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NEWSLETTER

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

Content

Introduction

Understanding – Not Appropriating – Revolution

The uprisings in the Arab world had not even been in full swing before various political agendas scrambled to appropriate them. Accordingly, for many Western media the protestors at Tahrir square were English-speaking, internet-savvy, secular middle class youth. Like most commentaries, such representations appeared to claim that the protestors, really, were 'like us'. Critical Western thinkers hastened to add that true responsibility for Arab popular wrath should be squarely placed at the doorstep of neo-liberalism with its rampant socio-economic inequality, grabbers' mentality, and food prices gone out of control. Other observers saw evidence of the mass revolts being led by women struggling against gender inequality. For their part, the Syrian and Iranian regimes insisted that the uprisings elsewhere in the region emerged out of mass frustration with these countries' close ties to the West and their failure to stand up against Israeli aggression. Some Lebanese commentators associated with this country's 14 March Movement claimed that the Arab revolts were predicated on their own protests that pushed the Syrians out of Lebanon seven years ago. In contrast, Colonel Qadhafi saw mostly al-Qaeda sympathizers, drug addicts and thugs swelling the ranks of the rebellion against his rule; claims soon echoed by the Syrian regime similarly lambasting criminals when it started to confront its own uprisings. Bahraini and Saudi leaders conveniently suspected sectarian conspiracies, instigated by Iran. For their part, Israeli leaders mostly spotted bearded Islamists among the furious crowds; a dangerous development, so they warned, for Israel's security. Surely, these differing interpretations cannot be right all at once. In fact, serious doubts should be raised against each of them. By transcending time-honored ideologies the 'Arab street' –for long castigated for being passive or even lethargic—proved its anger to be truly revolutionary. In contrast, and to date, much of the rest of the world appears to be caught up in clichés and analyses colored by blatant attempts to only see self-serving and worn-out world perspectives confirmed. It is against this background that sobering and thorough academic research on the origins and nature of the Arab uprisings gains urgent value. After all, even the most outlandish versions of events –when left unchallenged—are bound to affect the Arab uprisings' further directions; towards or away from conflict resolution, genuine democracy, and social empowerment. A first important step to embark on this research agenda is to start listening to those who broke the wall of fear and made the uprisings possible.

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REGIONAL 'CONTAGION' IN THE MIDDLE EAST
For 'good' or 'worse'?

Although predicted by few, the current upheavals in several Arab countries reinvigorate commonplace perceptions of the countries and peoples in the Arab world and the Middle East at large as constituting a densely intertwined, interconnected and bounded region. When Tunisian protestors expelled their dictator, parallels were quickly drawn with Mubarak's rule in Egypt, prompting mass mobilization there and causing a similar exit of this country's long-standing ruler. In their wake, anti-regime protestors in other Middle Eastern countries equally felt a rare momentum for change. With varying results, they scrambled to get rid of their own rulers' deeply engrained authoritarian tendencies or, when the latter failed at all to listen, to push for the overthrow of entire regimes. By taking inspiration from fellow activists in neighbouring countries and by observing resemblances in authoritarian governance, barriers of fear have been tumbling down region-wide. Such remarkable moments of regional 'contagion' match the frequently observed inter-Arab interconnectedness at both state and society levels. Paul Noble (1991) described the region historically as "a vast sound chamber in which currents of thought, as well as information, circulated widely and enjoyed considerable resonance across state frontiers". Yet it is much less clear under what conditions this regional sound chamber resonates loud calls for democratic change, as is the case today, or, in contrast, when it plays the tunes of authoritarianism. As Myron Weiner (1996) put it more generally, regional contagion often results in "bad neighbourhoods" marked by conflict, instability and authoritarianism. But "neighbourhood effects" equally have been argued to serve as a force for 'good' – a recurring theme in the literature on the 'third wave' of democratization.

For long the Arab region, and with the increasingly prominent role of especially Iran, the Middle East, has been described as highly interconnected and intertwined as cross-border flows of ideas, networks and conflict fused the boundaries between intrastate politics and conflicts to the extent of blurring them into one larger imbroglio. Arguably, both the extent and the nature of state border permeability and the region's penchant for transnationalism played a contributive role in the building, reinforcement and consolidation of what Nazih Ayubi (1996) called the region's "fierce" and deeply authoritarian states. State-endorsed Arab nationalism helped facilitating authoritarian governance as regimes used it to garner popular support and discredit domestic rivals, to justify administrative reshuffles and purges, to enlist crucial support of prospective Arab 'unity' partners, to extract rents from oil-producing states, and to justify emergency legislations. (Leenders 2010) In turn, border permeability and local reverberations of the region's perpetual crises including the Arab-Israeli conflict gave impetus to the building, maintenance and enhancement of security apparatuses and national armies. Regional intricateness of politics and conflict also helped the discursive framing of state violence and repression as sometimes entire communities were branded as foreign agents due to real or perceived cross-border linkages. In addition, increasingly resilient regimes replicated repressive strategies tested by their neighbours in what Heydemann (2007) called processes of "authoritarian learning". Arab secret police officials exchanged notes at regional workshops as recently as October and December 2010, respectively in Cairo and Tunis. They finessed their grim teamwork by establishing institutions such as the 'Arab University for Security Sciences' in Dubai. Jointly, such manifestations of transnational or cross-regional interconnectedness produced important resources, strategies and rationales contributing to authoritarian state building for decades.

By the early 1990s, both physical and discursive cross-regional or transnational linkages had begun to show changes in that they appeared to acquire 'privatized' features and to slowly escape full control by authoritarian state elites. Of course, grassroots Islamist networks, of various tendencies, had pioneered in this respect as both their organizations and ideas reverberated throughout the region. Yet the supposed Islamist threat bore the full brunt of state repression, made

possible by authoritarian regimes' successful efforts to declare themselves the last line of defense against religious extremism and chaos. In response to the relative retrenchment of the state associated with selective economic reforms, private networks also began to proliferate in business circles, as the super-rich extended their reach regionally by building shopping malls, holiday resorts and buying up real estate in neighbouring countries. Yet these networks for now continued to depend on and reinforce authoritarian regimes molding private markets into restricted arenas of business privileges. Although in this context of privatizing cross-regional linkages various measures of "authoritarian upgrading" (Heydemann 2007) seemed to keep the potential of anti-regime challenges in check, some scholars expressed doubts that this could be sustained indefinitely. For example, Bassel Salloukh and Rex Brynen (2004: 5-6) suggested that authoritarian states in the region were under threat because "the fodder for [the region's] permeability is … changing" and that "in contrast… to the regionalized permeability from above of past decades, the new permeability is from below".

Indeed, important changes in the qualities and platforms of Arab nationalism proved much harder to contain, repress or co-opt. Since authoritarian state ideologies of pan-Arabism had been abandoned –as their appeal had worn out, because consolidated state elites no longer needed them, or because real foreign policies blatantly contradicted them —Arab nationalism had been declared dead despite evidence that throughout the late 1970s and 1980s a strong sense of Arab solidarity and regionally framed perspectives continued to grasp the imagination of large Arab audiences. Since the 1990s, Arab nationalism experienced a revival as it found an effective platform in the rising importance of Arab new media. This prompted several scholars (e.g. Valbjorn 2009) to observe the rise of a "new Arabism" and "a new Arab public sphere", now largely carried by non-state actors and shared by large audiences. In addition to selectively appropriating some traits of the otherwise obsolete Arab nationalism once endorsed by states, the new Arabist sound chamber provided constant reporting and debates on human rights violations, corruption, socio-economic inequality and other authoritarian excesses. No less important, however, was the growing mismatch between regimes' foreign policies –their alignment with the increasingly interventionist U.S. and their silence on Israel's repression of the Palestinians —and Arab public opinion. Accordingly, domestic audiences increasingly appeared to be turning their reinvigorated Arab 'imagined community' against their own authoritarian state elites. National polls ranking the Arab region's most popular leaders included none of the Arab states' own authoritarian leaders but instead shortlisted Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Hamas leader Khalid Mish'al and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

After mounting frustrations with authoritarian rule fostered at both intellectual and popular levels a regionally shared and expressed sense of *'ajz* –an Arabic term denoting impotence, helplessness and incapacitation (Kassab 2010)-- it were extremely localized developments in the Tunisian small town of Sidi Bouzid that triggered accruing masses throughout the region to reclaim their *karama*, or dignity. Arguably, this rapid conversion of popular impotence into demanding repossession speedily travelled throughout much of the region as it rode the waves of the new Arabism. Even if the analogies drawn by protestors with often-distinctive conditions in neighbouring countries derived more of their power from imagination than from factual validity, walls of fear nonetheless came tumbling down thanks largely to this transnational, regional space.

American interventionism and Israel's obstinate refusal of peace, and indeed other key themes of regional resentment, do not prominently feature in the current rallying cries against Middle Eastern authoritarianism. Indeed, some prominent exponents of the new Arabism, such as the Arab authors of the celebrated UNDP Arab Development reports and the Arab Reform Initiative, although sharing concerns over U.S. and Israeli heavy-handed policies in the region, had already refused to accept regimes' logic to let these issues silence their calls for democratic governance. As such these regional issues cannot be viewed as having directly caused or propelled the Arab uprisings. Yet authoritarian regimes' abandonment of these widely shared causes --while indeed their lame or pro-U.S. foreign policies came to be perceived as aggravating them—did cause authoritarian leaders to lose their virtual domination of the region's transnational public space. The ensuing vacuum provided opportunities seized by the new Arabism. Concurrently, authoritarian justifications and their appeal looked increasingly impotent and in sharp

contradiction with the foundational myths of many Arab authoritarian regimes that had been intrinsically connected to anti-imperialism and Palestinian solidarity.

Grasping the current fate of two steadfastly authoritarian regimes in the region, those of Syria and Iran, may be instrumental in understanding how dominating the Arab and by extension the Middle Eastern sound chamber is crucial for the propensity of mass uprisings to effectively challenge or even overthrow authoritarian regimes throughout this region. In contrast to Egypt, both regimes aggressively retained their references and linkages to the region's transnational flashpoints and their protagonists –including Palestine and Hizbullah and, in Iran's case, its resistance to real or perceived U.S. hostility. Inadvertently or by design, these regimes made it this way much more difficult for their opponents to seize on the region's newly emerging public space to make their case for domestic political reform or change. Referring to Syria's aggressive foreign policies on pan-Arab issues, one Syrian activist lamented to the author a few years ago: "It seems almost impossible to effectively pressure this regime to open up politically as we are constantly overtaken on the left." Hence, despite sharing similarities with the rest of the region in terms of authoritarian excess and ensuing popular frustrations, both the Syrian and Iranian regime seem able to wither the storm of change not in the least because both managed to cling onto their prominent share of the region's transnational public space. Given the region's current turbulence, predictions are especially risky. But as the Middle East's perpetual regional flashpoints are bound to regain attention, Syrian and Iranian authoritarianism is likely to once again look as if of secondary importance or, worse, 'normal' and, to some, acceptable in comparison.

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THE ARAB UPRISING AND IRAN: Claiming Ownership

Both the Iranian regime as well as the opposition were quick to claim credit for the uprisings sweeping through the Arab Middle East.
It was the Supreme Leader, Ali Hoseyni Khamene'i, who, while discussing the changes taking place in the region, said the following in response to the protests: "The recent events in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Bahrain are very important. A fundamental change is taking place in this Arab and Islamic region and it is the sign of the awakening of the Islamic community of believers." (Iran News Round Up March 22 via Irantracker.org). Other Iranian hardliners followed suit. Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, for example, claimed that: "31 years after the victory of the Islamic republic, we are faced with the obvious fact that these movements [the Arab protests] are the aftershocks of the Islamic Revolution." (via Payvand.com, January 29th).

In other words, Iranian officialdom struggles to spin the protests as "a belated Arab attempt to emulate the Islamic revolution and join Tehran in its battle against America and Israel" (Sadjadpour 2011). Iranian opposition leaders, on the other hand, praised the uprisings and called for a peaceful rally in support of the Tunisian and Egyptian protests. In a letter to Iran's interior ministry, opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi wrote: "In order to show solidarity with the popular movements in the region and specifically the freedom-seeking movement by the Tunisian and Egyptian people against their autocratic governments, we hereby request a permit to call for a rally" (BBC News February 14th).

As expected, the Iranian authorities refused to issue such a permit and, instead, both men were put under house arrest while their key advisers were detained. Despite lacking a permit and the large number of police stationed throughout Tehran, opposition members defied the ban and took to the streets between February 14th and February 20th. In the eyes of Iran´s foreign minister Ali Akbar Salehi, these protests in Iran were manipulated and bore no semblance to those in the Arab world.

Of course, attempts to take ownership of the Arab movements that are fighting for change must be seen in the light of opportunistic attitudes within the daily internal politics of Iran. While factional infighting intensified after the 2009 elections, the recent clash between Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad over the chairmanship of the Assembly of Experts being only one example, both the hardliners and the pro-reformists are eager to seize any chance that strengthens their agenda. Where the hardliners try to fit the Arab uprisings – considering their reaction to calls for protests in Iran and them obviously being nervous about the impact of these events – within their narrative of the Islamic revolution and awakening, the reformists aim at exactly the opposite and mould the seemingly successful protest of their Arab neighbors into something that overlaps their own search for freedom.

Based on the motives of the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the Arab protests seem to fit the reformists agenda better than the regime's narrative. Yet it would be appropriate for both camps to claim credit for the uprisings. For a long time Iranian democracy promoters believed that they were (far) ahead of their Arab neighbors when it comes to gnawing at the regime's power. The protests following the 2009 presidential elections in Iran gave ample evidence to support such a notion. In the words of Sadjadpour, the sudden Arab uprisings – largely secular of nature – bruised the Iranian reformists' ego. Why, then, did Tunisians and Egyptians manage to accomplish the fall of their regimes in a few weeks while Iranians failed to do so in the past several years? At the same time, the Iranian regime's line of argumentation shows major flaws as well. While it declared both the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes bankrupt as a consequence of economic stagnation, repression, and corruption – which in fact were major causes of the turmoil in the Arab countries – Iran scores worse than both Tunisia and Egypt in all three categories according to different published indexes

(Sadjadpour 2011). Besides, Islamic motives which, according to the regime, feed the Arab protests are in fact conspicuous by their absence: Islamist groups, although supporting reforms in those countries, did not claim a major role during the intense moments at Tunis and *Tahrir* square.

Although the Arab fight for freedom may to some extent overlap with the Iranian reformists' vision, one should be careful to declare both struggles as one and the same. Specific contextual circumstances influence reform processes on the ground, which makes it impossible – and unwise – to assume that Iran will follow the same path as Tunisia or Egypt. One main difference between Iran and Egypt, for example, is that an organized alliance between Iranian workers and students has still not materialized as it has [in Egypt] (Harris 2011). In that light, it is far more important – although not an easy task – to analyze *to what extent* the cases are (in)comparable and what Iranian reformists could learn from their Arab counterparts and vice versa. Regarding the claims of ownership for the Arab revolts, however, credit should exclusively be given to whom credit is due: those Arabs who risked their lives for political reforms and the uncertain future that awaits them.

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ON THE BREAKDOWN OF FUTURE ARAB DEMOCRACIES: Tunisian Lessons for Syria

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What if the Syrian uprising will be successful? What if Syrians overcome their fear and discover that a Syrian democracy is truly possible in a multi-sectarian country? Even if there would be a positive outcome (à la Tunisia), a few cautionary remarks are in order. The transition and consolidation phases of any nascent Arab democracy are likely to be replete with potential pitfalls. Tunisia, where the current Arab revolutionary wave started, provides some hints to what these dangers may be.

In the current wave of Arab uprisings and revolutions, Syria has not remained unaffected. Let us suppose that the Syrian uprising, like its Tunisian counterpart, will also be successful in overthrowing the regime. Despite the apparent differences between Tunisia and Syria (i.e. Tunisia is almost entirely Sunni and Syria is composed of multiple sects) some similar pitfalls may emerge when it comes to consolidating a democratic state. Countries that are immersed in the social inheritance of authoritarianism --where the pillars of (executive, legal and political) power have been fused for more than four decades-- will likely face similar challenges in erecting new structures for governing their affaires. What follows is an arguably bleak scenario, both for a Tunisian or Syrian democratic future. That said, I believe there also are reasons to be optimistic.

Generalized to the extreme, the histories of Tunisia and Syria share a similar trajectory. In both cases, an authoritarian leader emerged from post-colonial struggles – in Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba came to power immediately following independence; in Syria, Hafez al-Assad became ruler after a period of internal struggle – to lead the country in a grand socialist development scheme throughout the 1960s and 1970s. These schemes were aimed not only at developing the economy, but also at fundamentally modernizing society. When the failure of socialist policies became apparent, economic liberalization policies

were initiated: the so-called *infitah* policies. Throughout this period, the separation of political, executive and legal power was never institutionalized in practice, in either Syria or Tunisia.

This background resulted in a particular constellation of political sphere, state and society in both countries. Firstly, the socialist legacy resulted in a state that controlled many if not most economic assets. These assets were privatized as a result of the *infitah* policies. Yet it became apparent that economic actors with links to political elites had a comparative advantage over their independent counter parts in reaping the fruits of these liberalization policies. Consequently, a political-economic elite emerged, built around clan and party ties, which was to become central to governing these countries throughout the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century. In Syria, the military also emerged as an economic actor. Rami Makhluf, a cousin of Assad, became one of the key economic players. In Tunisia, the family of the First Lady Leila Trabelsi became infamous for their corruption.

Secondly, informal personal relations were the principal means through which this economic-political synergy was sustained. Political (and eventually economic) power was located in the informal sphere, while key political decisions were taken behind closed doors. Patronage – personal relations with powerful people – was the key to success in these countries. In Syria, this is called *wasta*; in Tunisia they call it *kataf*; in both cases it denotes the hidden network behind power throughout the Arab world.

Thirdly, the constellations mentioned above also influenced how ordinary Tunisians and Syrians interacted with the state. If one needed a job or a permit, or if one needed to deal with any state bureaucracy, one had to make use of personal contacts; otherwise it would take an inordinate amount of time to get anything done. Though corrupt and non-accountable, these state-society relations constituted the practical reality of daily life for both Tunisians and Syrians for decades.

And then a revolution unravels. The old ruling party is brought down by the people. Let us suppose that democratic institutions subsequently will be built successfully: the president is gone, the corrupt governor has fled and so have the nephews, cousins and all those corrupt elites with links to the ruling party. In their stead, free and fair elections are held and a free press and an open political sphere thrive. To the surprise of many, civil war does not break out and these regimes, at least initially, seem to be stable. What then?

I would argue that in cases where the Parliament, elections and the media are successfully reformed and prove stable, there still is a real chance that the executive branches of the state will break down under the strains of personalized social demands. This occurs primarily because the social legacy of decades of authoritarian rule remains. As political and state structures were fused before the revolution – and state-society relations rested on personal relations – Tunisians and Syrians never experienced a true separation of powers and the decision-making and implementation processes that come with it. People have never lived in a country where personal interests were collectively represented through political parties and then institutionalized through state organizations. Consequently, there is no natural trust in these institutions. At the same time, however, state institutions persist: schools need to be opened, people need to get married and permits have to be issued. What the experience of Tunisia shows us is that, revolution or not, life goes on. But it also leaves citizens with a problem: where does one turn when the state bureaucracy does not do what you want it to do? Without trust in political institutions, what remains is interest representation on individual levels.

Take an example of someone who cannot get a job because he was imprisoned by the former dictator and his educational achievements are not recognized. In a ‘correct’ democratic state, the options are to either pursue a legal path (go to court and demand recognition) or to follow a political path and, as part of a group, try to get this issue on the political agenda. Without trust in either route, the alternative is to approach the relevant executive organizations directly. This could mean writing to the Minister, or approaching a friend who, for example, holds a position of influence at the Ministry of education. As Ministers are unlikely to respond to individual demands, the latter option is the most attractive.

With the ruling party gone, it is likely that such informal interactions with state officials will run along clan or (extended) family lines. The 'friend' at the ministry will probably belong to the same, (extended) family, clan or social group. These informal social structures will emerge as the basis for informal interest representation, especially now that the overarching structure of a ruling party and the corrupt elite has been brought down. It is clear that despite the few weeks of nationalist popular mobilization and apparent unity, religious and sectarian differences will persist and flourish in both Syria and Tunisia.

In short, there is a real danger that these social structures will be translated into state organizations, resulting in social cleavages encroaching on the state's functioning. In practice this would mean that state officials might be divided along principal social cleavages (i.e. some are 'pro-Islamist' and some are 'pro-secular'). Ultimately, this may mean that the functioning of the bureaucracy becomes constrained by the interests of social groups, resulting in a state of affairs wherein policies are implemented ineffectively.[1]

The extent to which this 'state weakening' will become a serious problem depends on the oversight that political and legal institutions exercise on the executive branches. However, without trust in the overall political system, it is likely that politics will be marked by deadlock – one group does not want to give in to the other. With the overarching ruling party gone, a political sphere takes shape with parties representing various social groups in society. In Tunisia, these lines of division mainly follow the antagonisms between Islamists versus secularists; in Syria these might run along sectarian lines or follow more general religious-non-religious lines, or both. Consequently, there is a real possibility that society will encroach on and weaken the functioning of executive state branches in the context of restructuring politics.
This is a bleak scenario. But, of course, it is just that: a scenario. The future can (and probably will) be different than what I describe here. That said, this scenario provides some important lessons for Tunisians, Syrians and foreigners alike: citizens must learn to be governed democratically and what internalize what the separation of powers will mean for them. The good news is that many Tunisian already appear to be aware of this. They say that the revolution is as much about individual Tunisians changing their behaviour as it is about changing elite politics. Yet the fact remains that Tunisians never actually lived under a democratic regime. Despite their (understandable) antipathy to foreign intervention, there could well be an important role to play here by foreign actors; both at the level of building sound state bureaucracies and public awareness. An exchange of experiences would be a first step to learning what it is like to interact with and work for a state in a democratic political regime.

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For his Phd he is studying mobilization strategies of Islamic social movements in Tunisia.

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THE TIME FOR SILENCE IS OVER

Syria will not remain a State of Silence

A spirit is hovering over Syria. This spirit is freedom and it is spreading throughout the homeland. The winds of change that have been blowing from one end of the Arab world to the other over the past three months will ultimately reach the gates of the huge Syrian prison. We do not live on an island, detached from world events, and history will not stop at the doorstep of our country and its enraged people. The barrier of fear that has held back Arab peoples for decades has fallen, bringing to an end the long and exhausting half century of military coups and military rule, and of the denial of basic freedoms, and of state paternalism, once in the name of progress and socialism, another time in the name of religion, and another in the name of stability and the battle against Islamic extremism.

The change will come, have no doubt about it; Syria will not be the extraordinary case. Attempts are being made to frighten us of incipient anarchy and civil war, of Islamists taking control of the state. We are told that the people are not ready for democracy. All these claims will be futile once the moment of truth arrives, and the people regain the initiative. The Syrian people have matured, and the country's rulers must realize this before it is too late. Now, cosmetic measures to improve the economy and the standard of living are not enough. Significant and unambiguous steps to transfer Syria from a tyrannical regime to a democracy are required.

We have stated, again and again, that the Syrian government can (assuming it is aware of the need and wishes to act accordingly) promote the change, and prepare for it, provided that it does the following: release the political detainees, cancel emergency rule, allow political parties of various stripes to operate, institute separation of powers of the branches of government, end the single-party mentality, ensure equality, eliminate exclusion and discrimination, and cease repression, silencing of criticism, and voicing hollow support [to reform]. The fear has switched positions. Now it is the government, and not the people, that lives in fear. We remind those who warn about anarchy and disturbances, and frighten us that the state will collapse, and the national fabric will disintegrate, and therefore seek to maintain the sham totalitarian stability at all costs, that the Syrian people have managed, since the dawn of modern Syrian history, to overcome (by brotherhood and common struggle) ideological and religious division and the "mini-states" that the French occupier forced on it, and ultimately, by the blood of its finest sons, achieved total independence. With wisdom and understanding, the Syrian people succeeded in removing the danger of civil war that almost resulted from the violent actions of the ruling bodies and the rashness of some Islamic groups.

The rulers spoke in the name of socialism and brought hunger and poverty. They promised us the liberation of Palestine, and brought humiliation and shame. They spoke in exalted terms of freedom and justice, but they built a prison and detention camps for us. Today, with the repression, the poverty, the corruption, and the tyranny felt by all levels of society and by all groups, the Syrian people can, and intends, to regain its liberty, to safeguard its national unity, and to protect its Syrian state.

Silence is the means that millions of Syrians use to cope with the brutality and persevere in the face of the tyrannical aggression in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Lattakia, and many other places in the country. But the silence will be broken, and by means of peaceful protest, the people will confront the tyranny. The masses of people will place their trust in the solidarity of the Syrian people; the army and the people will stand shoulder to shoulder. Whoever thinks the people

will turn to violence, or that the army will turn its rifles against fellow Syrians errs. "The Hama equation" [referring to the massacre that took place during the violent quelling, in the Syrian city Hama, of an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982, in which up to 20,000 people were reportedly killed by military forces] is no longer feasible. The people and the army will not allow it. Let everyone who seeks to pit the people against the army, and vice versa, know that the two are inseparable.

I have no solutions to remedy the present situation, nor am I able to read the future. But it seems clear that young people will bring about the change, and not only because they constitute the majority of Syrian society. They also have greater awareness of the needs of the time, more so than the opposition parties and the politicians, many of whom remain confined to traditional discourse and outdated practices, and fear the dictates of the security censor.
It is also clear to me that Syria will not continue to be a state in which the people remain silent. Fear will no longer be the controlling factor in what takes place within the country. The homeland will cease being one big prison.
Certainly, "it is impossible to humiliate the Syrian people," as the demonstrators cried out in the center of Damascus a few days ago. The Syrian people aspire to living in dignity, and it is this aspiration that will bring about the dawn of freedom and the rebirth of Syria.

Without a doubt, "God protects Syria" thanks to the Syrian people, the Syrian army, and the Syrian state. As for the tyranny, it will be eliminated, sooner or later.

Riad al-Turk is a member of the leadership of Syria's Democratic People's Party and of the Damascus Declaration. His open letter (in Arabic) appeared in Akhbar al-Sharq, 12 March 2011.

THE END OF ARAB EXEPTIONALISM

There is no doubt that the Tunisian uprising and the departure of President Ben Ali from power after weeks of massive demonstrations against the regime have come as a surprise to most scholars. The almost inevitable contagion to other countries, including Egypt, has compounded the scale of the challenge for academics who focused, for a number of years, on attempting to explain the resilience of regimes that suddenly do not look so resilient at all. Scholars, policy-makers and public opinion are currently divided on how to interpret events in the Arab world, with some enthusing about the democratic revolutions taking place and other cautioning that for the moment, as US analyst Marina Ottaway (2011) recently argued, 'the presidents have left, the regimes are still in place' if by regime we mean 'the submerged icebergs of personal connections, institutions, and common interests of which the presidents and their immediate entourage were the visible tips.' These opposing views simply illustrate the uncertainty of the current situation, as no one can safely predict whether democratic transformations will occur or a different form of authoritarianism will again prevail.

Despite this uncertainty, there are a number of points emerging from the current situation that speak to the broad academic literature on democratisation. The first point of note is that 'Arabs can and do rebel' in the name of political change and freedom. A number of grand theories have for a long time assumed that Arab political authoritarianism is part and parcel of the region's political and social 'culture'. The millions of people on the streets of Tunisia and Egypt might not have a clear idea of what kind of democracy they want, but they certainly desire the accountability of rulers. This finally puts to rest any notion of an Arab exceptional infatuation with authoritarian politics and wilful political submission to unaccountable structures of power.

The second point to emerge is the depth of the crisis of legitimacy of current rulers throughout the region. The crisis definitely has an economic dimension and in this sense it proves Larby Sadiki's argument (1997), made in the mid-1990s, right. As Sadiki explained, a condition *sine qua non* for political transformations in the Arab world is the inability of rulers to provide economic goods to the majority of the population. The global recession has certainly had a negative impact on economies that were already largely inefficient, corrupt and rigged in favour of small constituencies linked to the political elites. The economy, however, is not the only convincing explanatory variable, as previous periods of economic crisis

did not lead to 'revolutionary' moments anywhere in the region, with the exception of Algeria in 1988. The crucial factor today is the generational gap that exists between rulers and ruled with the former unable to be credible and the latter, numerically in the majority, unwilling to believe empty slogans. In this sense demographics, as predicted a number of years ago by the French scholar Emmanuel Todd (2008), have proven to be an extremely important factor. The crisis is therefore systemic.

The third aspect is the absence of a coordinated opposition in initiating the demonstrations and uprisings and this is a novelty in processes of regime change. While the ruling elites have split along the familiar lines of soft-liners and hard-liners, it is very difficult to see the uprisings as the product of a concerted effort on the part of a traditional opposition. The same generational differences that exist between rulers and ruled affect the traditional organised opposition and it is also for this reason that the main agents of this revolutionary moment in the Middle East and North Africa are not to be found in the usual suspects within the parties of the opposition or in civil society, including Islamist movements. In fact organised political and social movements in the opposition seem to lag behind groups that are very loosely, if at all, organised. Opposition politicians and leading civil society actors are also old and tired-looking with antiquated slogans and beliefs, which have little resonance with the youth that is driving change beyond the personal rivalries and diatribes of many discredited 'opposition' figures. This is both new and significant in so far as traditional civil society actors have had their role confiscated by a loosely organised youth that has been able to unite the nation beyond class and religion in the struggle for change. As Challand (2011) 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 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.'

Very few can realistically predict the outcome of the events of the past three months across the region. The demands for freedom and accountability might find it difficult to be channelled successfully without the creation or revival of organisational and hierarchical structures that would function as gatherers of broad consensus, namely strong political parties or 'fronts.' Consequently, authoritarian rule can still be revived and regimes can still then demonstrate their authoritarian resilience. Yet it seems quite clear now that rulers' accountability and freedom are values that ordinary Arabs share with the rest of the world and this is the lesson that policy-makers in the West should finally learn.

Benoit Challand, 'The Counter-Power of Civil Society in the Middle East', March 2, 2011. Available at: http://www.deliberatelyconsidered.com/2011/03/the-counter-power-of-civil-society-in-the-middle-east-2/ Accessed on March 3, 2011.
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Larbi Sadiki, 'Towards Arab liberal democracy: from democracy of the bread to democracy of the vote,' *Third World Quarterly*, 18(1997), pp. 127-148.
Emmanuel Todd, *Après la Démocratie*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2008.

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Parts of this short piece appeared in an open editorial by the same author for The Irish Times on February 26, 2011.

THE ALGERIAN TIME MACHINE

In Algeria the 'Arab 1989' started with the uprisings in October 1988. Within a few months a new constitution was promulgated, allowing for free local and national elections. But three years later it was all over. The oppositional Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won the elections, triggering a military coup followed by an internal war between the army and Islamist armed groups. These conflicts claimed at least 150,000 lives. Both the sudden rise of Algerian democracy and its equally rapid demise may tell us something about the present.

Resource curse

Algeria's first wave of democratisation was initiated by president Chadli Bendjedid, who had sensed that the regime was approaching a dead end. And

rightly so. Low prices for oil and natural gas, of which Algeria still is a major exporter, posed a threat to a regime that relies on these revenues to 'buy' consent of the population. But Algeria is no Qatar or Kuwait, and aspirations and expectations of many have often exceeded the state's capacity to deliver jobs, housing and subsidised consumer goods. Like the October 1988 uprising, the recent unrest was triggered by food price rises.

Upgrading military rule

Yet at present, increased oil revenues allow the leadership to keep aboard important segments of society. Added to this is the increased external support since the civil war and '9/11'. Since 1999, after the defeat or reintegration of the Islamist armed groups, Algeria under the presidency of Abdelaziz Bouteflika ostensibly is a stable country. With the durability of Arab regimes widely questioned nowadays, Algeria seems an exemplary case of 'upgrading authoritarianism'. The enduring role of the military was not affected by differences of opinion on political liberalisation in 1989 or Bouteflika's reconciliation policies ten years later. Rather than following Ben Ali's Tunisia or Syria under the Asad dynasty, the regime has sought to cultivate a 'controlled pluralism' along the lines of the Moroccan and Jordanian monarchies. This allows venting of social discontent and has served to keep the opposition divided. This margin of manoeuvre is probably due to a sense of legitimacy (from the liberation war) that is more powerful than that of most Arab republican leaders. In contrast to both, the Algerian military has always acted as a collective and kept its distance from direct rule.

Lost in transition

This being said, the regime has never managed to solve Algeria's structural problems. The oil economy is incapable of bringing about real development. Politically, the absence of meaningful participation hampers the legitimacy of state institutions as well as the building of trust among political and social forces. In 1989, acute economic dilemmas were countered by a political flight forward. This was due to both the divisions within the regime itself and the underestimation of the profound opposition to its rule, which ultimately led to its derailment. Since political liberalisation aimed at 'reform', a 'pact of transition' that would have helped to build trust was lacking. Instead, the Algerian leadership has prevented political parties of becoming a real power factor and it relies on a particular 'politics of fear'. The trauma of the 1990s civil war has installed a profound fear on large parts of the Algerian population of all-out violence.

Resilient society?

It is therefore not surprising that many Algerians did not jump on the Tunisian bandwagon. 'Overcoming fear' is far more complex in this situation. Added to this is the divisiveness between and among the political opposition, surfacing again with this year's demonstrations and the demise of its organising committee. One factor in this was the rivalry between the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) and the Socialist Forces Front (FFS), both rooted in the Berber-speaking region of Kabylia. The Islamists are also divided. One tendency, close to the Muslim Brotherhood and propagating 'Islamisation from below', took part in coalition governments under military supervision. The smaller leftist and liberal parties have been equally hovering between outright opposition and cooperation with the regime.

Food or housing riots that have existed for years point at social fragmentation that is more detrimental to the opposition than to the regime. The largely unsuccessful demonstrations so far also seem to prove the old parties' limited appeal to new generations and 'unorganised' forms of protest. Pessimistically, one might argue that the regime is too strong and that most people will not demand the resignation of the 'peace keeper' president Bouteflika. Parties are unable to unite and 'spontaneous' protests are too limited. But we may have only seen the tip of the oppositional iceberg, crowded with the familiar faces dominating the political and civil society landscape for decades. Algeria probably has a potential reservoir of younger activists and new networks that may be the carriers of change when the opportunity arises. Once ahead of time, these acts and actors might help reset the Algerian time-machine to the Arab world's revolutionary present.

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HIVOS AND THE ARAB UPRISINGS: Insights Revisited

The Arab uprisings are 'political Big Bangs' that have shocked and awed almost everyone in the world, including the revolutionaries themselves. Certainly, the researchers of the Knowledge Programme (KP) are no exception. Until the fall of Ben Ali in January this year the conventional wisdom – both in the region and beyond – was that Arab autocrats are 'here to stay' and that the region is doomed to be governed by authoritarian regimes. . What, then, are the consequences of the recent dramatic and transformative events for the main ideas and understandings informing and driving Hivos' engagement with the region?

At Hivos we have focused mainly on Syria, Iran and Iraq, with the Knowledge Programme also generating comparative research on Morocco, Yemen and Jordan. Much of these studies reveal that traditional civil society and relatively new actors such as social media and the private sector operate in an ambiguous authoritarian atmosphere, thereby compelling them to engage in complex ambiguous interactions with the state. Such ambiguity does not render activists into puppets of the regime, but rather, it demonstrates that the Tocquevillian notion of civil society as the engine of democratization does not reflect the regional reality. Furthermore, regimes have been apt in appropriating democracy discourses and co-opting civil and political society (upgrading authoritarianism). However, the upgrading of authoritarianism in many cases does not appear to be a proactive strategy; instead, it seems a reactive response to internal and international socio-economic and political changes and challenges. Consequently, the daunting dilemma, which Hivos grapples with, is the extent to which civic activism in authoritarian states such as Syria and Iran should be of a politicized nature. At the core of this dilemma is the recognition that activists have to walk a tightrope between co-optation and confrontation. Hivos' conclusions suggest that active citizenship could bridge the divide between political and apolitical civic activism. Active citizens are aware of the authoritarian context but engage in civic activism without being overtly political or using political tools. In addition, we concluded that social non-movements and the politics of small steps are stepping stones to acquiring societal spaces and further claims via organized activism but only once the *political opportunities arise*.

What we didn't see-and perhaps also other international actors- however, was the boiling anger *beneath* upgrading authoritarianism and the culture of fear; the decades of insulted dignity, despair and desperation of ordinary citizens. We did not see the long-term impact of demographic shifts and, in particular, the failure of the post-colonial state to meet the high expectations of a mass of highly educated un- and underemployed youth. That said, it is of course often impossible to predict revolutions or foresee the tipping points that ignite them. Yet in our 'search' for (quick) agents of change – particularly within the professional and organized civil society – we overlooked the invisible incremental societal changes that have paved the way for these revolutions. As the Egyptian researcher Mariz Tadros put it succinctly: "Our analytical perspectives failed to enable us to 'see like citizens' and understand that people were overcoming barriers of fear and reaching breaking point". http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/05/arab-uprisings-egypt-tunisia-yemen]

At the same time, however, the breaking point 'thesis' is insufficient to explain the timing of the uprisings – were circumstances not also profoundly 'unbearable' in the days of Saddam Hussein and Hafiz al-Assad, for example? Against this background, the core questions posed by Hivos and resonating in some contributions for the Knowledge Programme about how local civil societies and international actors can support social change are more relevant than ever. Now that the culture of fear has collapsed, there finally is a free space for liberated civic activists to contribute to meaningful social change. This provides real

windows of opportunity for international actors. Yet as a combined result of colonialism, Western support for authoritarian regimes and Israel, as well as the Iraq war, (mis)perceptions and mistrust of the 'West' remain deeply rooted. The fall of the Arab 'Berlin Wall' does not automatically translate into the fall of the Arab 'Mistrust Wall' towards the West. Indeed, the 'Arab democracies' may not necessarily be as 'Western friendly' as some would like.

Hivos believes that international actors should have realistic ambitions in terms of their supportive roles in any post-authoritarian Arab order. It is too early to devise clear-cut and extensive recommendations. That said, broadly spoken assistance should be provided in the areas of comparative knowledge and experience on *transitions* from *authoritarianism* to *democracy*-with focus on women's rights and marginalised minorities- as well as *reverse transitions* from *democracy to authoritarianism* (since transitions are not linear). It also is imperative to realize that the West is not the only source of such assistance. For instance, India, Brazil, Turkey, Indonesia, Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia and Chile could also provide valuable knowledge and know-how on *transitions* and *counter transitions.*

The factors that have led to these uprisings appear to be similar, but the *transitions* will be different depending on the country context. Hence, the type of support offered needs to be country and context specific, and in accordance with the needs of local actors who can claim credit for the Big Bangs resonating throughout the region.

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RECENT PUBLICATIONS OF THE KNOWLEDGE PROGRAMME

Policy Paper 2: Resilient Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from Iran and Syria, by Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders
While celebrating a historic turning point in particularly Egypt and Tunisia, this paper argues that authoritarianism will remain a prominent feature of Middle East politics. Even though the region might be transformed in the years ahead, the cases of Syria and Iran remind us that the political landscape of the Middle East will retain familiar and troubling features. This presents some key challenges to democracy and reform promotion in this part of the region.

Policy Paper 1: Rethinking Civic Activism in the Middle East: Agency without Association?, by Kawa Hassan
This paper presents the characteristics of the context in which civic activists in the Middle East operate. It provides a discussion of the role of relatively new actors — new media and private sector entrepreneurs – in democratisation processes, particularly in Syria and Morocco.

Working Paper 19: The First Lady Phenomenon in Jordan: Assessing the Effect of Queen Rania's NGOs, by Felia Boerwinkel
This paper assesses the so-called 'first lady phenomenon' in a (semi) authoritarian context. It discusses the extent to which organizations involving Queen Rania affect the development of a truly independent organizational life in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Working 18: The Political Implications of a Common Approach to Human Rights, by Salam Kawakibi
The issues of human rights and civil society provoke a lively debate on both sides of the Mediterranean. This paper examines this synergy, looking at the role of external participants (in this case, Europeans) in promoting democratic values, and looking at the reception that has been given to this "interference" by official bodies of the societies in the Middle East and North Africa.

Working Paper 17: Authoritarianism and the Judiciary in Syria, by Reinoud Leenders
This paper analyzes the role of the judiciary in Syria's strongly authoritarian setting wherein 'the rule by law' serves as a tool of repression; qualities that have far-reaching implications for foreign assistance programs on judicial reform, the rule of law and reform generally.

Working Paper 16: Civil Society in Iran: Transition to which Direction?, by Sohrab Razzaghi
In this paper Razzaghi analyzes the main features of civil society in Iran and offers recommendations for bolstering independent civil society actors.

Working Paper 15: Re- Rethinking Prospects for Democratization: A New Toolbox, by Stephan de Vries
Democratization is a highly complex matter. A holistic framework is needed. Accordingly, this paper discusses the concepts of democracy, democratization, and democracy promotion/assistance and how they relate to one another.

Working Paper 14: Dissecting Global Civil Society: Values, Actors, Organisational Forms, by Marlies Glasius
This paper describes the different expectations people have of global civil society. The author describes the various normative connotations, normative ideal types, the new actors (or not so new actors) and the trends in global civil society.

KNOWLEDGE PROGRAMME MEETINGS

On March 22 2011, the Washington based Stimson Center hosted a discussion, organized by Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia , on the future of non-democratic regimes in the Middle East and the policy implications of the unprecedented, and unexpected, recent popular uprisings in the region. A report can be found on the POMED website www.pomed.org.

On 18 and 19 April 2011 Hivos, the University of Amsterdam and IKV Pax Christi organized the two-day expert meeting 'Middle Eastern Perspectives on the Revolutions' at the Universit of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Activists from Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon discussed the role of civil society, international actors, social media. They presented first hand perspectives and insights on their revolutions.

In the context of the recent turbulence in the Middle East, the Knowledge Prorgramme on Civil Society in West Asia is organizing an expert seminar in Amsterdam on May 17. The seminar entitled 'Authoritarian Governance and Civil Society Actors in Iran and Syria: Challenges, Prospects and Regional Perspectives' will serve as a platform for the presentation and discussion of two collaborative research programmes on governance and societyin Iran and Syria, conducted over the last 2 years within the Knowledge Programme and involving over more than 20 scholars from various universities worldwide. Participants will reflect on recent developments in Iran and Syria, will draw comparisons and point out differences, and discuss their regional ramifications.

On Friday May 20th, the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia organizes a seminar in Beirut in collaboration with the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. The meeting 'Governance and Society in Iran and Syria: Challenges and Prospects in Regional Perspectives' will bring together regional policy analysists, scholars and practitioners who will discuss the challenges and prospects of governance and society in Iran and Syria.

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