The UN in the Arab region: The Human Rights Agenda Reconsidered

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Event Summary by Andrea Longo

On May 26th IFI's United Nations in the Arab World Program hosted a lecture by Mr. John Pace, in which he provided an insight into the theoretical debate pertaining to human rights studies in the Middle East, touching on questions of cultural relativism, civil society's role and politicization of human rights discourse.

Dr. Karim Makdisi, IFI's Faculty Research Director for the UN in the Arab World Program, and Mr. Fateh Azzam, the newly appointed Director of the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, introduced the speaker and described him as the "unknown soldier of the UN system". Indeed, Mr. Pace, former Secretary to the Commission on Human Rights from 1978 to 1994 and former Chief of the Human Rights Component of the UN Mission in Iraq, has a long and vast experience within the Human Rights division of the United Nations, including past field work in Lebanon, while he is currently also still involved in Palestine. Human rights works and practices remained relatively unknown until the seminal 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna – where Mr. Pace worked as a coordinator – which gave an impetus to an “increased sensitivity to human rights in the political and intergovernmental sphere”.

Most notably, the Vienna Conference marked the recognition and the affirmation of the universality of human rights, an important step towards the consolidation of a socio-political system based on human rights. As such, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan launched “A Framework for Change”, a new UN institutional framework to support the Vienna achievements. Mr. Pace showed the audience a graph displaying what he defined as “modern architecture”, namely the several UN agencies grouped under four categories – Peace & Security, Economic & Social, Humanitarian Affairs, UN Development Group – all having Human Rights as common denominator.

However, the human rights discourse still tends to remain stuck at the level of theory while lacking substance in practice. According to Mr. Pace, this is expected because the shift towards a human rights-based political sphere has happened only recently. Furthermore, the post-Vienna architecture presents a duality with the Office of the High Commissioner and the Human Rights Council, where the latter shows a closed-minded action mostly dependent on internal and western-based inputs. On the contrary, according to Mr. Pace, civil society should “encourage central authorities to decentralize while still maintaining the homogenous and universal nature of the message.” As a matter of fact, the Middle East is extremely rich in terms of human rights experiences, and has the potential to substantially enrich the human rights discourse and theory with inputs from the region itself.

The second part of the event took the form of a debate centred on cultural relativism, on the politicization of the human rights discourse and on civil society’s role. Several members of the audience were interested in these three issues, and some were critical about
the Human Rights discourse in general, particularly about its fundamentally Western-based approach. A main criticism was against the lack of a historical approach in the human rights discourse, for instance its failings in addressing the colonial history.

In his closing remarks, Mr. Pace reaffirmed the necessity to shift the human rights discourse from a Western-based one to a more inclusive understanding of human rights that would look at both local and national inputs coming from civil society and other local actors.

“After all”, he added, “human rights represent the international community’s desire to be more moral.” Within the decentralization program, the Arab world shall play a key role, for it remains a laboratory for the study and consolidation of human rights practice for the entire world.