

Workshop: ‚Agents of change in the Euro-Mediterranean Space’: Politics and social transformation from a local perspective, Berlin, 27 – 29 January 2010

The workshop, convened by the Centre for Middle Eastern and North African Politics, Free University of Berlin, under the aegis of RAMSES 2, a Network of Excellence on Mediterranean Studies, looks into the local dynamics of change in the Mediterranean space.

The majority of past and present studies on the Middle Eastern state focuses on the national level of regime elites aiming to identify and analyze the origins and effects of the persistent stability of authoritarian regimes in the MENA region. However, a closer look at the local level reveals moment of stability as well as transformation. The increasing number of strikes, social turmoil and riots in the Mediterranean region like those in the Egyptian provincial town of Mahalla in April 2008 or in the Tunisian phosphate mining area Gafsa in January 2008 are examples for dynamic local movements and reflect the rising dissatisfaction of people at the grassroots. In addition, development cooperation projects such as decentralization programmes, which are funded by international donors like the European Union and implemented by the agencies of the central state, often intervene quite massively into local structures, leading to the creation of new governance institutions and the re-spatialisation of governance. This in turn changes patterns of inclusion and exclusion of agents on the local level. In spite of such dynamic developments, less attention has been given to the intricate field of local politics and its impact on social and political transformations from ‘below’. Against this background, the workshop intends to take a closer look at local politics in the Mediterranean region, aiming to detect current conflicts, (relevant) agents of change as well as local political and social transformations.

Some of the main questions to be addressed during the workshop are:

- How is local politics framed and how does it work?
- How does the recent wave of social unrest affect local power structures? Do emerging agents challenge the status quo or are they incorporated?
- How are local power structures linked horizontally to trans-local actors and vertically linked to national and international institutions and actors?
- How do externally induced programs and reforms affect these structures?
- How is this reflected in the local discourses?
- Which agents are included or excluded in the course of these political, social, economical and spatial transformations?
- What role do local, national and transnational media play in the process of transformation from below?