

ARAB HUMAN RIGHTS FUND

A zest for change

Investing in human rights in the Arab world could do more than improve the quality of life. It could make the region a better bet for investors too

HUMAN rights are not a luxury; they are the basis upon which society functions. "It's very simple. No rule of law, no safe business," says Fouad Hamdan, the director of the Arab Human Rights Fund (AHRF) in the run-up to the UN Human Rights Day on 10 December. This is a pressing problem in the Gulf, he says. With the exception of Bahrain and Yemen, which is not part of the GCC but closely linked to it, it is difficult to set up a human rights group – or any such organisation – which aims to operate with a level of independence. Those that exist tend to be funded by the government, meaning they lack the autonomy needed to effect real change.

This can have dangerous implications, not just in a social context but for the region's economic development too. The oversight of human rights – whether it is related to a woman's right to drive a car or access to a functioning legal system – can affect the long-term economic prospects of a country. Maybe not in the initial flush of making money, concedes Hamdan, but the absence of "basic human rights, respect for law and an independent judiciary" can persuade people "not to invest".

AHRF aims to change all that. Conceived as an idea in 2002 but launched earlier this year, the organisation is based in Beirut and registered in the Netherlands as a non-profit organisation. AHRF is independent of any political influence or government, says Hamdan. It aims to support human

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rights in the region by offering an independent source of funds for projects that offer the potential for long-term change (see box). It supports groups that provide training in a particular area, develop public education or offer help in litigating human rights cases in local, regional or international courts.

Set up with an initial grant of \$600,000, next year's budget will be increased slightly to \$650,000-\$700,000. Fundraising is to start in earnest in the new year, but already "numerous small to medium-sized donations ranging from \$1,000 to \$25,000" have come in. These will be channelled into an endowment fund, which will be used to finance suitable projects. Most of the money has come from Arab donors, says Hamdan, which is exactly what AHRF was hoping for.

Hamdan says he is targeting not just Arab businessmen and women for donations, but professionals of all kinds including people who wish to contribute only "\$50, \$100, it doesn't need to be more". This is to encourage a sense of ownership. AHRF, he emphasises, is not just for the region but



of the region. "Our strategy is to change from within," says Hamdan. This means not imposing the notion of change from outside – something that some international human rights groups are perceived as doing – but creating a situation in which Arabs are the proponents of change.

"Our challenge is to convince people that we're transparent. We'll have an audit," he says. "And everything will be published on the web. Hardly anyone else [in the region] is doing that."

Philanthropy may be well established in the Arab region, says Hamdan, but it is usually based on charity or relief aid. The notion of giving for human rights is more controversial. "People in the region are afraid to give because they are afraid of problems with governments," says Hamdan.

"Many donors ask to remain anonymous because of this, because they are afraid of



Street protest in Damascus, Syria Reuters

retaliation from the government."

This is a normal reaction in a region where human rights are limited – at best. Despite the fact that more than 100 groups have been established in the past 25 years or so, it is hard to get new ones off the ground because of laws restricting the setting up of non-governmental organisations.

That is not all. Activists are often harassed or imprisoned. Some are forced into exile. Because of the difficulty of getting funding from the region, most groups rely on western sources of financing. AHRF is different. While it may be supported by the Ford Foundation of the US, its staff are Arabs. The importance of this is more than cosmetic: the Arab world is used to being berated for its record on human rights and it is all too easy to shrug off the concerns of distant activists in London or New York. Harder to ignore are the complaints of local people, particularly when a group

Where the money goes

The Arab Human Rights Fund awarded 26 grants this year to organisations in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Mauritania, the Palestinian territories, Somalia. Also:

\$20,000

To the Bahrain Women Association, aimed at promoting the social status of women and eradicating discrimination through legal reforms based on international conventions

\$8,333

To the Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq, which will be used to train workers to monitor and study human rights in the workplace and to propose legislation

\$10,000

To the Civic Democratic Initiatives Support Foundation in Yemen, aimed at increasing public awareness of citizenship issues to promote democracy and a sense of civic duty

makes strides towards sustainable change. The fact that AHRF's fundraising coincides with a downturn in the global economy is

no matter, says Hamdan. "In a recession people give less, but they will still give. They will always give." ■