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THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

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This review discusses the policy paper *Beyond Orthodox Approaches: Assessing Opportunities for Democracy Support in the Middle East and North Africa,* a joint publication of Hivos and NIMD, published March 2010.

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The Uncertain Future of Democracy Promotion

Table of Contents

Democracy Promotion

Democracy promotion has had a tough decade, nowhere more so than in the Middle East. Ten years ago, the democratic optimism that followed the end of the Cold War was in relatively good health. Today, after a decade of authoritarian reversals, a sustained "backlash against democracy promotion,"[1] and authoritarian resurgence from Russia to Latin America, post-Cold War optimism has given way to a darker, more sober assessment of democratization's limits. The Middle East in particular, with not a single experience of transition from Morocco to Iran, has been the crucible of hard-won lessons about the durability of authoritarian regimes and their resilience even in the face of quite extraordinary pressures.

These troubling empirical trends are reflected in changing research programs. The conceptual foundations of what was once called "transitology" have been severely weakened by a decade or more of research challenging the notion of a world moving, however unevenly, toward a common democratic destination. To be sure, researchers continue to express a strong normative commitment to democracy. Their worldview, however, has been tempered by a growing appreciation for the adaptability of authoritarian regimes, their capacity to learn, and the emergence of new patterns of authoritarian collective action in an international system in which liberal democratic norms are increasingly contested by authoritarian actors. In response, political scientists now work to understand varieties of authoritarian governance,[2] how societies are responding to authoritarian upgrading,[3] and the globalization of authoritarian practices—how authoritarian regimes are reshaping the international system. These concerns now overshadow earlier interest in the dynamics of democratization and the conditions that might facilitate the breakdown of authoritarian regimes, transitions to democracy, and democratic consolidation. For one group of scholars who focus on the Middle East, the claim is that we have made a different kind of transition—to a post-democratization phase in the social sciences.[4]

How have practitioners and policy makers responded to the reassertion of authoritarianism? It would be reasonable to assume that changes on this scale would have brought comparable adjustments in practice of democracy promotion. Surely, the experiences of the past decade could not have escaped notice, or failed to provoke noticeable shifts in the work of those whose careers are devoted to ending authoritarianism?

Unfortunately, such an assumption would be misplaced. In the Middle East as elsewhere, professional promoters of democracy, whether governmental or nongovernmental, have been remarkably unresponsive to changes on the ground that have transformed the contexts in which they work. This is not because they have failed to acknowledge shifts in authoritarian practices over the past decade: democracy promoters are keenly aware of just how profoundly the ground has shifted

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[1] Carl Gershman and Alllen Michael, "The Assault on Democracy Assistance," *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 17, Number 2 (April 2006), pp. 36-51.
[2] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[3] http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2007/10arabworld.aspx
[4] Morten Valbjørn, "Examining the 'Post' in 'Post-Democratization'. The Future of Middle Eastern Political Rule through Lenses of the Past." Forthcoming.

beneath them. Nor are they unaware of how little success they can claim for the past ten years of work in the Middle East. Yet rather than assess the impact of democracy promotion in aggregate terms, or against substantive indicators of change, democracy promoters focus on project-by-project outcome assessments, often defined in terms of whether a specific project has met programmatic objectives and done so on time and within budget. These limited measures have their use. They provide for accountability to donors concerned about whether funds were used for their intended purpose. They avoid inflating expectations about what democracy promotion can realistically achieve. They are hardly adequate, however, in assessing what democracy promotion has or has not achieved.

When weighed against conditions on the ground, even the very modest gains of democracy promotion appear strikingly insubstantial. We do not have a single case in which democracy promotion has caused or contributed to the breakdown of authoritarianism in the Middle East, much less a transition to democracy, under the most auspicious international conditions for democratization in the past century. Is that too high a bar? Perhaps. But democracy promotion would fail even less demanding real world tests. Nowhere in the region has democracy promotion caused significant change in the distribution of political power. This includes not only the hard cases like Syria and Tunisia, but even the "easy" cases like Morocco and Jordan. Nowhere in the region has the global investment in democracy promotion produced meaningful change in the levels of internal democracy within civil society, the capacity of civil societies to serve as carriers of democratic norms, the efficacy of political oppositions, the effective functioning of parliaments, the development of rule of law, or reductions in corruption or increases in government transparency and the accountability of ruling elites. To review the ten-year rankings of the MENA region in indices of freedom or corruption is to be confronted with the visceral failures of democracy promotion to achieve its stated aims.

Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)
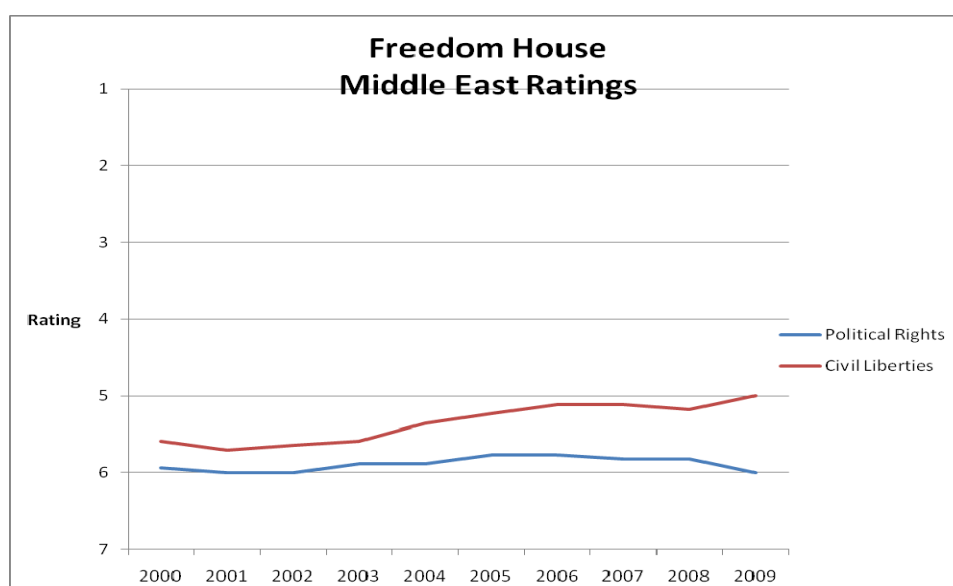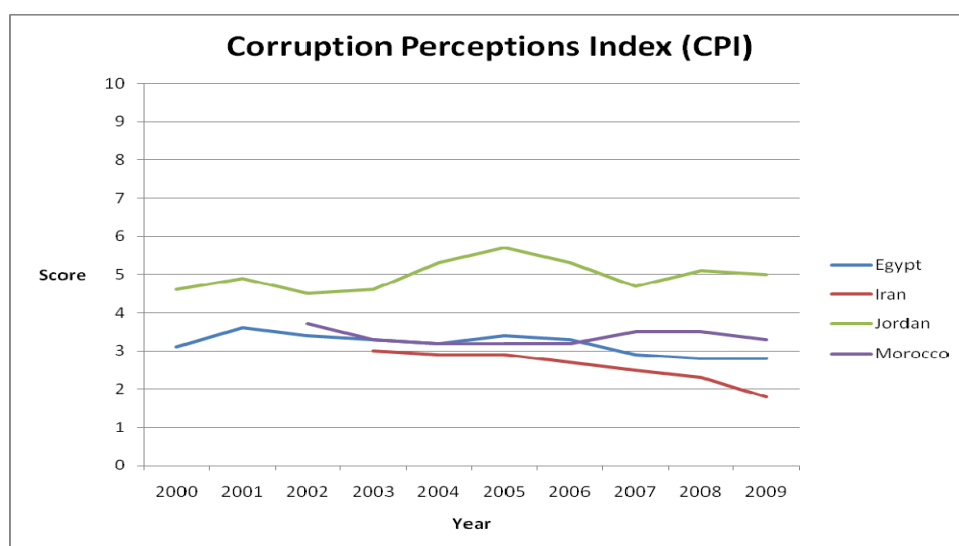
What makes these data even more alarming, limited as they are, is the challenge they pose to the underlying assumptions that drive Western democracy promotion programs in the Middle East. The minor increase in overall civil liberties noted in the 10-year Freedom House data correlates with zero improvement during this period in overall political liberties. If anything, the crude indicators shown here suggest that the two are moving in opposite directions: modest improvements in civil liberties go hand-in-hand with modest declines in political liberties, even while both remain at abysmally low levels. For a field that has based its work on the conviction that robust civic sectors will "transform non-democratic countries,"[5] these trends cannot be reassuring.

Despite this track record, however, the practice of democracy promotion has changed very little in the past decade. The field continues to rely on approaches that have failed to deliver meaningful political change in all but the highly restricted "metrics" that practitioners and donors use to define success. Resistance to change runs deep among practitioners and has many sources—institutional, bureaucratic, financial, political, normative. To be sure, it results in part from idealism among practitioners—a seemingly unshakable faith in civil society as a carrier of democracy, and in the potential to transform corrupt electoral institutions into real expressions of popular will. Yet it can also be traced to the sheer opportunism of democracy promoters who depend on grants and contracts for their livelihood; to bureaucratic inertia and the grip of the "democracy bureaucracy;"[6] and—if we are to be honest—to the ambivalence of Western governments more concerned about security, terrorism, Muslim immigration, and political Islam than they are about confronting authoritarian partners in the MENA region.

Whatever its sources, however, the result is that democracy promoters have remained faithful to what two prominent Dutch NGOs, the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy and Hivos, have recently characterized as an outdated orthodoxy, a conceptual framework and related practices

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[5] http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/democracy_and_governance/technical_areas/civil_society/index.html
[6] Thomas Melia, "The Democracy Bureaucracy." The National Interest. Summer 2006.

that must be modified and improved if democracy promotion is to be effective. In a major report issued earlier this year, *Beyond Orthodox Approaches: Assessing Opportunities for Democracy Support in the Middle East and North Africa* (*BOA*) the two organizations present their own critical diagnosis of the field, and offer a number of useful recommendations for how it might change. The report is an important step forward. If it is able to affect the practice of democracy promotion it will have made a significant contribution. Even this report, however, does not take fully into account the depth and scale of the obstacles that confront efforts to advance political reform in the Middle East. Gaps in *BOA*'s assessment of the conditions that democracy promoters must contend with suggest that this commendable effort to push beyond current orthodoxies may not be radical enough.

Beyond Orthodox Approaches

Anchored in three case studies, of Morocco, Egypt, and Iran, *BOA* is remarkably explicit about the track record of democracy promotion efforts to date. "As a result of US and European assistance efforts and demands," the report notes, "incumbent regimes have adopted a discourse of democracy. Yet tangible results in the field of democratisation and human rights have not been generated" (p.7). It concludes with a grim but accurate assessment: ". . . the impact of EU and US programmes and policies have thus far failed to make a positive contribution to democratic change" (p. 52).

BOA offers up an abundance of reasons for this abysmal track record. First, Western governments have been reluctant to make the hard trade offs in their relations with MENA governments that meaningful support for democracy promotion demands. Western policies reflect an unwillingness to hold MENA governments accountable for their political performance, and to sanction those which resist reform, or, more commonly, engage in sham reforms that simply reinforce authoritarian systems of control. In *BOA*, this is characterized as a lack of "coherent strategies" among governments in the West. This is certainly accurate, but the characterization risks transforming a profound lack of political will into a problem that can be solved by adopting what, in current Washington-speak, is called an "all of government" approach to the problem. As the report makes clear, however, coherence is not a panacea, if all it does is systematize unsuccessful policies.

Second, democracy promoters have operated largely with top down approaches. They have focused on political elites, giving preference to secular, Western-style opposition movements with very limited popular appeal over their more popular Islamist counterparts. Rather than encourage the development of inclusive political arenas in which all relevant actors can compete, including moderate Islamists, democracy promoters adopt selective, exclusionary approaches to reform. Whether intentionally or not, they work hand-in-hand with regimes in challenging the legitimacy and democratic integrity of all Islamist actors, even those which have established their commitment to play by the rules.

Third, democracy promotion programs have tended to address technical deficiencies, rather than take on the hard issues of political power and how it is organized. In both Egypt and Morocco, Western programs have sought to reform existing electoral institutions such as parliaments, knowing all the while that the dysfunctions they exhibit cannot be resolved through the equivalent of cosmetic surgery. In Morocco, democracy reform has also supported capacity building for political parties that only nominally deserve to be labeled oppositional. Similarly, capacity building for civil society organizations is highly unlikely to bring about political reforms if it fails to address structural obstacles to civic action, political mobilization, and real mass politics. As the graph shown above demonstrates, strengthening civil society and upgrading authoritarian systems of rule are not necessarily incompatible. Tocqueville, it turns out, is not the best guide to the promotion of democracy, at least in the Middle East.

The case studies provide useful overviews of democracy promotion experiences in Morocco, Egypt, and Iran. Each country summary also includes a brief overview of the political landscape and of key actors. The Moroccan case study will be useful even for regional experts. It shows a keen appreciation for the limits of political reform, even in a so-called "semi-authoritarian" state, and reflects the author's extensive background as a scholar of contemporary Moroccan politics. The Egypt case is also well informed, overall, though it has some minor errors (the history of Egypt's emergency laws), and some questionable judgments (describing Egypt's state institutions as weak). The Iran case, published anonymously for obvious reasons, will be particularly helpful as a précis of the period leading up to and following the elections of June 2009. Collectively, the country summaries illustrate effectively how struggles for political reform have unfolded in all three cases, and highlight the tactics that regimes have developed to blunt their impact.

Attentive to the differences among these cases—and to the variety of authoritarian forms evident in the MENA region—some clear patterns are nonetheless evident. Trends over the past decade have largely reinforced systems of authoritarian rule, with regimes showing clear evidence of adjusting and modifying their practices (i.e. engaging in "authoritarian upgrading") in response to pressures for democratic reforms. In all three, civil society remains weak, hemmed in, penetrated and tightly regulated by regimes. In Morocco and Egypt, in particular, both leading laboratories for democracy promotion, popular attitudes towards some features of democracy, including political parties, are becoming less favorable. In Morocco, a moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) has contested elections successfully, becoming a meaningful presence in parliament. Yet it operates under the constraints of a powerful and centralized monarchy that dominates the political arena and carefully prevents meaningful shifts in the distribution of political power. As a result, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (or, it might be added, its counterpart in Jordan), the PJD is a visible force in Moroccan politics, exerts a measure of influence, but lacks the power fundamentally to affect political outcomes. In all, the case studies underscore just how little impact more than a decade's commitment to democracy promotion by the West has had in the MENA region.

To address the deficiencies that afflict current approaches, *BOA* argues for some fundamental and far-reaching changes in how to undertake the hard work of democratic reform in the Middle East. Perhaps most important, *BOA* endorses what might be called "smart conditionality": making assistance programs conditional on regime progress toward carefully defined reform objectives. Conditionality, as the authors are clearly aware, remains a highly contentious issue. To date, no Western government has been willing to use conditionality as a means for advancing democratic change. There are few indications that this is likely to change. Nonetheless, *BOA* correctly identifies conditionality as, potentially, "a powerful instrument of political reform" (p. 7), and advocates its broader use. Not least, it argues, conditionality offers a response to regimes that have proven themselves highly adept at hijacking the rhetoric and forms of democracy to preserve their hold on power.

In addition, *BOA* recommends that top-down approaches be complemented by broader use of bottom-up and more inclusionary strategies of democratic reform, reaching out to grassroots organizations with broad popular appeal, including Islamist groups where appropriate. It also argues

that democracy promoters must come to terms with shifts in popular opinion, and find ways to address the decline in public support for political parties—the growing disaffection of citizens with elections that never bring about meaningful change—and develop strategies that help to "level the playing field" for political oppositions.

Other recommendations in the report are welcome, if commonsensical. They include the need to improve coordination among democracy promoters and avoid duplication of effort; to work more closely with local political reformers; and to focus not only on civil society but on the development of political society, as well. They also include greater attention to the content of political reforms, and what kind of outcomes would constitute success; the importance of modest expectations among democracy promoters; and an awareness of what it means to be outsiders, and Westerners, advocating for reform in the Middle East. In some instances, including in Iran, Western reformers may be most helpful by keeping a watchful distance, and recognizing that their support could well do more harm than good.

The cumulative effect of these recommendations belie their apparent modesty. Taken individually, they seem to tweak current orthodoxy rather than move beyond it. This conclusion would be misleading. If *BOA*'s recommendations were adopted, the practice of democracy promotion would look very different than it does today. While retaining much of current practice, it would be focused far more directly on questions of political power than technical matters, be more closely engaged with grassroots political mobilization and less with elites, and would direct significant resources toward moderate Islamist political actors rather than focusing exclusively on their secular, and less popular counterparts. Moreover, reform programs would be shaped by a clear sense of direction, informed by well articulated understandings of where reform is leading. They would benefit from the use of conditionalities that bring the weight of Western governments to bear on behalf of political reform. Inversely, democracy promoters would no longer rely so heavily on proxy strategies that peck around the edges of democratization. They would acknowledge, for example, that however desirable they might be in their own right, programs that support capacity building in civil society are not necessarily commensurate with programs that support opposition to autocratic rule. These are not trivial changes. In presenting them, *BOA* poses a serious challenge to practitioners: reform yourselves or continue to fail.

Whether even these changes would achieve success, however, is another matter. This is not to suggest that the Middle East is doomed to a future of authoritarianism without end. Nor is it to suggest that democracy promoters are incapable of overcoming current orthodoxies. After some twenty years of sustained, if uneven, attempts to advance projects of democratic reform, however, political contexts in the Middle East have been transformed. Today, they present a very different set of challenges than those that existed in the late 1980s or early 1990s. And in many respects, these new challenges are the direct result of the failures of democracy promotion. Whether democracy promotion can overcome them is an open question.

As *BOA* acknowledges, regimes have been remarkably effective in appropriating discourses of democracy, in claiming democracy's mantle, and in abusing corrupt electoral systems to claim democratic legitimacy. The report makes clear the consequences of the sustained abuse of

democracy by incumbent regimes. These include growing popular disenchantment with elections, declines in voter turnout, and the erosion of popular support for existing political parties.[7] Islamist parties that entered the political arena are reassessing the benefits of moderation, and, as a recent Brookings paper indicates,[8] have moved further toward re-radicalization than *BOA* concedes. The report is less explicit about rising popular disenchantment with democracy promotion within the Middle East, and the extent to which Western, and especially American, support for democratization is now dismissed as self-serving and hypocritical. *BOA* regards the failures of democracy promotion as the result of flawed approaches, and not, as many in the Middle East are inclined to believe, as a desired outcome that reflects the real intent of Western governments.

Despite these difficult facts, the report's assumption is that democracy remains the aspiration of Middle Easterners, and that these trends can be reversed if only the right kind of reforms are pursued, supported by the right kind of democracy promotion strategy. It assumes that citizens of the Middle East are willing and anxious to participate in electoral politics, given the opportunity. It assumes that Islamist political parties can function effectively as instruments of political mobilization, simply because they have done so in the past, even though voter turnout for Islamist parties has also fallen. It has faith not simply in the power of grassroots politics, but assumes that such politics are naturally democratic. On all of these counts, however, some skepticism is warranted.

There is a more troubling reality emerging in the Middle East with which democracy promotion must contend. Over the past twenty years, and increasingly over the past decade, democracy has been systematically devalued as a political good across the Middle East. Even as opinion polls reflect high levels of popular support for democracy—in the abstract—the everyday experiences of Middle Easterners provide few reasons to support projects of democratic reform, to participate in electoral politics, to have confidence in political institutions, or to place themselves at immediate risk in the pursuit of long-term changes that seem unlikely—based on past experience—to deliver tangible gains. Iran's Green Revolution reignited a sense of optimism about the possibilities for mass politics to bring about meaningful political reform. It also sparked productive reflection among Arabs about why such a movement was possible in Iran, but not in the Arab world. Yet this moment was short-lived. It ended by following a predictable script of regime repression and the brutal but successful suppression of mass protests. Parallels with an earlier moment of democratic failure in the Middle East, the post-independence ear of the 1950s and 1960s, are both plentiful and troubling. To explore them, however, is beyond the scope of this review.

The corrosive legacies of twenty years of failed democracy promotion, the extent to which democracy itself is now seen as little more than a cover for corrupt, authoritarian politics as usual, may not be possible to reverse through democracy promotion programs, no matter how far they move beyond orthodoxy. What is needed, instead, is a project to reclaim democracy as a political good, and to do so in terms that will make it both tangible and meaningful for citizens of the Middle East. To achieve this end means denying regimes the space to appropriate democratic rhetoric for authoritarian

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[7] Francesco Cavatorta, "The Convergence of Governance? Middle Eastern Authoritarianism in Comparative Perspective." Forthcoming.
[8] http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2010/0809_islamist_groups_hamid.aspx

purposes, while fostering space for alternative political futures to emerge not from regimes but from society, with all of the risks that this involves. It requires holding regimes fully accountable, in tangible ways, for their failure to adopt democratic reforms. It means containing and constraining the exercise of authoritarian power wherever possible—including, most immediately, in the form of emergency laws that represent a singularly egregious denial of democratic rights to citizens. It also means holding civil and political society accountable for their own lack of democratic norms and practices.

These aims would be difficult to achieve under the best of circumstances. These are not the best of circumstances. As the first decade of the 21st century comes to a close, democracy is not faring well, either in Europe or in the U.S. The troubling state of democratic politics in the West, as Larry Diamond's most recent book points out,[9] tarnishes experiences that might otherwise serve as models for the Middle East. For Arabs and Muslims in particular, growing intolerance toward Islam in Europe and the U.S. reinforces popular alienation from Western-style democracy.

In contrast, authoritarian regimes operate in a more permissive international environment than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Whether we are in the midst of an "authoritarian revival" can be debated.[10] There is little doubt, however, that democratic norms exert far less influence in the international system today than they did in the recent past. There is also little doubt that across the Middle East, authoritarian incumbents continue to hone their craft, observing and emulating the "best practices" of their nondemocratic counterparts.[11] None of this bodes well for the future of democracy promotion. These conditions amplify the challenges of moving the field beyond current orthodoxies. They call into question whether the revitalization of democracy promotion will have its intended effects, even if we assume that the inertia of current orthodoxy can be overcome. These are not justifications for business as usual in the struggle to secure democratic change in the Middle East. The reforms called for in *BOA* are necessary even if they are not sufficient to overcome the uncertainties that shadow the future of democracy promotion in the Middle East.

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[9] Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World* (St. Martin's Press, 2009).
[10] http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63721/daniel-deudney-and-g-john-ikenberry/the-myth-of-the-autocratic-revival
[11] Steven Heydemann, "Authoritarian Learning and Current Trends in Arab Governance." http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Files/rc/papers/2009/02_oil_telhami/02_oil_telhami.pdf, pp. 26-36.

About the Author

Steven Heydemann serves as vice president of the Grant and Fellowship Program of the US Institute of Peace, and as special adviser to the Institute's work on the Muslim world. His research and teaching interests focus on the Arab world, and include authoritarian governance, economic development, social policy, political and economic reform and civil society. From 2003 to 2007, Heydemann directed the Center for Democracy and Civil Society at Georgetown University. He has also served as director of the Social Science Research Council's Program on International Peace and Security and its Program on the Near and Middle East (1990-1997). From 1997 to 2001, he was an associate professor in the department of political science at Columbia University. Heydemann has served on the board of directors of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and is currently a member of MESA's Committee on Public Affairs. He is the author of *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946-1970* (Cornell University Press,1999) and co-editor of a forthcoming volume *"Comparing Authoritarianisms: Reconfiguring Power and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran".* This is produced within the framework of Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia.

About the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia

The paper is produced in the framework of the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia. This is a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on the roles and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. This programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Syria and Iran can contribute to various processes of democratization and how international actors can support this.

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