

## THE ARAB HUMAN RIGHTS FUND

# The politics of social justice philanthropy

Fateh Azzam

Social justice is a political issue as well as a humanitarian one; consequently social justice philanthropy is a political act. This can pose formidable difficulties for donor agencies and activists everywhere, especially in an area as politically complex as the Arab region where human rights activism tends to be interpreted by authoritarian regimes as a direct challenge. Many local philanthropists shy away from such confrontation, leaving organizations in the field dependent on foreign funding. But this raises the problem of agendas and priorities as well as the independence of grantees and their accountability to local stakeholders. One answer, feel the organizers of a new fund, the Arab Human Rights Fund, is to articulate strategies that can build local support for human rights activities in the region and at the same time create bridges between the local and the international to minimize problems and promote international social justice philanthropy.



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In most countries, laws preclude the use of public or tax-exempted funds for overtly political work. The politics of social justice are more subtle, however, and it is important to acknowledge the fundamental tension between the political and humanitarian motivations and perceptions involved in working for a more just world. Many funders around the world are unwilling to deal with the political implications of fighting injustices; to see themselves as being on one side or another of a political rather than a humanitarian question; or to occasionally confront those with vested interests in a status quo that perpetuates injustice. This is also reflected in the relationships between international grantmaking organizations and the local activists they support. Are those who are most effective on the ground and deserving of support politically 'acceptable', asks the grantmaker, and is association with them politically safe? The enthusiasm and political perspectives of the recipient can conflict with, and be moderated by, the caution of the grantmaker.

## Changing political dynamics

These questions have a particular urgency in the Arab region. The changing dynamics of both the interna-

tional and Arab political scenes since the turn of the new century, especially the sharp shift to the right in US policies and the after-effects of 9/11, have produced a radicalizing response in the region as well, raising the levels of suspicion and making the debates more complicated. The new 'due diligence' procedures set in place by international grantmakers and the governments to which they are legally accountable are the clearest example of these complications. Most grant recipients in the region working in the field of human rights and social justice consider themselves to be on the side of democratization and the promotion of more open and just societies, yet they are being asked to prove this on the grantmakers' terms. At the same time, they are deeply suspicious of the politics behind increased governmental and non-governmental funds pouring into the region for those same stated purposes.

## The local dimension

The tension between politics and philanthropy is evident in local philanthropy as well. In the Arab region, philanthropy has been of a strictly charitable and often religious nature, taking comparatively little account of development approaches, let alone social justice activism. The preponderance of authoritarian regimes makes the philanthropic community very skittish vis-à-vis, for example, human rights activities, which are perceived as being a direct challenge to such regimes, and philanthropists generally will not consider putting themselves on such a crash course. Consequently, local human rights funding is almost non-existent, and groups active in the field must rely on foreign funds which in turn raises questions in the region about their legitimacy, independence and accountability.

## The problems of reliance on foreign funding

Reliance on foreign funding gives rise to doubts as to whether or not human rights activists are wittingly or unwittingly implementing donor-defined agendas. Who sets those agendas, it is asked, and on what basis? Similarly, questions are raised over wider NGO accountability to other stakeholders: the individuals and communities they purport to help. How careful are activists to define their agendas in accordance with the immediate and long-term needs of their communities? How open are they in articulating their programmes and priorities? Who challenges them on the decisions they take?

Finally, there is the question of sustainability. The foreign funding that human rights and other social

For more information on the Arab Human Rights Fund, see [www.ahrfund.org](http://www.ahrfund.org)

justice activists continue to rely on is, more often than not, project-oriented, with short-term measurable goals and benchmarks rather than strategic approaches based on a long view of social change. If anything, international grantmaking mechanisms are becoming tighter, more careful and more short-term than a decade ago. More alarming is the ease with which funding patterns respond to the changing currents of the political environment. Today, it is very easy to find support for any project at almost any level that has anything to do with 'democratization,' but not so for advocacy for refugee rights, for example.

### **The Arab Human Rights Fund**

The nascent Arab Human Rights Fund (AHRF) is an effort to respond to some of these concerns, both within the region and between the region and the international arena, by providing an indigenous, independent and sustainable source of support for human rights activities in the Arab region and by articulating principled, clear and practical strategies.

Over the past two years, a volunteer Preparatory Committee of five individuals from the Arab region, in cooperation with Ford Foundation staff and with support from the Foundation, has been preparing the ground for the establishment of the AHRF. This has involved carrying out research and holding consultative meetings throughout the region, hammering out approaches and strategies based on a commitment to universal standards of human rights with the long-term goal of developing capacity for their protection and promotion. Whether in its grantmaking strategies, fundraising efforts or operating principles, human rights standards remain the primary guidelines for the proposed AHRF.

By implementing transparent, inclusive and participatory processes for agenda and priority setting, and by ensuring indigenous decision-making in its programmes and activities, the AHRF hopes to strengthen local participation, and consequently respond to some of the legitimacy questions raised above. In the planning of the Fund, broad participatory and consultative mechanisms are being developed for nearly every aspect of the work, from Board recruitment to priority setting to the grant-making process itself.

### **Promoting indigenous social justice philanthropy**

The AHRF is hoping to harness local, regional and international sources of support for human rights and

to promote Arab social justice philanthropy in the Arab region as one of its main strategic goals. This will take time, and many political fears within the region will have to be confronted. This is why the AHRF is planned as an endowment, eventually with assets of at least \$50 million, in order to become an effective donor with tangible impact and a sustainable source of support for human rights work. (One positive trend is that NGO laws in the region are liberalizing, though very slowly.)

### **Bridging the local and the international**

At the same time, the Preparatory Committee sees the Fund as a potentially important player in the international philanthropy field, and a bridge between the local and the international. It can help articulate priorities, funnelling international funds to the region where funds are most needed. At the same time, it can bring new Arab and regional players into the international philanthropy scene and into discussions of global social justice. This bridging function is desperately needed in today's divided world, especially where the Middle East and the Arab region are concerned.

### **A political choice**

By establishing the Arab Human Rights Fund, the Preparatory Committee is making a significant political choice for the region. It implies a willingness to take risks in a difficult political environment and it will need the support and encouragement of like-minded individuals and organizations within the region and around the world. Today, more than at any other time in the past, we must recognize that local communities know what's best for them, that human rights are universal values shared by activists and philanthropists alike, and that they form the basis of international cooperation in the promotion of social justice. The challenge is to build the trust necessary for such cooperation and to have the courage to confront each of our own societies and to move them towards the achievement of social justice.

After four years of planning and more than two years of research and investigation, the first meeting of a founding Board of Trustees will take place this summer. As the Fund begins its operations in Beirut, Lebanon, which will happen by the end of the year, it is hoped that the AHRF, and its perspectives on social justice, cooperation and participatory approaches, will be welcomed into the international philanthropic community. @