

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

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Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 10

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10-2006

**Sonia Cardenas on Human Rights in the Arab World: Independent Voices. Edited by Anthony Chase and Amr Hamzawy. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 336 pp.**

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## Recommended Citation

Cardenas, Sonia (2006) "Sonia Cardenas on Human Rights in the Arab World: Independent Voices. Edited by Anthony Chase and Amr Hamzawy. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 336 pp.," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol6/iss1/10>

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**Human Rights in the Arab World: Independent Voices. Edited by Anthony Chase and Amr Hamzawy. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 336 pp.**

Cultural preconceptions often drive debates about human rights in the Middle East and North Africa. Human Rights in the Arab World takes a substantial step in the opposite direction. Its principal contribution is to undermine the prevailing view that human rights are largely irrelevant in a region deemed *sui generis*. As such, the book should appeal to a broad audience, including human rights students and regional specialists alike.

The contributors to this volume are neither naïve nor apologetic about the place of human rights in the Arab world; they are indeed quick to acknowledge the dismal record of abuse. Their argument is that human rights practices are the product of particular historical, political, social, and economic circumstances—contrary to popular assumptions that the region is inherently incompatible with Western human rights principles. The volume thus documents a richly diverse set of human rights discourses and forms of activism that reveals the region’s complexity in this domain.

Most of the book’s chapters embrace, to varying degrees, a universal conception of human rights. Anthony Chase does this most explicitly in the introductory chapter and one devoted to challenging the simplistic and a priori opposition of Islam and human rights. It is neither necessary to reject human rights nor to reconcile it to Islam, he contends, since Islam’s role in advancing human rights is socially constructed and historically contingent. In rejecting cultural relativist arguments, the book’s diverse contributors also warn against construing human rights primarily as a Western import, despite the concept’s historical pedigree or the hypocrisy of Western actors.

Others follow suit in characterizing the region’s multiplicity of human rights discourses. Amr Hamzawy traces disagreements among Arab intellectuals over globalization, showing how even opposing perspectives have adopted the language of human rights. Valentine Moghadem’s chapter on women’s contributions to notions of citizenship emphasizes similar dynamics, attributing patriarchal gender relations to concrete social and economic arrangements. The book’s universalist assumption is also evident in a brief but poignant chapter by activist Eyad El Sarraj, who soberly records his captivity and torture by fellow Palestinians. Likewise, Sheila Carapico surveys the range of human rights ideas long put forth by Yemeni intellectuals, including a national charter of rights issued ten months before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Human Rights in the Arab World further emphasizes the role of advocates. Activist Bahey el-Din Hassan, for example, discusses the ethical dilemmas faced by the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights when deciding to defend Islamists at the risk of being targeted by the state—a decision that nonetheless imbued the organization with moral authority. Focusing on the Egyptian state’s reaction to transnational pressure, Neil Hicks applies the “spiral model” of socialization only to find that, contrary to the model’s expectations, pressuring the Egyptian state has weakened social groups’ capacity to mobilize. Hanny Megally discusses more generally the widespread problems confronting the region’s activists, including the tendency of domestic groups to focus on the international context without establishing a solid local base. Nicola Pratt

extends this reasoning to examine the foreign funding debate in Egypt, namely whether human rights groups should accept funds from abroad even if doing so marginalizes them locally.

The book's final section turns to country-specific case studies. In his chapter on Egypt, Tamir Moustafa explores how opposition and human rights groups used judicial institutions to challenge the state in otherwise inconceivable ways. Despite these groups' substantial successes, Moustafa details how the state systematically set out to destroy the human rights movement, which ironically had neglected to forge broad social support. Susan Waltz and Lindsay Benstead tell a more optimistic story about Morocco: without local groups, recent processes of reform would have been untenable. Complementing the text, two appendices provide human rights documents and information about states' treaty ratifications and reservations.

In challenging essentialist views of human rights in the region, Human Rights in the Arab World showcases a broad range of "independent voices" just as it raises numerous questions. For example, contributors describe the limits imposed by the state on human rights activism, but what explains states' differential thresholds for tolerating activists? Likewise, the transnational dimensions of human rights change need to be further clarified, including the historical influence of global forces on indigenous notions of rights. Methodologically, findings from cross-national comparisons, beyond single-country cases, are needed, including studies of the differential response of human rights groups to foreign funding and variations in local rights discourses. The contributors to this important volume have laid the foundations for studying human rights in the Arab world. It is up to future researchers to push these parameters.

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*October 2006*