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Asef Bayat

New ISIM Academic Director

Asef Bayat grew up in Iran in a rural Azeri-Turkish migrant community located in the central province. For the sake of schooling his family moved to Tehran in the 1960s where he attended an Islamic school followed by a government high school and then college, earning a bachelor's degree in political science. As a rural immigrant living in an urban environment and cognizant of the burgeoning political dissent in Iran, he developed a keen interest in social and political issues from an early age. He was involved in student politics from the early 1970s and participated in the Iranian Revolution, in the course of which he left Iran for England to pursue graduate studies at the University of Kent. He obtained his Ph.D. degree in sociology and politics in the Interdisciplinary Studies Programme in 1984. The following year he was a post-doctoral fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. His desire to return to the Middle East, learn Arabic, and experience life in a country other than Iran took him to Egypt, to the American University in Cairo, where he has been teaching since 1986. In that period he also served as visiting professor at the University of California (Berkeley), Columbia University, and the University of Oxford.

With Iran, England, the United States, and Egypt as vantage points, and with linguistic competency in Persian, Azeri Turkish, and Arabic, Asef Bayat has been uniquely positioned to engage in empirical comparative research on contemporary Muslim societies that draw on and make a contribution to contemporary social theory. For his Ph.D. he studied popular mobilization during Iran's Islamic revolution and was the first and only student to conduct field research in factories and neighbourhoods during the turbulent revolutionary years. This study, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, was published in London in 1987. Attempting to locate the Iranian experience in the broader, largely non-Muslim, developing world, he later conducted a comparative study by examining similar experiences in a number of such areas. The result was a volume entitled *Work, Politics and Power* (London and New York, 1991).

A witness to the profound social and political changes unleashed in both Iran (under the Islamic state) and Egypt (through its powerful Islamist movement), Bayat's work took a new direction. He documents broader social transformations in Iran in the book *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran* (New York, 1998), which draws partially on his own life experience and examines the particular politics of the urban poor, the *mustaz'afin*, from the 1970s through the post-revolutionary years until 1992. Theoretically, the book breaks new ground in social movement theory by offering a fresh conceptual framework ('quiet encroachment of the ordinary') to understand poor peoples' movements in the global South.



Asef Bayat joins the ISIM as Academic Director and the ISIM Chair at Leiden University from the American University in Cairo, Egypt, where he worked as professor of sociology and Middle East Studies. He brings to the ISIM and Leiden his vast experience in the study of contemporary Muslim societies from socio-historical and political perspectives, with social movements and social change as his central focus. Bayat's own life trajectories, educational background, professional experience, research interests, and international connections complement the scholarly areas, approach, and objectives that the ISIM pursues.

As he has become more familiar with society and politics of Egypt and acquainted with other parts of the Middle East, Bayat's research has taken on a more comparative regional dynamic. In his latest, forthcoming, book *Post-Islamism: Socio-religious Movements and Political Change in the Middle East* Bayat traces socio-religious movements in the Muslim Middle East with a particular focus on Iran and Egypt in the past thirty years. This historical-sociological study examines the transformation of political Islam into both a 'post-Islamist polity' (a project and movement that adheres to an inclusive religiosity) and a 'post-Islamist piety' (a fragmented trend of individualized piousness). Here, Bayat pays particular attention to the major agents of change – social movements of the intellectuals, the youth, students, women, and the poor – who attempt to articulate new visions of society and politics under the regimes of power that owe their legitimacy to identifying with Islamic orthodoxy. At the same time, a comparison of Iran and Egypt allows for an examination of the logic behind both the vitality and stagnation in religious thought in distinctly Muslim communities, and helps explore how socio-religious movements are able to animate, or impede, democratic transformation in the contemporary Muslim world and how they may influence the dynamics of transnational Islamist movements.

Meanwhile, Bayat continues to pursue his ongoing interests in diverse social issues pertinent to the Middle East including urbanization, social development, and the youth. He plans to expand his inquiry into the cultural poli-

tics of Muslim youth from the perspective of social movements and social change in the Muslim societies. Bayat is emphatic that scholarly inquiry includes rigorous attention to both the production of empirical knowledge and theoretical elaborations. Bayat hopes that this double engagement will serve to de-marginalize and 'normalize' the study of Muslim societies. His extensive involvement in international research networks and cooperation with scholars within and beyond the Middle East – in Sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Asia, Latin America, Europe, and North America – represent an attempt to engage questions of importance to Muslim societies with those of the non-Muslim world.

As ISIM Academic Director, Bayat will continue with and extend the ISIM's commitment to interdisciplinary and comparative research, as well as international and national outreach, by building on his vast international experience and his conviction of the need to integrate the comparative advantages of both the social sciences and humanities. His chair at Leiden's Department of Languages and Civilizations of the Islamic Middle East is particularly relevant to his commitment to such interdisciplinary engagement.