

CALL FOR PROPOSALS:

Authoritarianisms, Regime Resilience and State-Society Relations: Comparing Political Change in Syria and Iran

Deadline 30 October 2009

Steven Heydemann (U.S. Institute for Peace and Georgetown University) and Reinoud Leenders (University of Amsterdam) are pleased to invite you to submit a proposal for writing a paper within the framework of a joint research effort on *Authoritarianisms, Regime Resilience and State-Society Relations: Comparing Political Change in Syria and Iran*. The paper is to be presented in a project workshop and will be considered for publication in an edited volume or a special edition of a major academic journal. The project is part of the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia based at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.*

Main context:

Following nearly two decades hopes for and predictions of genuine and far-reaching democratic reform in the Middle East seem to have reached a dead-end. Congruently, conventional academic analysis on democratization and ‘civil society’, often grounded in Tocquevillian conceptual frameworks, have increasingly been criticized for their limited value in studying contemporary Middle Eastern politics. After all, authoritarianism in the region seems vibrant and, in many cases, more unyielding than ever before. As a result, many students of the region feel compelled to change their focus of investigation. Rather than exploring the reasons why the Middle East lacks democratic politics, the more appropriate research question pertains to the ways in which authoritarianism works and how it can be best understood.

Main research aims:

Our approach to the dynamics of the region’s authoritarianism does not and should not deny the desirability of democratic change. Nor should it be read as endorsing the permanence of existing regimes, or as suggesting a lack of dynamism and vibrancy, either among regimes often depicted as archaic or among societies often perceived as passive nonparticipants in political life. It merely proposes to no longer use such normative assertions as a starting point of and a conceptual matrix for studying and understanding Middle Eastern politics. Thus, a focus on authoritarian dynamics does not preclude the relevance of studying political change. Rather, it acknowledges

that the qualities of political change will not necessarily be of a liberal-democratic nature or evolve toward preconceived democratic outcomes. Similarly, making authoritarianism central to the analysis of Middle East politics does not and should not require that we discard the significance and role of non-state actors. What it requires, instead, is that we set aside the expectation that non-state actors necessarily organize in spheres independent from or (only) in opposition to the state, thereby generating a general platform for liberal-democratic change. It also draws our attention to the porous quality of the boundary between state and non-state domains, and the importance of mapping and assessing the interconnections between the two. Finally, renewed attention to authoritarianism does not and should not substitute one monolithic outcome ('liberal democracy') with another ('authoritarian rule'). Neither should the latter be conceptualized as an antonym to 'democracy'. Instead, research should allow for and question the multiple and flexible meanings and manifestations of authoritarianism—therefore perhaps more appropriately termed 'authoritarianisms'—in its national, sub-national and regional contexts, and conceptualize these phenomena endogenously.

Research themes and questions:

In view of the main pitfalls and lacunae that our approach to authoritarianisms aims to address, its research agenda can be broadly described as including the following main themes or research questions. 1) To what extent and how do democratic or liberal-democratic agendas, discourses, and practice help frame and affect authoritarian politics in the region? 2) How and to what extent can political change be understood as strategies of 'authoritarian upgrading' by regimes adjusting to new global, regional, and domestic challenges? 3) How do non-state actors (individuals, organizations, movements, networks) operate in authoritarian conditions, formally and informally; how and why do they cross and/or fuse state-society boundaries and in the process become instrumental to drawing or blending such boundaries; and what implications follow from this in terms of non-state actors' roles in (intentionally or inadvertently) sustaining, modifying and/or contesting authoritarianism;? 4) What variations can be detected in forms of authoritarianism dependent on place, time, and circumstances, and to what extent can alternative denominators capture these differences better than generic conceptions of 'authoritarianism'? 5) How do contemporary modes of authoritarian governance in the Arab world compare to authoritarian practices and strategies of regime maintenance in other cases? Can we find indicators of authoritarian learning, or evidence that new, cross-regional patterns of authoritarian governance are becoming consolidated?

Comparing Syria and Iran:

Both Syria and Iran have been variously described as among the most authoritarian regimes or societies in the region, and characterized by regime resilience featuring high levels of adaptability to new global, regional, and domestic changes and challenges. Yet clear differences stand out in equal measure, pertaining, for instance, to the level and relevance of electoral politics, intra-regime cohesion, social mobilization, intensity of anti-regime contestation and the impact of regional politics. A comparison of the two countries along the lines suggested in this project—by looking both for similarities and differences—is expected to enhance an understanding of the persistence and malleability of authoritarianism in Syria and Iran individually. It also constitutes a first important step toward formulating a credible research agenda on authoritarianism beyond the one associated with conventional approaches to ‘civil society’ and liberal democratic reform in the region generally.

Possible fields of research and topics:

Research papers should engage with (one or more of) the general themes listed above. However, the project’s analytical and conceptual framework will communicate closely with the proposed papers and continue to be formulated while the joint research effort is in progress. Possible fields of research and topics may include but are certainly not limited to:

- The role of Islamic actors, movements and/or networks in sustaining, adjusting and/or contesting authoritarian rule in Syria and/or Iran
- The role of business elites and –groups and the shifting constituencies or coalitions of the authoritarian regime(s) in Syria and/or Iran
- The role of social movements and blurred state-society boundaries in the context of authoritarian regime maintenance in Syria and/or Iran
- The political economy of “authoritarian upgrading” and selective reforms in Syria and/or Iran
- Coercing, appropriating and containing regime antagonism: the adaptability of authoritarianism in Iran and/or Syria
- ‘Democracy’ and ‘civil society’ for and by the regime: the use and manipulation of ‘democratic’ politics for authoritarian resilience in Syria and/or Iran
- Authoritarian regime resilience and contestation in reference to the use and control of the media and/or new communication technologies in Syria and/or Iran

- Authoritarian justice: what exactly are 'show trials' supposed to show?
- Diversifying international linkages: the international political economy of authoritarian regime maintenance in Syria and/or Iran.

Workshop & publication:

Participants of the research project will be expected to present their (draft-) paper and discuss those by others at a two-day workshop in Amsterdam in May 2010. The project will ultimately result in an edited volume, most likely a special issue of a major (ISI-listed) academic journal to be approached for this purpose. Participants are expected to submit their final drafts for peer-reviewing by August 2010.

Expenses and fee:

Expenses made on travel and hotel accommodation for attending the workshop will be fully reimbursed. In addition, papers containing about 8-9,000 words will be awarded 3,500 Euros, to be paid upon acceptance of the final draft. Co-authored papers, when two authors explicitly compare Iran and Syria in one paper, are strongly encouraged and will be awarded 5,500 Euros to be shared by the respective authors.

Requirements for participation:

Those interested in taking part in the project are kindly invited to submit a 2-3 pages paper proposal on any of the themes suggested above and falling within the general framework and focus of the project, before 30 October 2009. The proposal should motivate how the suggested research will fall within the overall parameters of the joint research project and include a section on research methodology and the intended use of sources. Successful applicants will then be approached to address the editors' possible questions and queries, resulting in a final research plan to be submitted and approved by the project organizers shortly thereafter. Participants are expected to adapt their papers to a comparative approach involving Syria and Iran. This may be done by explicitly comparing the two countries in one paper. Yet at the very least it requires the author to reflect in the paper's introduction and conclusion on his/her country findings in reference to relevant observations made by other contributors to the project. All papers will have to be based on recent fieldwork and/or rely heavily on primary sources in Arabic and/or Farsi. Candidates of all social science disciplines are encouraged to apply.

Possible queries and paper proposals (with a CV detailing past research—and publication efforts) should be sent to Reinoud Leenders [r.e.c.leenders@uva.nl] or Steven Heydemann [sheydemann@usip.org]

* The Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia is a joint initiative by the Dutch NGO 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. The programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioners' 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 how international actors can support this.