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## Diploma Thesis Evaluation Form

Author: Sarah Saad Mohmed Ahmed,

Title: *The Activity of Organizations Supporting Civil Society in the Middle East: The Cases of Egypt and Turkey*

Programme/year: International Relations (MAIN)/2018

Author of Evaluation (supervisor/external assessor): PhDr. Jan Hornát, Ph.D.

Criteria	Definition	Maximum	Points
<b>Major Criteria</b>			
	Research question, definition of objectives	10	6
	Theoretical/conceptual framework	30	24
	Methodology, analysis, argument	40	32
<i>Total</i>		<b>80</b>	62
<b>Minor Criteria</b>			
	Sources	10	10
	Style	5	3
	Formal requirements	5	5
<i>Total</i>		<b>20</b>	18
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>100</b>	80



## Evaluation

Major criteria:

Ms. Ahmed's thesis is an ambitious attempt to map the role of civil society under the political and social circumstances of authoritarian/hybrid regimes. Also, the text aims to provide an understanding of the EU's and US support to civil society organizations in their effort to support democratic transition and consolidation. As per the author's own words: "The most recurring question [in the thesis] is whether or not civil society is able to contribute to politics if it is faced with harsh policies, as well as understanding EU and US democracy promotion, the motives behind exporting ideologies and understanding if these promoted 'good' concepts of democracy, peace and aid juxtapose domestic and security interests in an insecure world." (p. 3)

It is particularly this twofold goal of the thesis that renders it less coherent and concise than it could have been, if Ms. Ahmed would have focused on observing only one of the stated goals. The problem is that the thesis explores two themes that, however, are not as related as they may seem at first sight. Firstly, Ms. Ahmed is looking at the advocacy and manoeuvrability of civil society organizations under authoritarian circumstances. This, of course, is a worthy goal and deserves our attention.

She starts out with a solid introduction and theoretical debate into the relationship between democracy, civil society and authoritarian regimes – although the debate may at times be a bit cumbersome for the reader and not as functional in the text itself – and then continues with providing a similar theoretical/historical introduction for the concept of democracy promotion. The reader thus moves into the empirical part of the text with two self-standing theoretical introductions that the author links only marginally by applying the notion of "bottom-up" democracy assistance (i.e. the assistance to civil society groups and other grassroots political and social movements). At this point of the thesis, we arrive at another question (this time much more relevant and concrete than the ones mentioned in the introduction) that the author aims to explore: "James Ferguson finds the concept [of democracy assistance] irrelevant because democracy promotion through civil society and most importantly NGOs is impossible because NGOs cannot really resist [*sic*] dictatorships. This exact position is what I aim to research in my next chapter." (p. 33). However, even though the author claims to look more deeply into this question, we do not really find explicit answers in the ensuing text.

The empirical part thus also breaks into two quite distinct threads of research – on the one hand both chapters (one on Turkey and one on Egypt) contain a set of subchapters descriptively mapping the historical role of civil society in these countries and then a pair of subchapters on EU and US assistance to civil society in these countries. The subchapters on democracy assistance are nonetheless quite



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delinked from the rest of the text and less empirically robust than chapters focusing on civil society *per se*.

The conclusion itself unfortunately does not truly link these two research threads. Ms. Ahmed recapitulates her work rather than synthesizing her arguments and “answering” questions posed throughout the text.

So, in the end, a better question to ask at the outset, that would at the same time bind these two threads of research in the thesis together, would be: “How do external actors (namely the EU and the US) that aim to support democracy in target countries, actually facilitate and enable the advocacy and political or social role of civil society organizations under authoritarian circumstances?” Although, of course, such a research question would entail issues with its operationalization and the “measurability” of the causality of the relationship, it would present a much more coherent research framework.

Minor criteria:

The text generally meets the standards of an MA thesis – the citations and endnotes are coherent; the bibliography employed is adequate and layout is fine. The work does contain a number of typos (even in the title of a chapter: e.g. “Chapter four: Egypty”), but this is still at the level of an average thesis. The language and style is satisfactory although at some points the author repeats herself and the text loses flow, becoming a bit cumbersome and heavy for the reader.

Overall evaluation:

The author has chosen a topic that is very close to her personal experience and interest. Thereby we can see in certain passages of the text (especially the ones dealing with Egypt) that they were written with zeal and ardour. Ms. Ahmed demonstrated that she is well-versed in the theoretical literature regarding democracy and civil society and her introduction in this sense provides for a sound literature review of the topics. So, while the text is well-situated theoretically, any methodology (apart from case study) is basically lacking. As such, the author basically neglects any description of her methodology and operationalization.

The major problem that I see with the text is that it basically falls apart into two distinct research designs (see above) that the author never really successfully binds together. The flow of the argumentation thereby loses coherence. The reader is thus left with an ambiguous sense of what the thesis aimed to achieve and, moreover, what it actually achieved in expanding our knowledge of the issues.



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Despite my criticism, I do believe it is a thesis worthy of defence as it is well-researched and theoretically and empirically sound.

Suggested grade:

I suggest awarding the thesis 80 points, thus – depending on the commission's impression from the defence – either the **grade B or C**.

Signature:

23.8. 2018

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Jan K...'.