



‘Highlights’ 2008

While reforms in the promotion and defense of human rights remain relatively unambitious in the southeast Mediterranean region, concrete progress has been made particularly in the context of the adoption of laws strengthening the participation of women and the fight against corruption.

However, the year 2008 highlighted unprecedented collective movements of peaceful protest in Tunisia and Syria challenging unfair employment practices and calling for the establishment of a democratic system that respects the rights of citizens, guarantees the rights to freedom of expression and association, and brings an end to discrimination. The governments’ response led to several arrests, imprisonment sentences and reprisal measures against the families. These are but two examples of a high degree of political, economic and social paralysis taking place in this region, compounded by conflict situations which had tragic consequences. Repeatedly using security concerns as a pretext, the governments of the region also continued to add to the range of legislative tools, laws designed to curtail the effective enjoyment of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression by human rights defenders, especially in Algeria, Egypt, and Syria.

In light of this regional context, it was essential to provide defenders not only with political support but also with financial support, taking into account the need for timeliness, flexibility and discretion, so as to enable them to develop their activities not only as witnesses, advocates and promoters but also as defenders of all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Against this background, the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders (EMHRF) provided support to *more than a hundred defenders*, individuals and NGOs, in the region.

The support provided by the Foundation fell into three broad categories of intervention. It should be pointed out, however, that certain types of intervention, in particular among those aimed at strengthening human and operational resources, are not always easy to distinguish from those aimed at supporting innovative activities.

1. Urgent interventions in support of defenders facing difficulties or at risk¹

The EMHRF provided financial assistance in a rapid, tangible and discreet manner to several human rights defenders to help them overcome difficult circumstances and/or, at a critical moment, reinforce the visibility of their work and their prospects for pursuing their activities.

Specifically, the Foundation provided emergency support for:

¹ The urgent interventions represented 33% of the Foundation’s interventions in 2008.

- More than sixty families of defenders who were the targets of *psychological harassment and arbitrary legal proceedings* because of their views on respect for human rights in their country, in order to sustain the basic requirements for survival;
- Seven defenders, who had been sentenced to several years of imprisonment and whose life was in danger because of *grave health problems*, thus enabling them to obtain the medical treatment they needed, in their country or abroad;
- An association of human rights defenders against which an *arbitrary order of dissolution and the freezing of its assets* had been decreed without warning by the authorities, to give it the time needed to take steps to stabilize its status and continue its work;
- Nine *projects whose success essentially depended on a time-sensitive intervention* to heighten their profile and increase the prospects for a successful pursuit of human rights activities in countries where the political environment and the context in which NGOs must work are particularly difficult.

In its urgent interventions, the EMHRF took a decision within a maximum of 10 days and attempted as much as possible to coordinate its work with other regional and international organisations that have a mandate to provide political and financial support to human rights defenders.

2. Bridging interventions to strengthen human and operational resources²

The EMHRF also provided financial assistance the main purpose of which was to strengthen the ability of defenders and associations to create new structures or ensure the effective implementation of their work in the region. These interventions have, among other things, made it possible to increase the visibility of defenders, and to ensure they have the resources needed to pursue their work over the long term.

In particular, the Foundation supported:

- The *training of thirty members of grassroots associations* aimed at helping them to develop communication and publication tools to promote the activities of their associations;
- The *setting up of a website* for two NGOs in order to allow them to redeploy their activities in the national and international arena;
- A portion of the *operating costs* (e.g. rental costs, equipment and staffing) associated with the consolidation of six existing groups which operated mainly on a volunteer basis, and the establishment of seven new ones in the region;
- The *advocacy and fund-raising campaign* of a small NGO that was facing financial difficulties because of the sensitive nature of its work.

In the context of its role as an intermediary and advisor to its beneficiaries, the Foundation encouraged and facilitated the development of multi-year strategies backed by a fund-raising programme. The Foundation was thus able to respond strategically to the needs of the organisations concerned and/or to help them in their efforts to approach other donors who may be in a better position to support their activities over the long term. In five specific cases, the Foundation facilitated contacts between NGOs and donors, provided lists of potential donors and assisted in the presentation of funding requests.

² The bridging interventions to strengthen capacities represented 43% of the Foundation's interventions in 2008.

3. Interventions in support of innovative initiatives in light of the regional context³

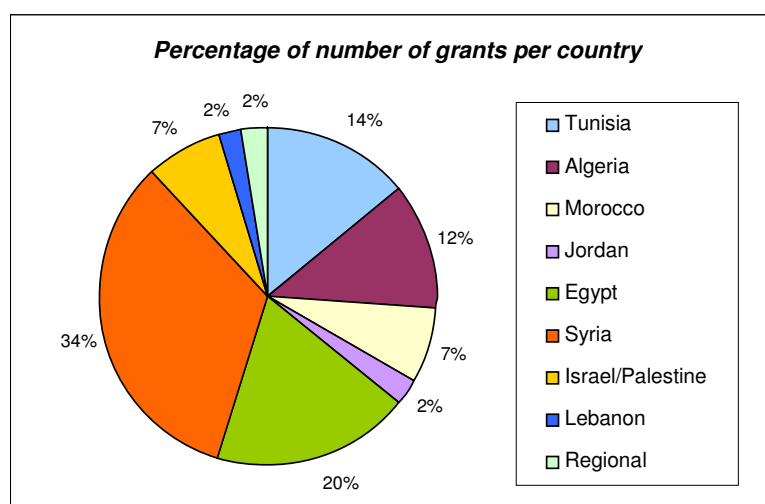
At last, the Foundation provided financial support for projects concerned with subjects that were innovative and/or had a priority importance in light of the regional context. It paid particular attention to strengthening the coordination of NGOs activities at the national and regional level and to bolstering the protection of the rights of groups that could be considered as being particularly vulnerable or as needing specific assistance.

In particular, the Foundation provided support to, among others, groups that are active in:

- fighting impunity,
- promoting and protecting economic, social and cultural rights,
- fighting homophobia and defending the rights of LGBTQ,
- promoting and protecting the rights of women and children,
- promoting and protecting the rights of the disabled
- promoting and protecting the rights of refugees and migrants in countries of the southern Mediterranean.

In its role as intermediary to its beneficiaries, the EMHRF has also encouraged some defenders and NGOs to develop contacts with national institutions that have similar projects in their own country or in other countries of the region, as well as with regional and international networks working to promote and defend human rights. Such contacts can be used by these defenders and NGOs to share information and experiences, to discuss the potential for exploiting synergies and coordinating activities, and thus to draw benefits other than financial that are capable of increasing the impact and viability of their work.

4. Geographical assessment of interventions in 2008



In light of the broad political trends at the national and international levels, the year 2008 highlighted important needs expressed by defenders mainly acting in Syria, Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria. Most of the independent NGOs located in these countries face constant impediments in obtaining legal recognition of their human rights activities and therefore only have limited access to national or foreign funding. As a consequence, these NGOs lack operating capacities and the needed prospects to pursue their work effectively over the long term. Therefore, these countries were set as priorities for the Foundation's interventions in 2008.

³ The interventions in support of innovative initiatives represented 24% of the Foundation's interventions in 2008.