



# Civil IN SYRIA & IRAN Society

Activism in  
Authoritarian Contexts

edited by

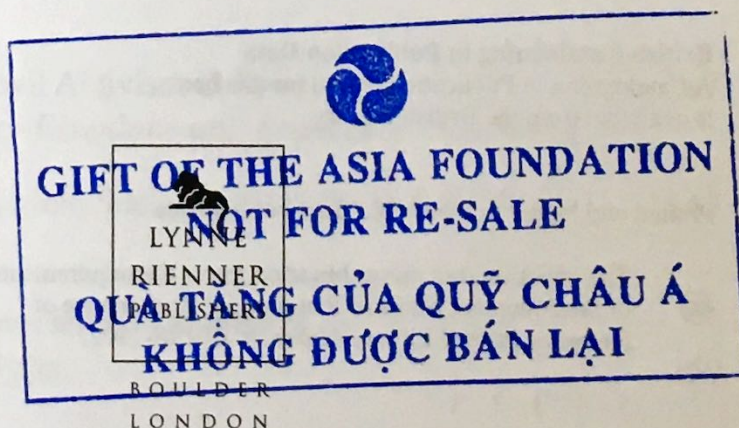
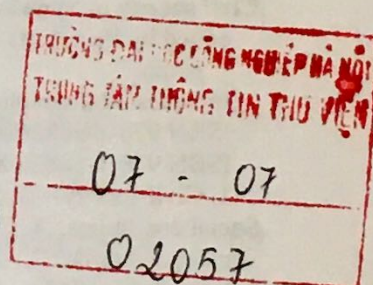
Paul Aarts and  
Francesco Cavatorta



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Preliminary findings from the research project have been presented at a number of professional conferences and meetings with activists across the Arab world, but this book is very important to us because it brings it all together. We are very grateful to all those who participated in the conferences and meetings and commented on our work to help us put the research into sharper focus. We benefited considerably from the input of Steven Heydemann at Georgetown University; Gerd Junne, Marlies Glasius, Reinoud Leenders, Stephan de Vries, and Maaïke Warnaar, all at the University of Amsterdam; Wael Sawah in Syria; Mohammad Mojahedi at Cambridge University; and Katerina Dalacoura at the London School of Economics.

The book is dedicated to all of those activists in both Syria and Iran who have struggled and continue to struggle in the name of freedom and dignity against unaccountable and repressive regimes. *Hasta la victoria, siempre!*

—The Editors



# 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.



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.<sup>1</sup> 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,"<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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