

The following is the transcript of an interview conducted with Ziad Abdel Samad, executive director of the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND); head of the Euromed Civil Forum on Mediterranean and Euro-Arab Cooperation; member of the Policy Forum of Development, which is organized by EuropeAid; an activist in the defense of social and economic rights; and a researcher in a number of think tanks.

Interviewed by Hussein Yaakoub

*Mr. Ziad, let us start discussing Lebanon, where you currently work, before we move on to other regional issues. Recently, the Lebanese parliament extended its own mandate – once again, after having extended it for one and a half years previously – for another two years and seven months. We did not see any effective opposition from the Lebanese civil society. There were only minor protests against this extension. If one were to ask the Lebanese people about their opinion on this, one would find that people, in general, are in favor of the extension. In contrast, if one were to ask activists who oppose the extension the following question: “In case there were new elections, do you think these would result in a new political class?” The answer would be: “No. However, we, the members of civil society, have to stand against the extension, because this is part of our tasks.” Hence, the answer would be surreal. Society acknowledges that there is a political stagnation, but everybody plays a part in creating this reality. The parliament extends its own term, while civil society’s actions go without inducing any change. Rather than presenting new alternatives to change the system, civil society demands that elections be held instead of extending the parliament’s mandate, justifying this stance by saying that it would preserve the state. How do you comment on this?*

There is an ongoing debate about elections among civil activists in Lebanon that is not only related to extending the parliament’s mandate. What we are witnessing reflects a crisis that goes much deeper than parliamentary elections. Prior the parliamentary crisis, the Lebanese President’s post was left vacant, leading to political and security crises that touched upon the very foundations of the state and the system. Protests and all other actions carried out by civil society still move within the scope of limited demands that do not rise to the level of bringing about real change; this is not enough. The discrepancy in the answers on the extension of the parliamentary mandate is because everybody feels that even if elections were to be held, they would not lead to change.

In the report issued by the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections in 2009 we said that even the best electoral model possible will not lead to change. This is because the nature and structure of the system have become factually based on a political class that has the capability to renew its authority. This situation demonstrates that the crisis is much deeper than this.

The central government lacks the capability to manage the prevailing differences between the political and civil spheres. Hence a political polarization is taking place that affects and influences civil society. Because civil society is part of the political landscape, this polarization weakens its capability of assuming the role of an intermediary between the conflicting parties, and of reaching a new deal that could allow for the reshaping of the general political scene. This has particularly been the case since 2005 when the political sphere underwent a sharp divide of which two contradictory sides emerged, each of which having its own regional and international extensions. The result of this can be witnessed today: civil society has been divided, and it has lost its capability to play an effective political role in the process of change.

*Despite this, civil society continues to work according to agendas and ideas that aim to strengthen [Lebanon] internally, drive development, or improve the governance system – all of this is in line with its agenda, or strategy. If we look at the whole picture, we find that deliberate fraud is practiced by the political class to maintain control and power. Civil society is involved in this process, and it is unable to*

*achieve any breakthrough. If we examine Lebanon's crisis that is driven by the civil war in its vicinity, and the presence of more than one million displaced people in its territories, as well as [internal] social problems, we will find that civil society is not capable of doing anything; not even of achieving any real breakthrough in this system. Despite all this, civil society is holding on to the same political agenda.*

First of all, civil society is dealt with as if it were a homogeneous framework that works in pursuit of a common vision. In fact, this is not the case. Civil society is a space, a general framework, in which all contradictions of society exist. It is not one homogeneous framework with one vision. This diversity within civil society creates a wealth of ideas, and the conflicts between these ideas generate development and progress. The rules of the game in this arena are determined by whether the results are positive or negative, as well as society's capability to manage these contradictions and differences. A set of principles forms the foundations of this sphere that include the acceptance of diversity and the other in order to have a sound environment in which civil society can play a certain role. Tunisia, for example, has created a climate that allows civil society to play a role. It was possible to strike a balance between two major political groups, both of which decided that conflict between them should be carried out in a peaceful political manner. None of either decided to use its influence in the government, or on the street (resorting to weapons and violence). The game that they played was political only, and this paved the road for civil society, despite its contradictions, to play its proper role too. An agreement on a minimum wage for workers was reached, and employers and the lawyers union support human rights. In this game, different parties committed to engage in a process, and to bringing it to an end, and to respect contradictions.

This climate did not exist elsewhere; [in Tunisia] political parties were ready to give space to carrying out political conflict without resorting to any other means by which they would impose their opinions; opponents were willing to acknowledge contradictions and different opinions as aspects that should be taken into account.

In Lebanon, there are not only two conflicting sides but there are several sides that succeeded in creating vertical, non-conventional divisions in the system. As a result, this divide has become a sectarian one, with the head of each sect succeeding, through the use of intimidation and scare tactics, to restrict the sectarian community to a vertical confine. Within any one sect we find all the contradictions of society. Conflicts may occur within the sect, but it is kept within limits, because there is someone who protects the sect. Every conflict that occurs reaches the side that protects the sect, and no side is willing to allow it to go beyond the boundaries of the respective sect. The intimidation and scare tactics caused that certain components of a sect are unable to cross the border of their sect to interact with others.

The political class has managed to use the system well in order to create this harsh vertical divide, and to prevent the possibility of the emergence of a healthy space in which civil society or the political landscape could play their roles.

In such an atmosphere, political consensus can result only by reaching a deal among conflicting sides. In order to have a constitution, electoral law, or any mechanism for a political process, there must be agreement among these sides. Sometimes one loses hope that the status-quo can be changed, especially when it is linked to regional interests that benefit from maintaining it. Furthermore, when there is a defect, we find that these sides do not have a problem with resorting to non-political practices. Violent intimidation becomes a means, and this constitutes a breach of the agreed on political rules.

Despite all of this, we expect civil society to solve these problems within this reality. We demand so

much of civil society, because we feel so incapable. As a result, civil society is facing a crisis. When [Lebanon] is experiencing exceptional circumstances, one cannot ask civil society to perform its role as if it were functioning in a normal country.

[...]

Despite the perceived sectarian divide and the existence of a system that is based on an agreement among sects, this agreement is being practiced, and it slightly contributes to the system's functioning. But when the agreement is shaken, then the system is shaken as well. During certain periods, which occur once in a while, one regains the certainty that behind the sectarian appearance of the conflict the seeds of socio-economic [movements] still exist. Such movements include the teachers' movement, which transcends sectarian and political boundaries, as well as the people's movement, which intends to topple the regime, and has given hope to that we can go beyond sectarian divisions.

Of course, this system is not weak. On the contrary, it becomes clear that the powers that be are capable of using this system to reorganize and control situations and overcome difficulties. The political class that is ruling our country has a default capability to control politically and to scare society. It has the capability of using its power and influence to meet all of society's needs, but society receives its rights only through an intermediary who is part of the ruling authority. It lies in the nature of the system to bestow this or that leader with the power needed to determine the distribution of resources and how different sides may obtain their rights to employment, medical services, etc.

There is a correlation between the structure of the political system and that of socio-economic relations, and the way they impact society. So, I would imagine that the conflict is embedded in a cycle that cannot be fragmented. It is wrong to consider that priority should be given to just either of two: political struggle and changing the regime, or the economic struggle.

This conclusion is not new; since regimes in the Arab region are dictatorial and despotic by nature, the most prominent civil society movements work on changing the human rights movement. The latter played a very important role in facing dictatorship and authoritarianism. However, this movement's central focus was on politics and the establishment of a democratic system, while it neglected socio-economic rights, considering that these were not a priority in the conflict at the present time.

*Could you tell me what your achievements are after 17 years of work?*

It should be known that the advanced understanding of what society is began to take shape with the structural transformation of the concept of the state. The transition to a market economy caused a void in terms of services rendered and policy-making. Because there cannot be a void, the role of civil society grew.

With the absence of the role of the welfare state, the need emerged for someone to play a larger role in deterring the ambitions of the market economy in controlling society.

This became apparent in the late 1980s after the Washington Consensus was drafted and applied in developing countries; the state apparatus was dismantled, and the market economy promoted privatization to strengthen the role of the private sector's role in state-building. Free trade mechanisms, which were practically unfair in the late 1980s, were also promoted.

This system led to an economic and social imbalance, and to the loss of social justice. This was because the state reduced its role in providing services, and there was no alternative role for the state to play. At the same time, market economy only pursues the interest of accumulating profits, but not providing services. This is why these issues gained prominence at the level of society. Another important aspect was that during the 1990s the United Nations played a positive part in promoting concepts such as comprehensive, sustainable development (political, economic, and social). This began with the support of the United Nations of several conferences during that period, the most important of which was the one held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and where the inseparability of development from governance, i.e. the state, was debated. The agenda of this same conference also included how economic policies were to stand against the World Trade Organization, which was established in the same period, and which calls for the full liberalization of economy and the adoption of free trade in accordance with unfair standards and imposition of laws by the strongest side. The United Nations tries to shed light on development challenges. It provided the space for even non-official and non-governmental groups to participate in Rio and in the series of conferences that followed, and in which the civil movement interacted more strongly. Eventually, the United Nations recognized the role of civil society as a complementary agent to the lost role of the welfare state.

A number of civil society organizations realized the trend that was taking place at the international level, and considered that the agenda put forward, which demanded the political system be transformed to a more democratic one, was not enough. Hence, their agendas included economic and social issues, which were also adopted by some weak political parties and trade union movements.

During that same period, civil society organizations contributed to and participated in international processes and became familiar with the emerging development-oriented concepts and relevant challenges. Our network [ANND] was part of this process, because the implementation of the Washington Consensus by the international financial institutions in our countries led to the disintegration of the state and the productive forces. Under the rule of the dictatorships and totalitarian regimes, certain groups of people drew benefit and deepened the gap between the rich and the poor, increasing marginalization and unemployment. This led to deformations within Arab societies. Based on this view, members of the group saw the need for the active components of the Arab civil society to increase their activism against dictatorships, and to call for political, economic, and social change, as well as to stand against the economic trends imposed by the global economic system.

During the time when the WTO emerged, the biggest problem we faced was that we did not want the globalization, and never wanted it; yet, we could not avoid it. The question was how to join the global system with the lowest possible losses. This is the development-based mindset that ruled this group that was behind ANND's establishment. That is why the ANND stands for the strengthening of the role of civil society in defending social and economic rights. At the time, civil society had an enormous role in the defense of civic and political rights, and we believed that social and economic rights had to be added to our agenda. But these rights cannot be achieved by simply leading a movement that raises demands. Rather, the focus had to be on adapting existing economic options and policies to serve the protection of rights. Civil society founders then considered that they should not function only as a movement that called for obtaining rights, but instead, that their involvement in the movement should aim to change these economic and social policies. Civil society had to be engaged in social policy making. This is reflected in ANND's publications, which suggest alternatives to existing policies in two critical areas that form the base of national economy: the

disintegration of productive capacities through privatization, and the transformation of Arab economies from production-based to service-oriented economies - at the expense of the labor market's productive capacity and hence the infliction of a serious distribution imbalance. The only beneficiary of this distribution pattern is a very small group that is not being held accountable; there are 167 families in the Arab world who together own more than the collective possession of half of the Arab world.

By considering alternatives, we are reinstating the importance of production. It is not necessary that the state be productive, but rather the economy should be productive, and it should be subjected to laws and regulations, the implementation of which is to be guaranteed by the state. There should also be a mechanism for redistribution.

Most of the research papers published by ANND deal with investment policies that should, in our opinion, be adopted to enhance production. There is also a discussion of tax policies and social security as tools of redistribution. Here, we attack a set of ideologies; when we say that the tax system is a mechanism of distribution, this opinion faces another ideology that considers taxation to be a function of the state. This conflict is not about policy; it is about options.

*You said that as a result of changes in the eighties and the promotion of the private sector, the beginnings of globalization generated an opposition movement within civil society. This movement attempted to object to privatization policies, which concentrate capital in a specific class at the expense of marginalized groups, or even society at large. Twenty-five years after this phase began, if you would examine the policies adopted by civil society since the advent of globalization, you would see that objections to these policies did not create a breakthrough in the global system, which has also been embraced by dictatorial regimes.*

I repeat that the concept behind civil society and the approach it adopts do not necessitate that civil society be a homogeneous body. There are people who support globalization and liberal thought, because they believe that political liberalism is tied to economic liberalism. The components of civil society that oppose globalization consider that the former is an ideology that can only be fought with another ideology; hence the struggle is considered an ideological one.

Some of those who adopt this idea have a problem with any other way of thinking. For them, the enemy is not only globalization but anyone who does not share their beliefs. This is an ideological, totalitarian position. There are those who believe that globalization as a phenomenon is already present and cannot be eliminated, and that it is the result of a historical evolution of civilizations that involves human conflict. Either one is active and influential, or one becomes sidelined. It is important to understand how to be active and influential, to learn what the alternative is, and to know how to make use of the mechanisms.

So, there are two parties: One believes that this system must be destroyed and replaced by another, while the other party believes that this is a deeply rooted phenomenon - this is the intellectual conflict that prevails within the anti-globalization camp.

[...]

The talk about how globalization infiltrated the region leads to discussing the relevant historical context: in the nineteenth century, as the Ottoman Empire collapsed, several states with their respective projects emerged. The common factor among these states was that in socialist ruled systems (Egypt, Syria, Iraq) the government played a key role in addressing development

challenges, while in other countries supporting production stood at the heart of the state's plans. Sometimes features of a welfare state could be observed that cared to provide services to its citizens (health, education), such as the educational system that made Tunisia what it is today. There was a health and social service provision system that reached the poor and the farmers under the rule of Abdel Nasser in Egypt, including land redistribution. There was a state that tried to provide services to citizens, but historical, political, and international factors led to the failure of such projects.

If you look at movements of peoples in general, you will see that the liberation movement began with the rise of an intellectual, cultural, and scientific renaissance, as was the case in Russia and Europe, for example. We actually had this kind of renaissance in the late nineteenth century. It was interrupted at the beginning of the twentieth century for several reasons. First, there was the advent of colonialism that did not favor this renaissance, and considered that it was a priority to deter it in order to impose neo-colonialism. There was also the Second World War, which was partially fought in our region. Another factor was the emergence of the State of Israel, which also created a serious regional challenge. All of these factors obstructed the projects of state building and renaissance, and practically transformed countries in the region into dictatorships. In Egypt for example, before Nasser, a political movement existed (the Wafd Party, Saad Zaghloul, Mustafa [Nahas] Pasha). Nasser directed the revolution to face the great national challenge that Israel represented. So, the process of political renaissance was interrupted, and henceforth the process of state building became based on a dry and rigid model.

When the project of building a state that acts as a guarantor for the development process failed – in the Arab region, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union – the anti-model became prevalent, or in other words, the liberal model that was promoted by international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. In his speech on the occasion of the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, Abdel Nasser talked about the World Bank, saying: “We do not want to succumb to its conditions in order to take loans. We are an independent state.” The influence of the World Bank became stronger, and the ability of countries to reject its terms became weaker, because the capacities of states also became weaker.

In Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, and almost all other Arab countries, these institutions managed to promote their policies, which were based on the Washington Consensus. The latter stipulates the need to reduce the role of the state to a minimum, for it is considered a burden on society. It also requires a larger role for free economy, especially market economy, in line with the theory that says that market economy mechanisms affect the entire society.

So, the idea of economic growth governed all policies, and rulers became ready to secure economic growth. A small degree of economic growth creates new jobs, without forcing the state to worry about securing these opportunities itself. This is the process that took place in our region; this is how globalization entered the region. In Lebanon, globalization became effective to a lesser extent, because this country does not rely on a state system.

The policies [of international institutions] were applied in undemocratic countries. Decisions are taken by a very small group, or a certain elite whose interests are associated with these promoted policies; these people who benefited the most from privatization, new foreign investment, and financial services, etc., in a system that does not possess any accountability mechanisms, constitute only a small segment of the population. The greater the economic influence of this class is, the more pressure it exerts on society to prevent protest movements. There is a dynamic that normally comes with this process: The more this class adopts privatization and receives its revenues, the

more people suffer and become socially and economically marginalized, bearing the weight of poverty and unemployment. Theoretically, as people become more marginalized, pressure increases on the ruler, who either decides to respond to demands, or to become more repressive as a means to maintain stability.

Regional causes were among the factors that helped rulers pressure society, foremost the Arab-Israeli conflict into which all our efforts were directed. Rulers protected themselves by using the conflict as a pretext to oppress their peoples. In an equal fashion, rulers used the rise of terrorist, violent Islamist and other non-Islamist groups. They used scare tactics on societies, warning from communists and Islamists, and thereby justifying repression. This process has taken place under totalitarian, repressive dictatorships that no one could stop and whose policies were not open for discussion.

Hence, we did not enter globalization under the patronage of a liberal economic system but under the rule of dictatorships whose interests were associated with those of the global system. These dictatorships willingly sold all public interests to this global system, becoming the sole beneficiary from this process.

*What is the link between unemployment, the countryside, urban centers, and internal migration? To put it more clearly, what is the nature of the social contract in modern Arab states?*

There are two separate issues. The first is the occurrence of a shift in the nature and priorities of the economy. At the beginnings of the emergence of states, concerns were directed toward production, the productive state, and a productive economy. On the one hand, the distribution of land under Abdel Nasser, for example, had social aspects, and on another it aimed to boost production and agriculture. In Egypt, for example, cotton production was subsidized. So, there was an interest in helping farmers and the countryside at a time when capital evolved at a slower pace than it is evolving now. Differences were not significant and did not pose a threat to society.

When interest in production shrunk and economic priorities changed, there was no longer any support for productive capacity in the countryside and remote areas. People lost the most basic means of living and thus their ability to lead a life in dignity. Hence, marginalized communities appeared that were characterized by increasing poverty and unemployment rates, and by a deviation of social practices within these communities, turning them into fertile grounds for violence and fanaticism. These communities are more willing to move toward violence because of their resentment of society. They are also more willing to migrate to cities, where there is a greater availability of jobs. Rural migration strips the countryside of its capacities. The migrant becomes marginal in the city if his integration does not happen smoothly. These cities produce marginal shantytowns, homes for the unemployed or the poor. The weakening of the countryside puts pressure on the city, not only because of the increase in population size but also because of the concentration of poor people around the city, such as is the case in the suburbs of Cairo, and the southern suburbs [of Beirut] in Lebanon.

The second issue is that at a certain stage, there were political movements as well as trade and labor unions, and there were political parties that had the ability to create historical moments by leading protests and uprisings. These political entities were not favored by the rulers who then pressured them. Rulers could resort to one of two solutions: either to abdicate, listen to the people, and reconsider all policies, or to give priority to the interest of the regime. This interest had become associated with the implementation of these policies. If a ruler wanted to take this path, he had to suppress any demonstration that stood in his way, and hence he contributed to the elimination of

the political movements that existed in the first half of the last century. At the same time, the ruler subdued intellectual thought, which was molded to suit the existing status quo; repression affected various aspects of life.

*The ruling establishment has been able to destroy any opposition to policies and the system, even when such opposition was carried out by revolutionary movements. The establishment reduced the opposition to a specific slogan and kept it “as stiff as a dead body”, to use the Syrian thinker Sadiq Al-Azm’s words.*

The ruling power did not only suppress political movements, it also practiced economic and social repression. Writers, poets, and thinkers were oppressed. Libya was a very prominent example. Repression affected all levels, including intellectual thought and the education of future generations. Prisons were full of intellectual persons who had no dealings with political parties. In practice, intellectual thought was packaged, representing the thoughts of the ruler. The common culture was that of annihilating the other. In summary, repression was not limited to political thought, but more so, it eliminated the level of culture, thereby interrupting the renaissance movement that was in the process of attempting to found a new Arab identity.

*From this point, on the state and the repression it practiced against society, let us return to the issue of development from a modern point of view. According to the international community, development must be linked to the state. This link may take the form of projects that complement the state with human resources provided by the United Nations or development experts, or it may also take shape through proposing electoral laws and amendments of human rights laws. In contrast, there is another point of view that perceives the whole idea of civil society as a Western concept that did not develop from within the Arab cultural environment. As a result, it did not bring forth a movement that aligns its demands around the idea of rescue –the context here is the destruction of a state that is perceived as disastrous and in full control of society. Instead, civil society is trying to comply with this disintegrated state with the aim to reshape society. Hence, civil society is working within this situation of disintegration.*

The state is not disintegrated, but it has a different nature from that of a modern state – as we understand it – with a division of the three powers (judicial, executive, and legislative) that monitor each other; accountability and transfer of power; existing decision-making mechanisms; and a social contract that governs all relationships between these authorities and institutions, which are monitored by the people through direct or indirect elections and other specialized institutions. We, in contrast, deal with a strong authoritarian state; a state that is different from the modern one. Some definitions describe this kind of state as a state that practices clientelism, or one that plunders resources. In a state that practices clientelism, a citizen is considered a client, and the state buys services and gives them to citizens to gain their support. A state that plunders resources considers that land, people, and institutions are a booty that it can dispose as it wishes.

Hence, tyranny is tantamount to the state; tyranny uses the state to suppress society. In such a state, civil society cannot replace the state apparatus. We completely disagree in our assessment and expectations of civil society, and whether it can be a substitute for the state, or whether it can lay the foundations for such an alternative. In Tunisia, for example, the Tunisian General Labor Union, as part of civil society, was able to play a lead role in deterring political parties. It was able to set rules for a different game, and it saved Tunisia by refusing to enter the political process. In the first government after the fall of Ben Ali, the General Labor Union was assigned three ministerial portfolios, but their ministers resigned the next day. The Union had decided not to be part of the

authority but to remain within the realm of civil society. This is how the Union was able to perform its role later on.

So, the basis of the process, and the alternative within it, is the activity of political parties and currents that are considered a necessity to drive change. The latter, in turn, develops ideas and alternatives through dialogue and peaceful struggle. It is this kind of struggle that generates ideas and alternatives, exerts pressure, and practices all forms of advocacy and purification. However, it is essential that political movements exist that actually pose an alternative.

Anyone who considers that civil society is an alternative to political movements is wrong. For example, the human rights movement that demanded political rights never considered itself an alternative. Here, I do not mean by this individual leaders, or members of civil society who become part of the authority – this is another matter.

Many people say: "What does civil society do?" In my opinion, our expectations from civil society should reflect the way we see it. If we see civil society as a substitute, then, by default, it definitely has not done anything. If we see it as a generator of alternative ideas and as a force that exerts pressure, then that is something else.

*You said that civil society needs a healthy environment in order for it to be productive. We are now witnessing civil wars in Iraq and Syria, and Lebanon is not safe either. Borders have been shifted by local and foreign forces that have violated the concept of sovereign states and that are ready to strike Iraq and Syria. You linked the role of civil society to the existence of a peaceful situation, yet, in the Levant, a peaceful state never existed. In spite of that, civil society has had a relatively strong voice. It is in control of media that deals with the West, institutions, and the United Nations. Civil society is also represented, to a very big extent, in development conferences. Civil society members have a bigger presence than official state representatives in discussions on capacity building, concepts and ideas related to the next phase, and ways out of the crises. Nevertheless, you consider that civil society can only work in an environment where political work is peaceful. Civil society is a contributor and participant in non-peaceful suggestions and processes, yet, you are entirely linking it to the existence of a peaceful situation.*

I did not say – not even once – that civil society needs a peaceful environment. I said that it needs a healthy environment, which includes a set of elements. The agendas of civil society also change according to circumstances. If you talk about a repressive society in a repressive state, then the priority of civil society would be to stand against repression. You may want more freedoms, but in a country where the state is collapsing because of political conflict, society may set other priorities, e.g., how to stop the conflict, enhance civil society's peace-building capacity, and resolve conflict. In my opinion, the Syrian civil society has advanced and is engaged in providing services – this is in line with the priority of the millions of refugees, internally displaced, and people who dwell in areas of conflict. As these millions do not have a state that takes care of them, civil society provides food, potable water, and accommodation; these are some of the roles that civil society can take on.

There are a number of institutions that play an advanced role in civic diplomacy, and that have ideas for a possible solution. They are trying to exert pressure in order to reach a solution for the conflict. There are other sides that consider that there can only be a political solution to end the conflict, and hence stopping the war is the most important factor in peace-building, in addition to restoring the social fabric, and achieving civil peace and transitional justice. These roles should be carried out by civil society.

Syria and Iraq are two relevant case studies. Syria has been under an authoritarian regime for forty years, and its civil society is weak. At a certain moment, the authoritarian state became disintegrated. The transition from a repressed civil society to an active, organized one that shows presence requires both time and the development of its capacities and human resources.

Some people understand that political movements are an aid in the strengthening of civil society. I maintain relations with members of the Syrian civil society. They go to the European Parliament, the U.S. Congress, and the Human Rights Council to promote ideas and solutions. Even on the ground, in Homs and Aleppo, civil society demonstrated its capability to successfully push for the creation of safe areas. In other places civil society resolved the conflict between combating sides. Of course, this happened when all parties had an interest in it.

When we speak of civil society, one finds that different priorities are linked to the role it plays. One has to take into account that civil society needs to be enabled before it can carry out its role. This cannot take place overnight, but is the result of a development process.

In Iraq and Syria, civil society is trying to act, but there are factors that are distorting its role: International donors, which practice extortion and push for their own priorities. I am resolute when it comes to Syria; there has not been any local or international party that created space for dialogue, or even elaborated a vision on how to resolve the conflict. So, the result is that the international parties to the conflict in Syria did not give civil society enough space to come up with a vision about funding and politics. Rather, each side uses its financial instruments to create its own civil society. Hence, civil society is not being formed with the aim of having internal competition that would result in the formulation of a vision, or in the adoption of a unified stance toward the exterior.

The West and all exterior powers, including the East as well, approach the Syrian issue from the perspective of their own interests; nobody takes into consideration what Syrians want. Syrians should be allowed to sit together without any interference, and the space for carrying out the discussions among them should be limited to the opinions of Syrians, again without any interference. There is not a single Syrian side that knows what it wants, and so, external players seek to achieve their own interests by having these voiced through Syrians.

*A final point to address: a huge economic crisis has emerged because of this devastating war. Society has reached a stage of self-destruction. This war is costly at all levels – economic, social, political, and at the security level. In this catastrophic situation, what are the visions and agendas that are being discussed by development experts?*

First, there is no vision, but there are conclusions. The most important conclusion is that the underlying root causes to the ongoing crises, which have led us to this point, must be taken into account in any future state-building process. Democracy is essential, but it does not only revolve around freedom; Democracy should be based on institutions, accountability mechanisms, and peaceful transfer of power, etc. The lack of democracy practically means the absence of dialogue mechanisms, which then leads to violence and the use of force. First, we need to think about how to rebuild a democratic state. Second, we need to make sure that fundamental economic and social factors are not overlooked, including aspects related to marginalization and poverty. The policy model that was applied in Syria excluded social justice, and hence it had to lead to a crisis. Therefore, social options must be at the core of the solution for the next phase, and economic options must be connected to social justice as well.

In principle, services are not an offering to citizens, but they are citizens' rights. The validity of these rights cannot be conditional on whether resources are available, but rather opportunities must be created to make the delivery of these rights possible, to all people. In addition to massive destruction, which poses a big challenge, I do not think that a state can rebuild everything by relying on its capacities. Therefore, reconstruction must be linked to resources that will come from abroad. At this stage a ruler will have a significant impact on trends and options. He must understand both the East and the West, who will offer to contribute to the reconstruction process.

There are lessons to be learnt from the case of Lebanon that can benefit the venturing into new models and avoiding mistakes. The deal to stop the war in Lebanon was not bad. However, the steps to build peace have not been completed. The idea of transitional justice has not been implemented for many domestic and external reasons.

*What are the visions of ANND, your center?*

After 2010, we entered a phase of transition and re-establishment. Now, we have to look into the challenges we faced and into new alternatives that we can build on. We, as part of the network, consider that there is a correlation between economic, social, and political issues; anyone of these issues should not be given priority at the expense of the other ones. We cannot prioritize reconstruction at the political level without becoming active on any economic option that the state will adopt.

Therefore, in this historic moment, our thoughts focus on the social contract that we will shape, and which will include the constitution, the political system, and political economy. We at ANND say that if the challenge revolves around democracy, then we will react by rebuilding a country that is based on a political system and economic institutions.

A weak democracy and the absence of social justice are behind the 2010 crisis. We must study which development options should be adopted, and reconsider the policies that were applied in Arab states, and thus adopt an economic option that necessitates the existence of a development and democracy-oriented state. In other words, the state is to play a main role in the development process. In this, it does not necessarily need to take part in production, but rather it must assume responsibility for the protection of citizens' rights, and it must be fully capable of deciding on policies that ensure these rights.

Also, a process that rewinds the previous course into an opposite direction should be stimulated. Twenty years prior to the Arab revolutions, the productive sector of the economy was dismantled to the benefit of a service-based economy. Now, we must move again away from the service economy to a production oriented economy. We are pro reconsidering economic priorities in a way that would boost the production in the sectors of agriculture, handicrafts, and industries.

With regard to distribution, we are of the view that justice in distribution is tantamount to redistribution through taxes. We moved from a direct income tax to the value added tax on consumption, and we must now revert to the income tax so that more is taken from the rich than from the poor, without affecting investments. Without a fair tax system it is very difficult to establish a socially just system. If one wants to boost production, consumption must be encouraged, and consumers are needed. Therefore, wage is also considered a tool that increases consumption.

Services are a type of social protection system, and they are part of distribution and social justice.

Services do not come as a result of economic growth, but they must be delivered as part of a policy framework. Therefore, our work focuses on the elements of a new development model and on tax systems. We are conducting an assessment in order to be able to draw conclusions on systems that can be followed. We are also working on elements that impact the productive capacity, especially the investment agreement.

The research papers that we publish are mainly the result of dialogues that take place among groups of experts. The papers are the documentation of these discussions, and they should be thought of as tools that civil society uses in its negotiation and lobbying at three levels. The first is the level of the national government that drives the political decision-making process (unions, political parties, and other entities in power). The second level is that of foreign partners who exercise internal influence, in addition to countries with which there are negotiations on economic and trade relations. Here, the European Union is especially relevant, because of the financial support it provides and the suggestions it makes for potentially important trade agreements – provided we know how to negotiate with them. The third level is that of international institutions that had a role to play in promoting the Washington Consensus and that are still key players in our national options (for example, Egypt's negotiations with the IMF on energy subsidies).

These institutions have a considerable impact on options and systems that arise at the country level. In 2014, the IMF issued three fundamental documents on its policies in the region. We at the ANND took a clear position on these policies, and we went to negotiate with the IMF on the basis of the studies we have conducted, which are the result of a national dialogue and hence serve as a pressure tool. Our studies serve as material for debate that may lead to a solution. ANND is actively contributing to regional and national dialogues with the aim to come up with valid alternatives for sectors that we consider essential in new development options.