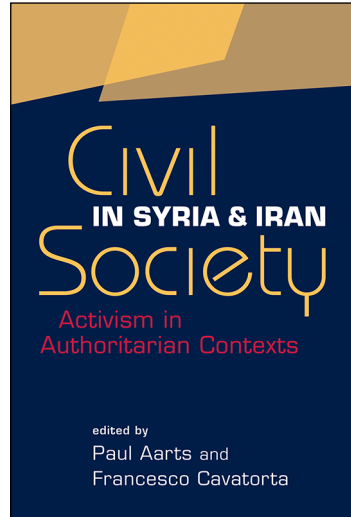


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Civil Society in Syria and Iran:
Activism in
Authoritarian Contexts

edited by
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Francesco Cavatorta

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1

Civil Society in Syria and Iran

Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta

The Middle East has been at the center of scholarly and policymaking attention for more than a decade, and the Iranian anti-regime demonstrations during the summer of 2009 and later during the “Arab Spring” have further intensified interest in the politics of the region. While the Middle East had always featured prominently in international affairs, it is fair to say that the events of September 11, 2001, truly put the focus of the international community on the political, social, and economic dynamics of the region, and the recent wave of mass protests have heightened that focus. Much of the debate on the Middle East centers almost entirely on questions of democracy and democratization, with every issue—from the rise of Islamism to political violence and from women’s rights to economic liberalization—crucially connected to democratic governance or absence thereof. The literature on democratization, with its assumption about the inevitable linear development of societies from authoritarianism to democracy, dominated analyses of the region during the 1980s and 1990s. When it became apparent that democracy was not making progress in the region, a significant number of studies were published questioning the mainstream approach of examining the region only through the lenses of democracy and democratization. The emergence of the “authoritarian resilience” paradigm seemed to be better suited to explain the mechanisms through which authoritarianism survived in the region, and this literature supplanted the one on democratization by providing a thorough critique of the main assumptions of transitology.

2 *Civil Society in Syria and Iran*

The popular uprisings of 2009 in Iran and 2011 across the Arab world have contributed to swing the pendulum back toward democratization studies, with enthusiasm for transition processes and regime change prominent once again. The interparadigm debate has been an important contribution to studies of Middle East politics because it has highlighted problems with both paradigms, while providing a number of theoretical assumptions that can potentially be shared by proponents of the two approaches. For one, despite the momentous Arab Spring, it is becoming increasingly accepted in both camps that the belief in a linear path toward democracy no longer permits, if it ever did, a clear analysis and understanding of regional, and even global, dynamics.¹ In many ways, the days of viewing political, social, and economic developments in the region as steps that would move countries either forward or backward on the imaginary linear path between authoritarianism and democracy are gone. This remains also the case in light of the Iranian protests and the Arab Spring for two reasons. First, as highlighted by Marina Ottaway, “presidents have left, but regimes remain in place,”² indicating that the changes taking place might be more cosmetic than real, with potential transitions facing significant obstacles. Second, even in the case of successful transitions to democracy, the scholarship on democratization would not be able to explain such processes, given that they seem to constitute a novelty in terms of the protagonists and the dynamics of change, as noted for instance by Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui.³

As mentioned, a significant section of the academic literature on the Middle East is now sufficiently developed to offer a different perspective on regional dynamics. The authoritarian resilience paradigm has produced a number of assumptions that allow scholars to examine the broad spectrum of Arab and Iranian politics in a less normative manner, investigating the mechanisms of the reconfiguration of power that still allows authoritarianism to be successful in many countries of the Middle East and North Africa. This literature is certainly on the retreat in the face of events that were not foreseen and that do not seem to make sense in the context of what was assumed to be extremely solid authoritarian rule. Criticism of this approach is well deserved to a certain extent, but some of its theoretical assumptions still provide a useful guide for understanding how authoritarian politics works. In addition, examining authoritarian reconfigurations of power, even in a context where this might be collapsing, is interesting insofar

as what follows through path dependency owes much to earlier political, social, and economic interactions.⁴

The issue of civil society activism, with which this edited volume is concerned, highlights some terms of the interparadigm debate. On the one hand, democratization studies postulate that a strong civil society is conducive to democracy and a necessary ingredient for political transformations. This literature places a lot of faith in the capacity of civil society to make democratic demands, but the unexpected revolts in Iran and across the Arab world surprised almost the whole spectrum of activists and associations that one would have associated with the struggle for democracy. The protagonists of the Arab Spring are not to be found in mainstream civil society. On the other hand, the literature on authoritarian resilience focused almost exclusively on the mechanisms of state domination and co-optation of civil society, ignoring informal and unofficial loci of dissent and activism, presenting therefore a picture of stability that did not exist.

Whether it stimulates democracy or reinforces authoritarianism, civil society activism is examined through studies dealing with traditional loci and actors of activism. This has led to neglect potential actors and milieus of dissent production that might marginally exist under the “official” surface. This book addresses specifically the issue of civil activism and builds on previous findings and assumptions linked to the interparadigm debate, to provide a much clearer understanding of civil activism in Iran and Syria. The objective is to examine how societies where authoritarianism has been “upgraded” respond and operate. From a theoretical point of view, the contributors in this project depart from a normative definition of civil society and concentrate on marginal realities of activism. From an empirical point of view, contributors highlight different aspects of civil society activism that characterize Syria and Iran, with specific attention to the dynamics that occur outside formal groups. It is precisely the nature of protests and the reaction to them by the regimes that make Syria and Iran crucial cases to examine, given the nature of such regimes and their status as international pariahs.

Leaving the Mainstream Behind

In an influential article dating back to 2002, Thomas Carothers convincingly argued that the transition paradigm had ended.⁵ After two

decades of academic and policymaking enthusiasm for the political developments taking place across the globe, theories of democratization seemed no longer useful to explain and predict them. Both the theoretical assumptions of transitology and the empirical evidence quite clearly demonstrated that the transition paradigm had lost its explanatory power largely because a significant number of countries that moved away from authoritarian rule “got stuck” on the way to democracy and developed political systems where elements of democracy and authoritarianism coexisted to create new political systems that deserved to be studied in their own right.⁶ This had a profound impact on the study of the Middle East and North Africa, where, more than anywhere else, authoritarian rule still prevails despite the global reach of the third wave of democratization and the Arab Spring. While countries across the globe left authoritarian rule behind to embrace some form of democratic governance, the phenomenon to be explained in the Middle East was the survival of authoritarian rule. The focus on the reasons behind the persistence of authoritarian rule did not simply hold academic interest but had profound political implications because it meant that if one were able to find the explanation for authoritarian survival (the disease), it could then identify the solution as well and proceed to implement the cure. In any case, developments in Middle East countries were predictably analyzed according to the mainstream understanding that changes and reforms were either making these countries move toward democracy or back toward more traditional forms of authoritarianism. The idea of a linear path remained strong.

Carothers’s article questioned the assumption of a linear path from a general point of view and did not necessarily address the Middle East specifically. Examples of failed transitions or of countries “stuck” in the middle between authoritarian rule and democracy, in fact, abound outside the region as well. In addition, authoritarian rule has survived the global democratic trend in countries as different as Cuba and North Korea or China and Zimbabwe. Thus, the marginalization of the transition paradigm meant that an intellectual shift could be made that would imply moving away from studying the reasons why democracy was absent in the region toward examining the features of authoritarian rule and politics.⁷ In some ways Daniel Brumberg had already indicated in his study of Arab regimes that scholars were probably dealing with political systems that had indeed become “something else” in respect to the traditional forms of authoritarianism

they previously displayed, although they had not turned democratic. Brumberg coined the term “liberalized autocracies” to define such political systems that, he argued, should be studied in their own right.⁸

The end of transitology and the necessity to study current forms of authoritarian rule in order to explore how they operate are increasingly accepted in the literature on the Middle East and elsewhere.⁹ This remains the case even in the context of the Iranian antiregime protests of 2009 and the Arab Spring for three reasons. First, some countries, particularly in the Gulf, will likely remain authoritarian for the foreseeable future, and therefore authoritarianism will remain a regional feature.¹⁰ Second, the direction of the political changes taking place in Egypt and Libya, for example, is not yet clear, although Tunisia might be moving more smoothly toward the establishment of a more or less democratic system.¹¹ Finally, even if some sort of democratic procedures and institutions were put in place, “transiting” countries might actually not finish their march toward democracy and might remain stuck in a semiauthoritarian limbo, as many others before them. What the interparadigm debate has shown is that both approaches have shortcomings, and this is true for the question of civil society activism as well.

Transitology and the democratization paradigm gave significant importance to the role of civil activism in regime change. Within democratic political theory and democratization studies, as Michaele Browers highlights, “Civil society forms the bedrock of good democratic governance.”¹² In transitology, the crucial assumption is that the presence of an active civil society is a positive development for stimulating democratization. Policymakers also share this belief. In terms of regional dynamics, Laith Kubba proclaimed that the “awakening of civil society” in the Arab world would be the decisive factor in challenging the authoritarian regimes in the region and eventually lead the Arabs to the “promised land” of democratization.¹³ This optimism was largely based on the genuine awakening of activism across the region, with numerous civil society organizations dealing with all sorts of issues, including human rights and democracy, popping up across the Middle East to generate much needed social capital that would be turned into democratic potential.

The problem is that from both a theoretical and empirical point of view, civil society activism is much more problematic as a concept and as a reality than generally accepted, and the literature on authoritarian

resilience has built its theoretical assumptions on this recognition of the role of civil society. However, a number of recent studies on civil activism in authoritarian countries run counter to the liberal assumptions that transitology espouses. According to this strand of research, rather than fostering democratization, civil activism seems, in fact, to strengthen, or at least not have any effect on, authoritarian rule.¹⁴ It follows that, first, there is a growing consensus that civil society should no longer be defined through normative lenses.¹⁵ Civil society has carried strong normative connotations that made it almost unquestionably linked to the liberal-democratic form of government. This meant that if civil society activism was growing in authoritarian contexts, the possibility of democratization would increase. Although this view of civil society is still prevalent in the policymaking community, in many academic circles it is now argued that a more neutral definition, stripped of its liberal normative content, can be a more useful tool to analyze what the reality of activism is on the ground in authoritarian systems rather than what liberal democrats would like it to be. Crucially, dropping the normative definition of civil society offers the possibility that within this enlarged field of activism, a number of nontraditional actors not usually thought to be part of civil society, such as individual blogger-activists or organizations more organically linked to the state, could be included.

Abandoning the normative definition of civil society poses two significant problems, however. First is the risk of depoliticizing activism and the “normative” drive toward the establishment of a more responsive system of government, which does an injustice to activists who struggled and still struggle in pursuit of democracy. Second, such a loose definition of the concept might end up encompassing all sorts of activities that are generated within society and that bear no relation whatsoever with political engagement. With respect to the first problem, the analytical choice of a more neutral definition does not equate with an abandonment of a democratic ideal but permits scholars to be more attentive to the reality on the ground rather than looking for an expected outcome. With respect to the second issue, a neutral definition of civil society is the space between the state and the family, where citizens on a voluntary basis engage with issues of societal relevance. However, this definition permits all sorts of issues and groups and individuals to be included without a priori determining their democratic or liberal credentials. This does not preclude that civil society might still play a role in democratization, but the intent

of civil society actors to bring about democracy should not be the basis for inclusion or exclusion from the sphere of activism.

The second assumption we abandon is that activism is equated with formal organizations, which has been a shortcoming of both the democratization and the authoritarian resilience paradigms. Indeed, much of the literature on civil activism focuses on formal organizations and associations and more specifically on human rights and pro-democracy groups. Once the normative content of the definition is removed, it is possible to examine not only other types of associations that self-define as apolitical, but, crucially, to look at nonformal processes of activism such as the ones that take place online, which involve individuals who might be physically disconnected with one another but are activated as citizens. To a great extent, much of the liberal and secular prodemocracy and pro-human rights activism in the Middle East has not only failed to bring about democracy but in a number of instances has actually strengthened authoritarian regimes, particularly if one examines how many of these prodemocracy activists acted when called to support a democratic process that would favor political Islam. According to Steven Cook, self-defined democratic associations, parties, and personalities tend to side with authoritarian regimes when Islamist parties make electoral inroads or demonstrate their popularity.¹⁶ Thus, focusing on groups that do not have human rights or democracy as central tenets of their activism and extending the study to processes that do not involve formal organizations contribute to a more realistic picture of what is occurring in society.

It is again worth mentioning how traditional civil society groups contributed little to the departure, for instance, of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak from Egypt (and even less in the case of Muammar Qaddafi from Libya one might add). In fact, traditional civil society actors have had their role confiscated by a loosely organized youth that has been able to unite the nation beyond class and religion in the struggle for change. As Benoit Challand recently wrote

I choose the phrase “counter-power of civil society” to describe the ongoing developments . . . because I believe that there is more to civil society than its organized form. There is more to civil society than NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] and the developmental approach which imagines that the key to progress is when donors, the UN or rich countries, give aid to boost non-state actors, in particular NGOs, in the developing south.¹⁷

The same point is made by Béchir Ben Yahmed, who wrote in an editorial for *La Jeune Afrique* that “no party, no union, no politician gave the impetus for this popular uprising nor were they in any way involved.”¹⁸ This might be an exaggeration, and one should not forget the role of political associations in the uprising in Bahrain, of the trade union movement in the Tunisian revolt, and of Egyptian associations and workers’ movements in ousting Mubarak, but their role was by no means a predominant one.¹⁹ The majority of the activism that led to the uprisings occurred outside formal and traditional groups.

Finally, and more controversially, opposition parties and civil society organizations that dissent from current authoritarian practices do not seem able and do not have the necessary ideological and material resources to challenge the incumbent authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, which are perceived to be “here to stay.” For example, the way in which the Iranian regime dealt with the “Green Movement” protest in the summer of 2009 (after the allegedly fraudulent presidential elections) is indicative of the power and resources still available to authoritarian regimes in the region. This leads many activists to accept the regime’s framework, to which they adapt by attempting to maximize their results in the knowledge that an antisystemic approach will not work.²⁰ It is for this reason that both in Tunisia and Egypt most opposition parties and civil society groups were only tangentially involved in the demonstrations and sought to benefit from the events after they took place. As Sarah Ben Nefissa convincingly argued in her analysis of the Egyptian uprising, “political movements within the opposition lag behind the social protests” occurring in the country.”²¹ Through a combination of repression and co-optation, incumbent regimes have been able to guarantee their stability, suggesting that the appeal of liberal democracy, on the wane even in established democracies,²² does not materialize into political change. In his analysis, Samir Aita argued that the social and economic inequalities created by the liberalization of the economy according to the neoliberal doctrine in the Arab world over the last two decades are the root causes of the uprisings and the desire for change, emphasizing that this factor has been and still is more important than political and democratic demands.²³ This means that mass protests due to worsening economic conditions were the force behind the uprisings, with political demands entering the scene later on. It was at that stage that more organized actors within the opposition attempted to take advantage of the breach made by unstructured mass movements.²⁴

The almost unquestioned acceptance of authoritarian frameworks on the part of large sectors of organized civil society has profound repercussions on how society itself operates and interacts with the regime because the expectation of change from civil society is no longer as strong as it was in the past, although the aftershocks of the Arab Spring have the potential to change that. This is verified as well by the failure of the most powerful opposition, political Islam, to gain power in any country of the region despite decades of opposition. Whether employing the gun or the ballot box, Islamists have not been able to subvert any of the ruling regimes in the region,²⁵ although they have profited from the changes that others mainly provoked in Tunisia and Egypt.

The enthusiasm generated by events across the Arab world in the spring and summer of 2011 might yet change the picture, but the analytical validity of looking beyond traditional actors remains intact. The type of activism that nontraditional actors are developing creates new dynamics of interaction between society and the regimes, leading to a reconfiguration of the role and objectives of activism. These new actors have emerged as civil society actors, but their interests and work do not conform to a traditional understanding of activism linked to notions of liberalization and democratization. This does not mean that democracy is the inevitable conclusion, but it should also be acknowledged that while some of the “battles” these new activists undertake might be considered civil in a traditional liberal normative way, other civil struggles might not be liberal or democratic at all. The arrival on the scene of these actors, such as new forms of business associations or individual bloggers, is partly the product of wider political, social, and economic changes taking place in the region and partly the outcome of states’ policies in their attempts to reshape and adapt authoritarianism to the modern globalized context. It is therefore in wider society, where less formal and looser ties are formed, that one would potentially find democratizing potential, highlighting an interesting paradox whereby those actors seeking democracy only found authoritarianism and the ones working within authoritarian constraints might be leading the way to democratic change. The Iranian protests and the Arab Spring demonstrate that societies are much more alive than previously believed in both academic and policymaking circles. This is all the more surprising in Iran and Syria where the power of the state to dominate society seemed strongest. While the outcome of the Arab Spring is still in the

balance, it is still necessary to analyze the sources and actors behind the recent protests. Examining Iranian and Syrian activism in marginal loci might provide a partial but important answer.

Civil Activism in Syria and Iran

As mentioned, this book challenges traditional understandings and assumptions surrounding the nature and role of civil society activism and provides a more complex account of how civil society actors operate in Syria and Iran, where authoritarian rule has gone through a process of transformation over the last decade. Steven Heydemann analyzed in some detail the way in which Arab regimes upgraded authoritarian rule (for instance, by appropriating and containing civil societies, capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms, controlling new communications technologies, and diversifying international linkages), and this book aims to examine how society deals with and, at the same time, is partly responsible for such an upgrading.²⁶ In some ways, we intend to look beyond the state and analyze in detail how social groups and actors have reacted to such authoritarian upgrading and, at the same time, how part of the upgrading is the outcome of new social pressures and demands.²⁷ This leads us to move away from the traditional issues of human rights and democratization that characterized civil society activism in the past. The volume does not intend to argue that such issues are irrelevant, but it simply aims to explore novel forms of activism on issues that are not so overtly political, at least superficially.

The theoretical starting point of our analysis is the assumption that regimes in the region are quite different from each other and rely on diverse tools for ensuring survival. From this, it follows that such regimes generate different types of opposition, implement different policies in order to strengthen their rules, and utilize tools that vary from country to country to manage civil society activism. All this influences the ways in which civil society operates and has an impact on the type of dynamics that are created among civil society actors, particularly if a feedback loop is considered, whereby governmental policies have effects in society that then translate to social actors signaling to the regime to make further changes and meet new demands.

The innovative contribution of the volume does not rest only on the acceptance of assumptions that are controversial and permit an

examination of activism through new theoretical lenses but also on the choice of countries studied. It provides, in fact, an examination of the development of civil activism in two Middle East societies that have not committed, even rhetorically, to Western-style political liberalization and that are outside the bounds of what the international community deems to be respectable states, responding instead to popular pressures for change with repressive measures. In addition, these two societies seem to display different degrees of politicized mobilization, with a more politicized society in Iran and a less mobilized one in Syria, even in light of the protests taking place in Syria, because organized dissent is a much stronger tradition in Iran. A number of reasons underpin the choice of examining these civil society dynamics in Iran and Syria.

First, Syrian and Iranian civil societies are underexplored compared with a large number of studies focusing on other countries in the region, and this book fills this empirical void. What becomes apparent almost immediately upon looking at social dynamics in the two countries is that despite the culture of fear, there is an unexpected level of civil engagement on the part of both organized groups and individuals.

Second, Syria and Iran are “confrontational” states (that is, they are often antagonistic toward Israel and the United States) leading the so-called resistance camp and they therefore deal with the added problem of operating in an unfavorable international environment when intensifying their authoritarianism; their respective societies can benefit or suffer from this. The contributions by Line Khatib in Chapter 2 and Ali Fathollah-Nejad in Chapter 3 provide a sophisticated analysis of how the international dimension and domestic factors interact to not only shape the power structures of the regimes and their legitimizing ideologies but also reveal how such a dynamic interaction partly explains how civil society actors respond and operate. Khatib’s chapter on Syria examines how the economic liberalization undertaken by Bashar al-Assad has led to significant changes in state-society relations, throwing up different challenges for new civil actors in an environment that has remained, from a strictly institutional point of view, a closed and repressive one. Crucially, the chapter analyzes how the Syrian state has managed and has been influenced by the rise of these new social actors. Fathollah-Nejad’s chapter on Iran focuses on the role of the international community in shaping activism. Iran traditionally had a rather lively civil society,

and the revolutionary spirit has always called for greater mobilization on the part of citizens. Over the last decade, however, Iran has become the focus of international attention as the country became a much more prominent regional actor. The nuclear issue and the support of Islamist organizations such as Hamas and Hizbullah have heightened significantly the tensions with the West. These international dynamics have considerable domestic repercussions, and Fathollah-Nejad argues that they are crucial in structuring activism in Iran.

The neoliberal doctrine underpinning the globalization of the economy has left its mark on both countries, although to different degrees. Even though this has been tempered by the heavy intervention of the state, both the Syrian and Iranian economies have changed over the last decade, allowing for a reconfiguration of social groups and their relations with the regime. In the case of Syria, we have seen the emergence of a new class of global businessmen, with workers, once pillars of the regime, losing out in terms of political clout and forced to create new networks of social linkages to articulate their demands. In Chapter 4 by Bassam Haddad, the role of business associations, a new phenomenon in Syria, is examined in the context of economic liberalization. Business groups see themselves as civil actors and lobby groups and therefore operate accordingly. This is not particularly surprising, but the main argument in Haddad's analysis is that the political elites are developing an interest in such associations because they detect that the associations have the potential to be autonomous, which they want to prevent. Through a process of interaction, the growth of civil society activism and, in particular, the activism linked to new economic actors legitimize the creation of a new order and set of social relationships, which are as authoritarian as the past ones but take different forms.

In the case of Iran, the progressive marginalization of the *bazaaris* (entrepreneurs in the traditional marketplaces) in favor of economic actors closely linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and sections of the clergy has modified the social dynamics underpinning the regime. Market ideas have now strongly entered the public debate, as the country attempts to mobilize its considerable resources to become a stronger international player and a more efficient provider of goods and services for its citizens. In Chapter 5, Peyman Jafari addresses some of the issues that Haddad's study focuses on but adopts a broader definition of civil society. This becomes a forum for ideas within which market ideology enters the

debate and negotiates with the regime the terms of new commercial arrangements. The case of the Chamber of Commerce is used to illustrate how fine the line is between activism and lobbying in the context of the dominance of the state in economic relations.

Economic globalization has brought with it both the technological revolution and by extension a much closer cultural contact with traditions from other societies, be they Western or from the Gulf. Together with the ever-present security issues in a hostile regional environment, both regimes in Syria and Iran have had to deal with the arrival of satellite TV and the Internet. The Web, in particular, has proven to be both a challenge and an opportunity for the Syrian and Iranian states, with attempts to both control it and increase its usage. Activists in the region have also taken to the Web with great enthusiasm, and the novelty of online activism deserves to be analyzed in some detail because it generates dynamics of interaction that affect state-society relations. Thus, that the governments attempt to control activism, while trying at the same time to stimulate it in order to better understand the demands society is making, is a conflicting strategy in a new terrain of cooperation and confrontation between the authorities and activated citizens: the Internet.²⁸ The analysis of activated citizens is crucial, as it is important to examine the response of the regime to the growth of citizens becoming more active and having the means to do so. Their activism surpasses traditional forms of organizations such as NGOs and, through the use of new technologies, can be a catalyst for and witness to social trends and struggles. There is a growing literature on the role of new media and social activism, and it is interesting to examine how these play out in Iran and Syria.

Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr and Francesco Cavatorta analyze in Chapter 6 the “cat and mouse game” that activists and authorities play when it comes to the Internet, but too strong an emphasis on this aspect would neglect what are probably more interesting findings. First, the Syrian civil experience with the Internet and social media demonstrates that the Internet remains an effective tool for expressing political, cultural, and social protest. A number of successful civil campaigns have occurred online—a testament to both the degree of activism present in society and the positive impact of new technologies. The importance of cyberspace certainly increased during the anti-regime rebellion that began in 2011. Second, the virtual life and real life of Syrians have had for a long time one characteristic in common: isolation. Despite the ongoing rebellion, many Syrians continue

to live under the law of silence. Off-line mobilization took place in the early stages of the antiregime protests, but the inherent weakness of this peaceful mobilization is illustrated by the very rapid descent into armed struggle. While the findings might be contradictory at a superficial level, a closer analysis reveals that weak ties and weak trust among protesters can engender considerable activism in relatively minor civil battles, while they prevent mass mobilization for more engaging and problematic issues. When such mass mobilization occurs, it is repressed and countered with mass mobilization in favor of the regime. In such a polarized environment, resorting to the gun rather than sustained peaceful activism became the strategy of both the regime and sectors of the population.

In Chapter 7, Ali Honari is also preoccupied with the nexus between online and off-line mobilization. He provides rich empirical material to illustrate the complex web of activism in Iran following the 2009 presidential elections and offers a new perspective on such events by arguing that off-line mobilization is crucial to trigger the online one. What Chapters 6 and 7 have in common is the unsurprising finding that regimes pay a lot of attention to what is happening online, at times interfering heavily. This is partly justified with the argument of protecting national security, and in confrontational states this might be both a compelling and plausible argument.

A final aspect of the implications for both society and political rule of the triple challenge of economic globalization, protection in the name of national security, and the necessity to modernize the state bureaucracy's operation is the appearance of new forms of practice of authoritarian rule. These include increased engagement with society in a spirit of "technocratization" of political issues²⁹ with the objective of depoliticizing them. Thus, authoritarian elites engage with society through technical issues and problems that can be solved by resorting to better management rather than challenging the politics behind decisionmaking. In this respect, the growth of government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) is quite telling. It follows that the type of civil activism that regimes wish to deal with shifts partly from purely political demands to focus on activating citizens around more technocratic issues. This does not necessarily mean that technocratic issues, such as the provision of health care to the rural population or Internet petitions to protest the absence of recycling facilities, are apolitical, but they are not overtly political either. This raises the issue of how to account for authoritarian resilience and

for authorities' tolerance and even encouragement of this type of activism. It follows that examining GONGOs is crucial, because they are becoming relevant social actors, replacing at times the traditional organizations that managed consensus in society, such as political parties or trade unions, and overshadowing traditional human-rights and prodemocracy associations. At the same time, such GONGOs can acquire a life of their own and offer opportunities for engagement to sectors of society that might not have had those opportunities before because GONGOs were set up precisely to deal with issues that had been ignored before and, therefore, involve social groups that had little voice in the past. By attracting the youth and technocrats outside the formality of state structures, GONGOs might not only defuse political opposition but also significantly change an individual's perception of state involvement in his or her life.

Chapters 8 and 9 by Salam Kawakibi and Paola Rivetti, respectively, deal with this phenomenon. Rivetti's argument is both compelling and controversial insofar as she argues that the rise of associations and groups loyal to the state, used to implement state policy delegated to them in a spirit of cooperation, is not a phenomenon unique to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency. While there is no doubt that the degree of authoritarianism under Ahmadinejad has intensified, Rivetti contends that the reformist regime of Mohammad Khatami also drew support from civil society organizations that effectively became GONGOs during his presidency. This, according to Rivetti, speaks to the problematic nature of examining civil society through normative lenses. Instead, civil activism in Iran should be understood in terms of power struggles within the regime that subsequently mobilized sectors of society to which it delegated the implementation of key state policies. The picture that Kawakibi paints in Syria is different. For one, the phenomenon of GONGOs is more recent and is aimed at weakening traditional channels of support for the regime such as the Baath Party. Second, GONGOs attract motivated and well-trained officials who take their roles seriously. This might have a profound impact on how they operate and the objectives they wish to achieve in the context of a national development strategy, although the uprising of 2011–2012 will invalidate the process for some time, even if the al-Assad regime survives.

In Chapter 10, Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid draws some general conclusions about civil society activism in the region. He returns to the definitional debate, arguing that, despite the potential validity of

a neutral characterization of civil society, in practice this is quite difficult to achieve, given the loaded meaning the term carries and the expectations surrounding it. From a more practical point of view, Kamel Al-Sayyid convincingly states that the ability of authoritarian regimes to manage civil society is a short-term strategy, because without popular legitimacy spaces of activism inevitably will be opened and potentially challenge the ruling elites.

This renders the present analysis of new forms of activism necessary in order to understand what kind of different realities exist on the ground in the two authoritarian states that, aside from their standing in the international community, have much in common with the rest of the countries in the region.

Notes

1. Anderson, "Searching Where the Light Shines"; and Valbjørn and Bank, "Examining the 'Post' in Post-Democratization."

2. Ottaway, "The Presidents Left." Also see Friedman, "Egypt: The Distance Between Enthusiasm and Reality" and "Re-Examining the Arab Spring"; Tignor, "Can a New Generation Bring About Regime Change?"; Agha and Malley, "The Arab Counterrevolution"; Carothers, "Think Again: Arab Democracy"; Owen, "Military Presidents in Arab States"; and Paciello, "Egypt: Changes and Challenges." In his recent *The Origins of Political Order*, Francis Fukuyama extensively goes into path dependency phenomena, which look to be highly relevant to understand the Arab Spring's perspectives. "Ultimately, societies are not trapped by their historical past . . . and yet societies are not simply free to remake themselves in any given generation" (p. 478).

3. El Alaoui, "Tunisie, les éclaireurs."

4. Heydemann and Leenders, "Authoritarian Learning"; and Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism."

5. Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm."

6. Doorenspleet, *Democratic Transitions*.

7. Anderson, "Where the Light Shines."

8. Brumberg, "The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy," p. 56.

9. Schlumberger, *Debating Arab Authoritarianism*; Schedler, "Authoritarianism's Last Line of Defense"; and Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.

10. Tétreault, "The Winter of the Arab Spring"; Lacroix, "Is Saudi Arabia Immune?"; and Gause, "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East."

11. Anderson, "Demystifying the Arab Spring."

12. Browsers, *Democracy and Civil Society*, p. 5.

13. Kubba, "The Awakening of Civil Society."

14. Wiktorowicz, "Civil Society as Social Control"; Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy*; Sater, *Civil Society and Political Change*; Liverani, *Civil Society in Algeria*; Cavatorta and Durac, *Civil Society and Democratisation*; and Gengler et al., "Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab Gulf."

15. Berman, "Islamism, Revolution and Civil Society"; Encarnacion, "Civil Society Reconsidered"; and Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy*.

16. Cook, "The Right Way."

17. Challand, "The Counter-power."

18. "Jours de Victoire"; also Chomiak and Entelis, "The Making of North Africa's Intifadas"; and Leenders, "Rethinking the Promotion of Democracy."

19. Also see Lust, "Why Now? Micro Transitions and the Arab Uprisings."

20. This is most clearly exemplified in the case of Saudi Arabia. See Gause, "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East."

21. Ben Nefissa, "L'Égypte saisie par la fièvre."

22. Cavatorta, "The Convergence of Governance."

23. Aita, "Abattre le pouvoir"; also Samad and Mohamadieh, "The Revolutions of the Arab Region"; Zurayk, "Feeding the Arab Uprisings"; Dahi, "Understanding the Political Economy of the Arab Revolts"; and Springborg, "The Political Economy of the Arab Spring." For a contrary view, arguing against the false dichotomy between politics and economics, see Kinnimont, "Bread and Dignity."

24. Haugbølle and Cavatorta, "Will the Real Tunisian Opposition Please Stand Up?"

25. Brown and Hamzawy, *Between Religion and Politics*; an insightful perspective is given by Hamid, "Arab Islamist Parties: Losing on Purpose?"

26. Heydemann, "Upgrading Authoritarianism."

27. In the context of the HIVOS Knowledge Programme, the book edited by Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders (*Middle East Authoritarianisms. Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, Stanford University Press, forthcoming) will deal more specifically with the issue of state-society relations.

28. On the use (and misuse) of the Internet, see Morozov's iconoclastic study, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World*.

29. Seeberg, "Union for the Mediterranean."