experiences throughout the 1990s, when she worked with the Network of Independent Monitors (NIM) reporting on state violence and supporting individuals and grassroots organizations. Jasmin shares some of the lessons she learned about the importance of creating networked organizations, the differences between leadership and management, and the need for clarity of purpose. Jasmin tells us, "...I no longer wanted to monitor the society I did not want to live in. I wanted to build the kind of society that my children and grandchildren would group up in."*

**T**he Network of Independent Monitors (NIM) was founded to

counter and monitor the apartheid state's brutality as it responded to the growing opposition to the apartheid regime. The organization provided support to those affected, including legal support. They monitored and reported on state-sponsored violence, making it public with the help of sympathetic parliamentarians who ensured that the reports made their way into official records.

The Network was more than a single organization, it unified a variety of civil society groups and activists with similar objectives, including religious institutions, human rights organizations, peace and development organisations, research organisations, and civil society organizations. This helped to provide an overview of how the apartheid state was systematically destabilizing society.

**Arseh Sevom: What was your first significant external challenge?**

Jasmin Nordien: When I attended my first network meeting, I was 22 or 23 years old, the youngest member in the group. I was shocked by the immature and childish behavior of group members.



Everybody around me was a director or project manager, but when I looked around the room, I basically saw three-year-olds in adult bodies throwing tantrums when they could not get their way. It was unbelievable; I guess I expected more from those in leadership positions. Realizing that you deal with people, who bring their emotional selves to the work environment, and you have to find a way to work with these individuals. That was a big learning experience for me. What I learned about leadership is that people, as individuals are human; they have needs, desires, ambitions, strengths and weaknesses, and you have to firstly, be aware of these and, secondly, learn how to cater to and constructively engage those needs, desires, etc.

This got me thinking about the differences between leadership and management. Organizations and movements are often founded by charismatic visionary leaders, and the functions of management and leadership are merged. That creates a lot of conflict within the organization that spills over to its function and even its survival.

In the province where I worked, there were a number of network individuals who had a clear understanding of NIM's role and mandate in facilitating change, and they also had a clear understanding of what was happening in apartheid South Africa. So when NIM had fulfilled its mandate and function, they pushed for a neat and organized closing of the provincial office. In other provinces, the closure was not so neat.

**Arseh Sevom: What you say about the difference between leading and managing is so interesting.**

Jasmin Nordien: Often when an organization starts out there aren't enough resources to have both leaders and managers, so need forces the two together. This happens out of need, but as the organization expands, it's hard for individuals to give up that power and to change the organizational culture and processes that emerged when the organization

started.

**Arseh Sevom: How did your organization overcome that challenge of leadership and management?**

Jasmin Nordien: There were individuals in the network and individual organizations that were really clear about their mandate and role. They were able to be true to their mandate and also to hold the provincial network accountable to its mandate and role of the organization. So when their mandate expired because it was no longer relevant, they could neatly close down and the network functions that needed to continue was devolve into other organizations functions.

This was not only about clarity of mandate, but also about individual leadership. There were people who could say, "Society is changing, and there is a larger need in society than us perpetuating ourselves as a network." They were very clear about how the network had fulfilled its mandate and role. Now there was a need to focus on building a new South Africa as opposed to monitoring the old South Africa. That shift of energy needed to happen, and it was individuals who

pushed that.

**Arseh Sevom: What are the most important things you learned?**

Jasmin Nordien: The one thing I learned after working at NIM was that I no longer wanted to monitor the society I did not want to live in. I wanted to build the kind of society that my children and grandchildren would group up in. There was a mental shift for myself as an individual, that was reflected in the civil society organizations around me as well.

I also learned that it is important for organizations in highly political situations to manage information and disinformation. NIM was actively involved in making sure that clear information was put out there and countering disinformation

What I learned about leadership is that people, as individuals are human; they have needs, desires, ambitions, strengths and weaknesses, and you have to firstly, be aware of these and, secondly, learn how to cater to and constructively engage those needs, desires, etc.



about the organization, individuals, and the work it did. Rumor mongering in political situations can quickly generate a lot of conflict.

The third thing I took away from this experience is that when a number of organizations do similar work it is important to cooperate with one another and with individuals in the field. It is important not just to share information, but also staff. Building relationships and cooperating with others to achieve a larger goal is really important.

**Arseh Sevom: Those are really valuable lessons, especially for us.**

Jasmin Nordien: Lets not be romantic about peace work, there is usually fierce competition for resources and a need for survival. The competition for survival is tough. It takes leadership, a few individuals who really understand and believe in what they are doing to coalesce a situation. When I started working as an activist, I did so because I believed in the work I was doing. Since then, peace-building as a field has become an industry. People work in the peace industry for different reasons, some people work because they believe they can make a difference in the world, some people it is merely a job and stable salary, and for others it is a goldmine where they can make a lot of money. Simply put, I think of it as peace missionaries versus peace mercenaries. There is competition for survival. It takes leadership, a few individuals who really understand and believe in what they are doing to coalesce a situation.

**Arseh Sevom: Why did you become involved?**

Jasmin Nordien: I became involved with conflict resolution through an American professor, Dr. Dudley Weeks, who conducted conflict resolution workshops for youth in South Africa. The workshops opened a new way of dealing with conflict for me. After going through the training, I became a volunteer. I wanted to contribute my

skills to building a better society. I went furthered my studies, and eventually got a master's degree in Peace Studies.

## JASMIN'S ADVICE:

**Second tier leadership:** It is important to actively build second tier leadership within organizations. In our organization, the director worked with a small management team which was responsible for leadership and management. Actively building second tier leadership ensures the continuation of the organization. This was particularly true in South Africa where many leaders from civil society organisations became part of the new government after regime change. Organizations that built second tier leadership could continue. Those that did not were in disarray.

**Sound financial and administrative systems:** It's crucial for organizations to have good and sound financial and administration systems. When these are not in place it leaves space for abuse and corruption. It's also important for funders who need access to narrative and financial reports.

**Be clear on who you are accountable to as an organization:** Who are our constituents and whose interests are we as an organization serving? The constituents or donor organisations? Then align the needs of the organization, constituents, and donors. This prevents you from putting yourself in a situation when you are in conflict with the

The one thing I learned after working at NIM was that I no longer wanted to monitor the society I did not want to live in. I wanted to build the kind of society that my children and grandchildren would group up in.

donor's needs and interests, and the needs and interests of your constituents.

### **Staff development and mentorship:**

Organizations need to engage in staff development. An organization is only as good as the staff working for it. Organizations really have to invest in this. It doesn't have to be expensive. It can be both formal and informal. Create opportunities for staff to expand their world view, to see other possibilities is important because they will bring that back to their organization and society. This can happen through training and staff exchanges etc.

### **Deal with conflict in the organization and amongst staff:**

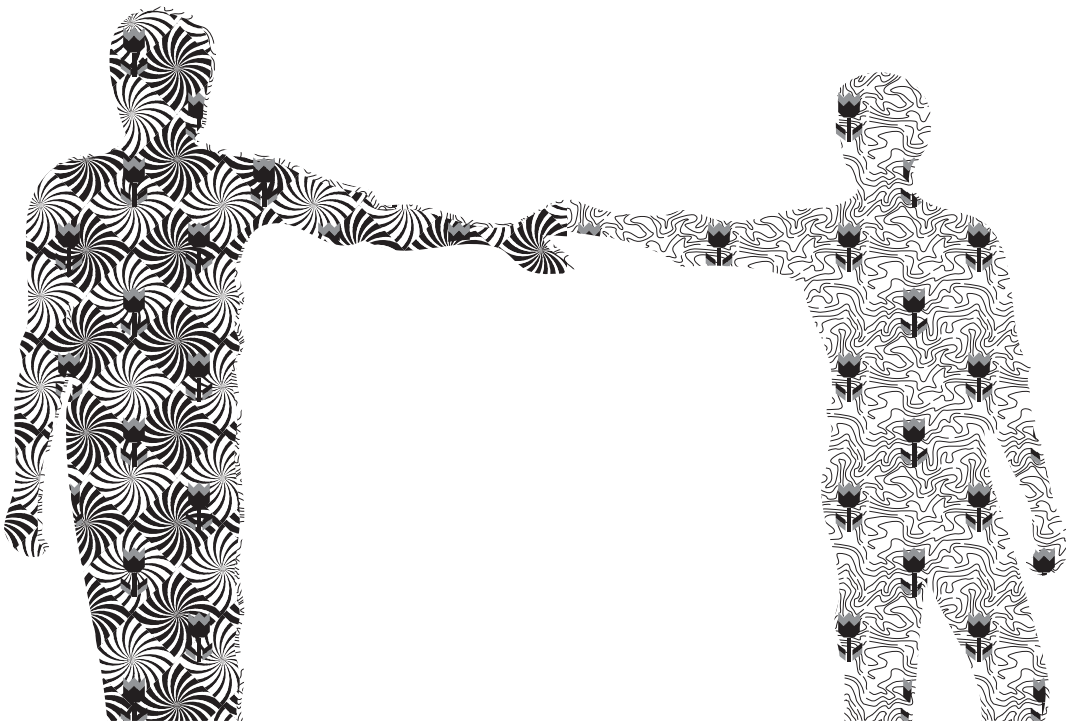
What I found important was that there need to be clear spaces allocated where individuals could come together to deal with issues of conflict. Those spaces were either formal or informal. In our organization we had something called 'open space or free land'. This was the final point on the agenda of the weekly/monthly staff meeting. At the end of every meeting, we created a space people to deal with conflict and to bring in issues that were not being addressed elsewhere.

### **Support networks for female leaders:**

One of the support initiatives that I thought was excellent, even though I was not a part of it, was having a monthly support meeting for female directors or leaders in the province. There was very little support for women in leadership positions. Women leaders were invited to join and became part of monthly conversations focused on about what it meant to be a woman leader. This space for women leaders is much needed in a highly patriarchal society.

*Jasmin Nordien (From Monitoring to Building: Questions for South African Peace-Worker Jasmin Nordien) is a mother and a peace-worker (practitioner) with sixteen years experience in both local and global civil society institutions focused on conflict transformation, peace-building, and gender; primarily in South Africa during the transition period (since 1993) and more recently in India, The Netherlands, and Sweden.*





# Human Rights in the MENA Region

42

*Rania F is a Lebanese human rights defender working in Jordan with IKV Pax Christi. Rania spoke to Arseh Sevom about her experiences working in the region. She spoke about human rights, the changes in the Arab region, women's rights, militarization, and minorities. "There is a lot of fear in our region," she stated. "We have deep-rooted fears that remain unaddressed. In Lebanon we have an anti-secular movement, which makes religious and political minorities apprehensive. The anti secular movement cannot achieve its goals unless it takes into consideration the fears of political and religious groups..."*

**R**ania's position as woman, a Christian, and a human rights defender gives her a different perspective on many of the challenges in the region. She is very much aware of the issues which make minorities and

women apprehensive. "There is a lot of fear in our region," she stated. "We have deep-rooted fears that remain unaddressed. In Lebanon we have an anti-secular movement, which makes religious and political minorities apprehensive. The anti secular movement cannot achieve its goals unless it takes into consideration the fears of political and religious groups. Many Egyptians still believe Islam should be the state religion. So the Coptic Christians are afraid. There is a fear of Israel: fear that people will be moved around and Israel will shut down its borders. Women are afraid. Me as a Lebanese, I cannot pass on the right of nationality to my kids because they are afraid of sectarian inequalities. There is also the fear of the Islamists and Salafists. The military is not a fear. It's a fact.

They have ultimate power and are beyond the rule of law... Conformity is a big problem in the Middle East," she stated. "I am afraid of my private rights and my civil rights."

Rania asks, "Are we capable of managing the diversity we have?"

The following is an excerpt of that interview.

## HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

RF: Human rights in the Middle East, this is a lot of work.

**AS: Working to defend human rights anywhere is a lot of work, but in the middle east, there is also a lot of pressure. Do people understand what you are doing?**

RF: There is mistrust in the international human rights instruments. So you hear, "It's nice, but we don't have it." We don't enjoy it. We don't practice it. Many people ask, "Human rights? Where are human rights?" It's as if you are talking about something inexistent. This is true to a certain extent. People do not feel or practice human rights in their day-to-day lives. They do not recognize when they are exercising human rights. I tell them, "Well you vote." And they say, "Oh I didn't think of it that way." We tell them that human rights appear in many forms: when you form groups, freedom to comment on articles in newspapers, freedom to call in to a talk show and express your opinion, also represent the freedom of expression.

**AS: I got the sense after living in Iran that many people thought of human rights for themselves, but not for others, or they thought of them as something used against them by the West, or as a luxury. Is this also true in your region?**

When you look at Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen, you see that the military, which is the biggest apparatus in the Middle East, did not tell the leaders that they had had enough. You see that the power to change governments is not always with the people, but with the military.

RF: Yes it is a luxury because the basic rights are not there. We can't blame people for that. It's the reality they are living in. As for human rights is for them, yes. You hear, "I have human rights, but in practice I don't. I have the right to express my opinion, but I am not tolerant of disagreement." I don't know if this human rights or tolerance. I know they are two faces of the same coin. It may be more tolerance than human rights. Human rights are human rights for all and not only for me.

If you take the issue of torture, you will find a wide spectrum — even among the elite and the educated and the middle class — who will say if he is a collaborator with Israel, he needs to be punished severely so that he will not do that again. If you talk about the death penalty, you will hear if a criminal went into a house and killed a family, for example, he should be hanged right away. So where is fair trial? right to life? Even among these circles that are considered to be more exposed, who read international papers, we find they don't have a deep comprehension of human rights and what it is really. If someone does something wrong, people forget about human rights. They are ready to dismiss with justice and condone torture.

Salafis and jihadists are also vulnerable. People think it's okay to torture them and raid their houses. They think it's okay to tap their phone calls, follow them, observe them, you can do all the intelligence work with them and it is ok as long as it makes us feel secure. Everyone thinks these people are dangerous. No one thinks that we are violating their privacy rights or their personal security and rights.

**AS: What you are saying is that in the minds of many, security trumps rights.**

RF: Yes. This is true. Especially after 9/11, and not only in the Middle East, but around the world.

This is true all over the world.





\*\*\*

## WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

RF: In Jordan, you find women more and more wearing the veil. You see the burqa and the niqab. In Amman you see this more and more. Ten years ago you rarely saw a burqa or niqab in Amman or in Cairo. Of course, some of the women wearing them here are making a political statement. And some people here respond by calling them Bin Laden's wives. They say, "There goes one of Bin Laden's wives." People are negative here about the veil. I don't want to call people here Islamophobic, since most are Muslims. Maybe it's extremist-phobic.

Even so, in Egypt, in Jordan, in Khartoum, especially in certain neighborhoods, will harass you if you are not wearing hejab. Even women will approach you and preach you.

Definitely things are changing in the middle east and elsewhere.

**AS: What role are women playing in the Middle East, and how they can secure a stronger role?**

RF: For me, if you are there and you are active, you gain a role. Frankly, there are few women participating.

**AS: So the pictures show us many, but you tell me there are few.**

RF: There are few actually. Women can't only go onto the streets, but they have to be part of the decision-making process. You don't see women in positions of power or accessing those positions.

**AS: Despite the participation of women, for instance, in the 1978 revolution in Iran, they found themselves marginalized. Basically, they heard, "Thanks for your help. Now go back to your homes and be good wives and good mothers."**

RF: Many people here are not gender sensitive. Both women and men do not consider the position of women. For instance, I was talking to a group

of Iraqi human rights lawyers a few years ago. A man claimed, "Women here are in heaven. During Saddam's regime, women working in the ministries got one-year maternity leave. Can you imagine? We had to work to support them. Thank God the new government changed that law."

One of the women participants said, "But this is forcing women out of public service."

The lawyer responded, "They shouldn't work anyway." He went on to explain that women had enough work at home, he called this their "natural duty." He added, "Why did God make it possible only for women to have children?"

I lost my cool listener attitude and responded, "Well in God's wisdom, he made women stronger and smarter." I was the sexist then.

## ON CHANGE AND THE MILITARY

RF: In Arabic, we have a saying: "Running away is three-quarters of manhood." If you know you're

doomed, you don't have to be a martyr. So, run away. Don't be so courageous that you become a martyr. Bin Ali in Tunisia knew the right moment to run away. He knew the military had had enough of him. He made a deal with the Saudis, and poof, he was gone.

You have Mr. Mubarak who did not apply this funny saying, and he knew he was doomed. The military were very much aware that the people in Egypt did not want Gamal Mubarak [Hosni Mubarak's son]. They sensed the people's refusal of Gamal. They did not like the idea that Hosni Mubarak had kind of made him an heir to his throne. Egypt does not have a monarchy. The people would not accept this, and the military knew this. They didn't want Gamal Mubarak either. They wanted elections and someone from the system, like they had when Sadat was assassinated.

Mubarak knew the military was not with him, but he was ready to be a martyr. The military had told him, please leave, we are not going to protect

In Arabic, we have a saying: "Running away is three-quarters of manhood." If you know you're doomed, you don't have to be a martyr.



you anymore.

When you look at Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen, you see that the military, which is the biggest apparatus in the Middle East, did not tell the leaders that they had had enough. You see that the power to change governments is not always with the people, but with the military.

The power center is the military. So the power center is now negotiating on behalf of the people. This is what is happening in Egypt now. The military is negotiating with the Muslim Brotherhood, because they are the most organized of all the groups. We will see what will happen.

**AS: What you are saying is that in order to make change in these heavily militarized regions you have to eventually negotiate with the military.**

RF: Yes.

**AS: How do you move beyond military control to civilian control?**

RF: We need to learn from the Turks. They have been doing this for a long time now. In Turkey they have more checks and balances. We don't have them at all.

**AS: So in a sense you have to move step-by-step with the military in order to get them to buy into civilian rule.**

RF: Exactly. But you also have to strengthen civil society. You have to strengthen education. You have to strengthen activism. You have to restrict military rule to military matters. In this region, the military also enjoys other privileges which makes them almost untouchable.

What has changed, maybe, in Turkey over the past five years is the awareness of rights. This was illustrated by the issue of veils in the universities. Women protested. They said, this is my right.

**AS: When the military has so much power, it limits the involvement of women. It makes it difficult for women to negotiate with power.**

RF: We have a very patriarchal society. **Women can be doctors or engineers, but they cannot be activists. They have to submit to the society. Even**

**women see activists as trouble-makers. Even educated women see those women who struggle for rights and choose to be activists as trouble makers.**

**AS: That's why there are so few activists: you are always making trouble by pushing the society to do better. People, men and women, would prefer it if we all just were quiet.**

RF: Exactly. Activists push the limits of society. They make it uncomfortable. It isn't just men who discriminate against women. Women discriminate against women.

## SUCCESS

**AS: Can you point to an initiative that is going well?**

RF: There are a number of initiatives going well and doing something good. For instance, in Lebanon there is a movement for women to be able to pass on their nationality to their children. Now, my child would not be Lebanese unless his Dad is Lebanese. Women are fighting for this right too, and it is going well.

**The general uprisings in the Middle East are good because they are showing that suppression cannot go on forever.** Even if the uprisings are violently oppressed, people know that suppression will not go unremarked forever. This is the start of checks and balances. Even the military has to think about what will bring people on to the streets. This may not be so obvious now, but it will become more important.

**AS: For this to continue, average people, people who are not activists, have to become more engaged.**

RF: Absolutely. This needs to continue at the grass roots level.

## INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS

*In the Middle East we are not educated that we are citizens.*

**AS: It was easy to unite people to topple Bin Ali in**



**Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, but it isn't easy to unite people for all the discussion and quarreling and compromise that makes up a democracy. How do you keep people engaged? Do you have any ideas?**

RF: Activists have to play a big role. Education has to play a big role. In the Middle East we are not educated that we are citizens. Education is about science and math. We learn that the authority of the Mom and Dad has to be respected. Older people must be listened to. This is not citizenship. We are not educated to state what we find wrong.

The pressure to be the same, to be part of the dominant culture is not good. We have to educate more about individual rights. We should educate from the individual up to the community. When individuals learn about their rights, they naturally respect those of other individuals.

Law enforcement also needs to be involved in protecting the rights of minorities. We need more education, more awareness.

**AS: We need more tolerance.**

RF: Individual space is lacking here, so there are very much blurred lines between what is individual and what is group. The notion of individual rights is a difficult one. It will be fought against by the collective.

**AS: People seem to think democracies represent the will of the majority at all costs, when in reality they are responsible for protecting minority voices and opinions.**

RF: **It is important for democracies to protect the rights and opinions and even the presence of minorities.** Minorities need to be protected to thrive and flourish under the majority, and this is not easy.

**AS: It isn't easy anywhere. In the Netherlands, which has a strong dominant culture, many people have a hard time imagining what it's like to be a minority. I saw this when living in Iran as well. It was hard for many to see differences among them. Many people had a hard time understanding that not everyone in their society was part of their culture.**

RF: I wanted to make a statement about the law passed in France about the niqab. I believe this is a violation of human rights. Maybe the law should state that if there is a woman who is wearing a niqab and the security officer needs a clear identification of who she is, then she must show her face. But if this is forbidden because it is against the majority or the norm in France, what is this? It is my right to wear whatever I want. Full stop. What about minority rights? If I have done something wrong, if there is a threat from me, ask me, Please remove your veil. If not, my rights as a minority should be respected.

I think this law is very racist and against human rights.

I would like to be tough, what is the difference between this law and the morality police in Saudi Arabia and Iran? It's the same stupid mentality. If I want to wear a short skirt or a veil, it's nobody's business. How can France or Europeans condemn the morality police in Saudi Arabia or Iran, when they do not condemn what they are doing? Short skirts do not mean I am more free than someone in a niqab.

**AS: I have also learned that from experience. I learned about my prejudices from meeting and working with women in hejab. I hate to admit that I had these negative ideas about women in hejab or other religious clothing, but I did.**

RF: I was not born with my present point of view. I also have had my prejudices. The first time I went to Yemen in 2001, I felt sorry for the women. I felt they were under suppression. It was to my surprise that women in Yemen were human rights fighters, they believe in things, they think, they are liberal, they want to be part of their society, they have so many ideas. I went to Yemen thinking these women were *ya haram*, pity on them. But no, pity on me! I know nothing. I know shit about how I thought because they were wearing niqab they were not thinking. That's wrong.... They are wearing niqab, but they are thinking. They are so open minded and so enriching to talk with. They are really nice women.



“Human rights? Where are human rights?” It’s as if you are talking about something inexistent. This is true to a certain extent. People do not feel or practice human rights in their day-to-day lives.



hi  
 Ghassen Athmni  
 hi  
 Arturo Desimone  
 ca va  
 how are u  
 ?  
 Ghassen Athmni  
 fine  
 you?  
 Arturo Desimone  
 ca va ok  
 Ghassen Athmni  
 in 23 years  
 there were more built mosques  
 than in any other period  
 and more closed bars  
 since the beginning of the  
 noughties  
 Ben ali used religion  
 and if the wahabist & salafist  
 came to be influential  
 it's because they let them  
 they fought  
 Arturo Desimone  
 but did he openly let them  
 Ghassen Athmni  
 the islamic reformism, they fought  
 culture  
 since 2008  
 there were  
 no veiled women targeted  
 Arturo Desimone  
 what is islamic reformism,  
 was islamic reformism part of Ben

Ali's  
 official  
 regime  
 Ghassen  
 Athmni  
 in  
 23  
 years

Arturo Desimone  
 ok, that is almost nothing for  
 an arab country  
 Ghassen Athmni  
 in 2008 20%  
 and now  
 35%  
 Arturo Desimone  
 that is a dramatic huge change  
 Ghassen Athmni  
 it's terrible

Arturo Desimone  
 yes  
 why  
 are they wearing it  
 more?  
 Ghassen Athmni  
 dogmatism  
 Arturo Desimone  
 dogmatism, of who

who spreads these dogmatism  
 Ghassen Athmni  
 the religious belief or  
 practice  
 are really "heavy"  
 Ghassen Athmni  
 the 'ulama'  
 Arturo Desimone  
 ulama  
 Ghassen Athmni  
 most of them wahabist  
 the others are salafist  
 Arturo Desimone  
 did Ben Ali become more  
 dependent  
 on  
 Saudi  
 Arabia

Arturo Desimone  
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 on Saudi Arabia  
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# Facebook interview with Tunisian Activist

*Arturo Desimone chats with student activist Ghassen Athmni about Islamism, conservatism, and extremism in Tunisia. This interview elaborates on the longer one published in the Civil Society Zine as A Rebellion of Civil Society, available online at <http://www.arsehsevom.net/zine/?p=130>.*

Arturo Desimone  
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 Ghassen Athmni  
 the islamic reformism, they fought culture  
 since 2008  
 there were  
 no veiled women targeted  
 Arturo Desimone  
 what is Islamic reformism,  
 was Islamic reformism part of Ben Ali's official regime





*Ghassen Athmni*

they even work at public offices with hijab since 2000

i meant people like

mohamed arkoun, hichem djait

mohamed talbi

*Arturo Desimone*

<http://kurdistancommentary.wordpress.com/2011/02/13/death-of-arabisation-mastermind-mohammed-talib-hilal/>

This article mentions a Mohammed Talib, but I do not think it is the Islamic reformist

Islamic reformism means Salafi?

*Ghassen Athmni*

talib

no

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammed\\_Arkoun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammed_Arkoun)

*Arturo Desimone*

[http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohamed\\_Talbi](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohamed_Talbi)

*Ghassen Athmni*

[http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam\\_lib%C3%A9ral](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_lib%C3%A9ral)

*Arturo Desimone*

"The coming stage in Tunisia will introduce a new era that will see more freedoms of religion, speech, and dress," Khademi said.

ok, [http://www.sunni-news.net/en/articles.aspx?selected\\_article\\_no=13432](http://www.sunni-news.net/en/articles.aspx?selected_article_no=13432)

*Arturo Desimone*

"In 1981, then president Habib Bourguiba ratified a law banning women from wearing hijab in state offices.

Worse still, Ben Ali's government issued in the 1980s and 1990s more restrictive enactments including the notorious 102 law, which considers hijab a sign of extremism and banned it"

*Ghassen Athmni*

that's true

but

in 1981 there was something like 2% wearing hijab

and still

the last years of Ben Ali were really conservative

*Arturo Desimone*

how much % wears hijab after 1981?

*Ghassen Athmni*

in 1998 i'll say 0.5%

in 2004 5%

*Arturo Desimone*

ok, that is almost nothing for an Arab country

*Ghassen Athmni*

in 2008 20%

and now

35%

*Arturo Desimone*

that is a dramatic huge change

*Ghassen Athmni*

it's terrible

*Arturo Desimone*

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why

are they wearing it

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*Ghassen Athmni*

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*Arturo Desimone*

dogmatism, of who

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*Ghassen Athmni*

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are really "heavy"

*Ghassen Athmni*

the 'ulama'

*Arturo Desimone*

ulama

*Ghassen Athmni*

most of them Wahabist

the others are Salafist

*Arturo Desimone*

did Ben Ali become more dependent on Saudi Arabia

in the later years

*Ghassen Athmni*

may be

*Arturo Desimone*

how do these Wahabist doctrines spread

*Ghassen Athmni*



qatar too  
 it's just like in the middle ages  
 or some regions of the US or Poland  
 regions where  
 education and culture are abandoned  
*Arturo Desimone*  
 have you studied Poland  
 Catholicism in Poland  
*Ghassen Athmni*  
 and superstition, fear from the future and almost everything  
 are used  
 i have a polish friend  
*Arturo Desimone*  
 I had traveled for a month through poland and witnessed a lot  
 of this  
 catholic fundamentalism  
 it is interesting you make the comparison to the US and Poland  
 instead of to an Islamic republic  
 are you still there?  
 hello  
 sorry I had to do go for a minute  
*Ghassen Athmni*  
 yes  
 some problems with my 8 years old PC  
*Arturo Desimone*  
 haha  
 what do you mean by  
 superstition  
*Ghassen Athmni*  
 It's like  
 "if u do this u'll have that, u'll have 14 points to make it into  
 paradise"  
 ...  
*Arturo Desimone*  
 14 points?  
*Ghassen Athmni*  
 it's a caricature.  
*Arturo Desimone*  
 ah ok

Did Ben Ali ideologically support Salafism  
 ?  
 Salafite officials in his regime  
 ?  
*Ghassen Athmni*  
 not  
 at all  
 it's a part  
 of a universal wave  
*Arturo Desimone*  
 in North Africa  
*Ghassen Athmni*  
 worldwide  
*Arturo Desimone*  
 yes in Europe we have a lot of salafite muslims it seems  
 "we"  
*Ghassen Athmni*  
 there's more conservatism dogmatic ways of belief  
 etc...  
*Arturo Desimone*  
 Islam is more conservative?  
*Ghassen Athmni*  
 islam & christianism  
*Arturo Desimone*  
 ok  
 some more questions:  
 Who finances Wahabism and Salafism in Tunisia?  
*Ghassen Athmni*  
 don't know  
 but  
 ennahdha  
 seems to have links with qatar  
*Arturo Desimone*  
 Ennahda  
 but I thought they are moderate  
*Ghassen Athmni*  
 they play the game  
 like



the right parties in europe  
 “we are fighting for identity” etc...

and they use a doublespeak

*Arturo Desimone*

have you read Orwell

*Ghassen Athmni*

moderate to modernists

fundamentalist to religious people

no

*Arturo Desimone*

ok

the words “doublespeak” and “doublethink” were invented by the  
 writer George Orwell, he used them in his novel 1984

do you know it?

(About 1984 in Persian)

*Ghassen Athmni*

no

*Arturo Desimone*

I sent a link in Arabic

*Ghassen Athmni*

i know orwell and 1984

but

i didn't read

*Arturo Desimone*

ok

so Ennahda

actually is Wahabi

?

*Ghassen Athmni*

no

like in the republican party (usa)

there are

many

*Arturo Desimone*

many?

*Ghassen Athmni*

currents

*Arturo Desimone*

yes

so in the Republican party,

there are more evangelical senators

and others who are more secular

like that

?

*Ghassen Athmni*

hum

some moderate

ones

but they are utralliberal

a majority adopting The Society of the Muslim Brothers ideas

*Arturo Desimone*

who is ultraliberal

in the Ennahda or in the Republicans?

*Ghassen Athmni*

and “moderate” salafists (non-jihadists)

enahdha

*Arturo Desimone*

how do you mean

‘ultraliberal’?

*Ghassen Athmni*

just like the republican party

*Arturo Desimone*

Muslims who allow

drinking and sex

and capitalism

is that what you mean?

hello

with ultraliberal

*Ghassen Athmni*

no

in terms of economy

*Arturo Desimone*

ok

explain

*Ghassen Athmni*

they are allies with people like cameron, lieberman, mccain...

they don't have any problem with the debt

*Arturo Desimone*

libertarian?

like Milton Friedman, right wing libertarianism

*Ghassen Athmni*

don't know him

*Arturo Desimone*

Milton Friedman is a neoliberal economist

who was a "Free Market" fundamentalist

Free Market absolutist, everything has to be privatized

liberalized

Chicago Boys? the school of economists

*Ghassen Athmni*

they are like the ruling party in poland in terms of economy

*Arturo Desimone*

Friedman went to Chile to reorganize the Chilean economy under Pinochet

*Ghassen Athmni*

i see

*Arturo Desimone*

ok

so you mean some currents of Ennahda is for liberal capitalism and very pro-business

?

*Ghassen Athmni*

yes

ennahdha is more a rally of conservatives wantin to take contol of the country

than

a real ideological party

they even congrtulate zionists for their "democracy"

*Arturo Desimone*

really?

*Ghassen Athmni*

this was said by a ennada leader at washington

*Arturo Desimone*

A party influenced by Muslim Brotherhood who congratulates Zionists?

as in Israel

*Ghassen Athmni*

the whole quote is

"religious parties can be democratic, and take part in a democratic political process, just like we see it in israel, where the religious parties succeeded in a democratic way"

it's

really

*Arturo Desimone*

ok

that is very interesting

*Ghassen Athmni*

a clash of civilizations

*Arturo Desimone*

do you know which Israeli religiius parties they are referring to?

*Ghassen Athmni*

no

they just wanted to please lieberman

*Arturo Desimone*

Senator Joe Lieberman

he's a democrat

*Ghassen Athmni*

yes but

he supported mccain in 2008

*Arturo Desimone*

I thought he was Al Gore's running mate

*Ghassen Athmni*

yes

*Arturo Desimone*

but then he switched

*Ghassen Athmni*

*On December 17, 2007, Lieberman endorsed Republican Senator John McCain for president in 2008, contradicting his stance in July 2006 where he stated "I want Democrats to be back in the majority in Washington and elect a Democratic president in 2008." Lieberman cited his agreement with McCain's stance on the War on Terrorism as the primary reason for the endorsement.*

*Arturo Desimone*

ok, does Ennahda try to get Washington support?

*Ghassen Athmni*

exactly

there are

two

'teams'



annahda & friends supported par Uk and the reublicans

and may be UMP

and Ettajdid & friends supported by the french socialist party

the first one is strong

*Ghassen Athmni*

the PDP is some kind of democrat party

and seems to be supported by them & labour

*Arturo Desimone*

UMP

who are they

*Ghassen Athmni*

sarkozy

*Arturo Desimone*

UMP is supported by Sarkozy?

*Ghassen Athmni*

no

it's his party

*Arturo Desimone*

I don't understand

*Ghassen Athmni*

may be supporting ennahdha

*Arturo Desimone*

Sarkozy is nortoriously anti-Islam

Islamophobe

*Ghassen Athmni*

the clash of civilisations is more simple

it'll bring the proof

that those stupid tunisians

can just be islamists

*Arturo Desimone*

do you know of

the philosopher Bernard Henry Levy

?

*Ghassen Athmni*

yes

*Arturo Desimone*

he seems to be Sarkozy's philosopher

what does he say

about Tunisia

or what is his stance

*Ghassen Athmni*

don't know

**all i understood**

**is that right wing want to face right wing**

**everywhere**

*Arturo Desimone*

why did Benali persecute ennahda officials

while he let officials who were conservative muslim reformists

have government positions in his later years?

*Ghassen Athmni*

the Rcd-annahdha war is a long story

since 1981

annahda wanted to make a coup d'etat

they were preparing it for november 1987

just like the ben ali

*Arturo Desimone*

why both at the same time?

the Italian minister supported Ben Ali's coup

the original "Jasmine revolution"

Ghassen Athmni

ben ali made his one to prevent

the islamic coup

annahdha was opposed to democracy until 1987

then they supported ben ali he promised free elections

*Arturo Desimone*

Was ennahda orignally a reaction to Bourghiba, who was pro-modernity?

Ghassen Athmni

in 1989 they ofically had only 12% of the 30 they should

then they possibly made some terrorism

and the war was declared

annahda returned to opposition of democracy after that until the middle noughties

and

*Arturo Desimone*





12% of what

*Ghassen Athmni*

voices

*Arturo Desimone*

votes

*Ghassen Athmni*

yes\*

*Arturo Desimone*

noghties=90s

noughties=nineties?

*Ghassen Athmni*

2000s

*Arturo Desimone*

ok

*Ghassen Athmni*

and

most of them left the country

and didn't make a real opposition until 2005

and the 18 october coalition

*Arturo Desimone*

most of Ennahda?

*Ghassen Athmni*

with secular, social democrat & marxist

*Arturo Desimone*

who was the real opposition then

*Ghassen Athmni*

parties

the marxists and the UGTT

*Arturo Desimone*

are the marxists only Leninists in Tunisia

in the marxist party

Stalinist?

*Ghassen Athmni*

hoxhaist

*Arturo Desimone*

hoxhaist?

*Ghassen Athmni*

enver hoxha

albania

but there are also maoists

(a lot of)

2 big marxist parties

a hoxhaist and a maoist

but both developed

so much tunisian character

*Arturo Desimone*

there is no Stalinist party?

*Ghassen Athmni*

the hoxhaist is considered to be so

but

the PCOT is not so stalinist

there even trotskists who joined it

*Arturo Desimone*

have you studied Enver Hoxha

his ideas

*Ghassen Athmni*

no

is it just stalinism?

*Arturo Desimone*

Albania was very Islamic before him I imagine

ok

How were relations between Bourghiba and Ennahda

?

*Ghassen Athmni*

opposition

perecution

*Arturo Desimone*

what did Bourghiba do to Islamic activists?

are you getting tired of all my questions

*Ghassen Athmni*

no

the

*Arturo Desimone*

*Ghassen Athmni*

fact is



i'm using a visual keyboard

bourguiba put them in prison

*Arturo Desimone*

what was his ideological attitude to Ennahda

*Ghassen Athmni*

explain the question

*Arturo Desimone*

what was the rationale of Bourghiba; did he persecute Ennahda Islamists just because of conflict of interests or was it out of ideological opposition to Islam, religion

*Ghassen Athmni*

according to me?

*Arturo Desimone*

yes or according to the historical record

according to the statements of Bourghiba

*Ghassen Athmni*

bourguiba wasn't against islam

*Arturo Desimone*

but he was pro-modernization

*Ghassen Athmni*

he probably was muslim

*Arturo Desimone*

probably?

*Ghassen Athmni*

he always said he was

bouguiba was just a megalomniac new state leader

and nothing more

the modernization is not due to him

*Ghassen Athmni*

and i don't see extraordinary modernization

he may have thought of himself as a builder of a new tunisia, but he just

extended the dependance

on france and US

and persecuted everyone saying no'

so he wasn't against islam

the fact is that 99% of the laws

are directly taken or inspired by sharia

the legend making burguiba enemy of islam

*Arturo Desimone*

"Emancipated Tunisian women

*Though a Muslim himself, Mr Bourguiba rejected militant Islam. He gave women the vote and scrapped polygamy and the veil. He balanced his pro-Western stance by giving refuge to the PLO following its expulsion from Lebanon."*

*Ghassen Athmni*

is used by conservatives & specially enahdha

*Arturo Desimone*

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/obituaries/703907.stm>

I see

this legend, made you say by Ennahda, is now more widespread in Western media coverage on Tunisia, i think

*Ghassen Athmni*

yes

just because of an important error

islam is not the veil, not polygamy

not the new mainstream standards

i'm not muslim

and i consider bourguiba more muslim than islamists

*Arturo Desimone*

what is islam

to you

if it is not these things

*Ghassen Athmni*

i think

that the question would be

what is religion?

islam is not different

*Arturo Desimone*

yes. I would like to conclude with this question

it seems

that the Muslim-oriented media in much of the Arab/Muslim countries

are and will continue to interpret the Ennahda and Islamic outpourings in Tunisia as defiance of previous Tunisian regimes persecution of Muslims,

and the Western media might also be picking up on this

*Ghassen Athmni*

OF ISLAMISTS

not muslims



a muslim does not necessarily pray or wear the veil

...

Arturo Desimone

where does this "PR" originate? Would you call it propaganda,  
what the consequences and whose interests does it serve

this is the last question for today

*Ghassen Athmni*

what is PR?

*Arturo Desimone*

public relations

public image

*Ghassen Athmni*

it is part of a process serving the interests of the clash of  
civilisations

*Arturo Desimone*

clash

like Samuel Huntington

?

Are you a fan of him

*Ghassen Athmni*

dont know him

*Arturo Desimone*

He wrote the essay called Clash of Civilizations [[pdf here](#)]

it is his terminology

ok

can you explain?

Sarkozy?

*Ghassen Athmni*

and the right wing all over the world

*Arturo Desimone*

thank you

for the interview

on fbook

*Ghassen Athmni*

u r welcome

