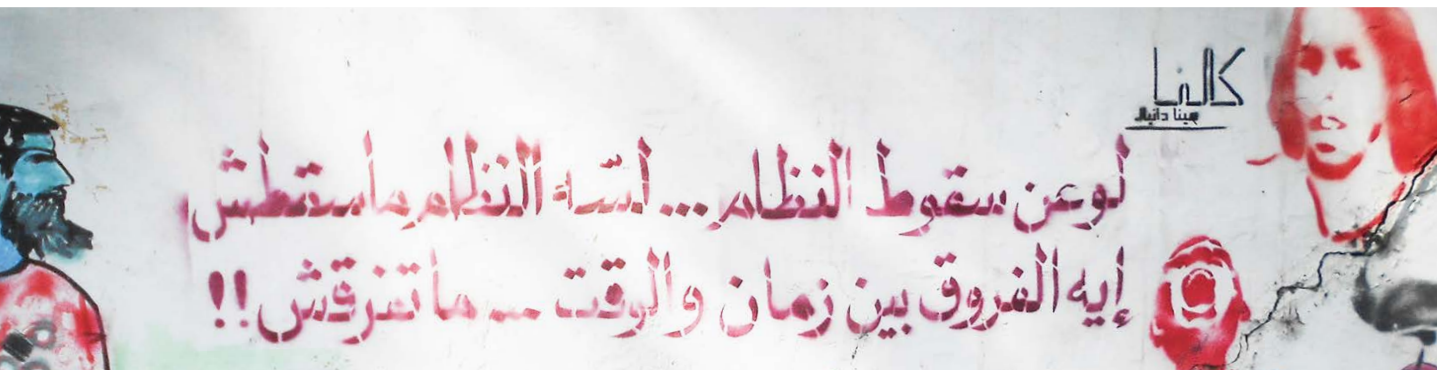


REVOLUTIONS

GLOBAL TRENDS & REGIONAL ISSUES

The Legacy of the **ARAB SPRING** New **FORCES** and **FAULT** Lines



/ Malek Abisaab / Madawi Al-Rasheed /
/ Abdellateef Al-Weshah / Riccardo Armillei /
/ Mohammed A. Bamyeh / miriam cooke / Amal Ghazal /
/ Raymond Hinnebusch / Fethi Mansouri /



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1. *The Arab Spring in Perspective*

2. *Unraveling the Uprisings*

3. *New Fault Lines & Legacies*

artworks &
PHOTOS



photos by Denis Bocquet

by D. Bocquet



"GET DOWN TO THE STREET! GET OUT ON THE STREETS!" (A FAMOUS SENTENCE IN EGYPTIAN DIALECT TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO STOP WATCHING THE EVENTS ON TELEVISION AND TO JOIN THEM INSTEAD) – CAIRO 2011 ©DENIS BOCQUET

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foreword

of the **The Legacy ARAB SPRING: New FORCES and FAULT Lines**

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the fourth edition of R/evolutions: Global Trends & Regional Issues. Its timing coincides with the remembrance of the start of the Arab Spring set ablaze by the young, desperate Tunisian street vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010. In this journal's 'Regional Issue' a splendid set of authors will highlight various dimensions of the Arab uprisings and what we know after more than five years about the popular protests, regime contention, and counter-revolutions in the Middle East and Northern Africa.

The topic editors would first of all like to thank the authors and anonymous reviewers for their enthusiastic participation in this project. The results of their original contributions have coalesced into this multi-faceted edition with various approaches, which together shed some interesting new light on this important topic.

In addition, the editors thank Matthew Kroenig, Larbi Sadiki, Javier Barreda Sureda, Thord Janson, Karol Bieniek, Toby Matthiesen and Aaron Stein for their interest in this project and their help and support behind the screens. Also we are grateful for the help of miriam cooke, Nahed Eltantawy and Abdellateef Al-Washeh for helping with the artwork and of course to Professor Denis Bocquet for sharing his work with us. Finally, we would like to thank our volunteer, Ewa Sudoł for her initial help in getting the project started, and our partner, the Faculty of Political Science & Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University for overall support.

Lasha Markozashvili
Jeroen Van den Bosch



by D. Bocquet

"RISE UP GEZI PARK" – ISTANBUL 2013. ©DENIS BOCQUET

INTRODUCTION:

The **COLORS** and **SEASONS** of the **REVOLUTIONS**

JEROEN VAN DEN BOSCH

BACK IN 2011 WHEN WESTERN MEDIA HAD TO LABEL THE SPREAD OF THE TUNISIAN PROTESTS TO NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES, THE TERM "ARAB SPRING" DID NOT YET CONTAIN SUCH A SEMANTIC MISMATCH WITH REALITY, AS IT DOES FROM TODAY'S PERSPECTIVE. IN ANALOGY WITH THE "AUTUMN OF NATIONS" OF 1989, WHICH ITSELF ALREADY RECYCLED THE "SPRING OF NATIONS" FROM 1848, THIS "SPRING" BROUGHT A SHORT-LIVED SEASON OF HOPE TO A REGION MOST DESERVING OF IT. EVEN WHEN THE LABEL IGNORES THE MANY PERSIANS AND TURKS THAT HAVE BEEN AFFECTED BY THESE UPRISINGS.

As the semantic gap widened in light of repressive authoritarian reactions or full-fledged civil wars, the West started pondering on its naiveness and looking for other labels (Arab uprisings, revolutions, etc.). In any case, the "Arab Spring" stuck. While the hope for democratic transitions, which was real in 2011 – both in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) as in the West – in retrospective seems misplaced, it was actually in line with the feeling of relief that blew through the Soviet Union once

its peoples realized the Kremlin would no longer oppose their plight for freedom and nationhood. In contrast though, few post-Soviet transitions were violent, and most at least nominally clung to democratic values. (Full reversals would be posterior and more incremental.) Also, in MENA, there was more than the democratic genie that popped out of the bottle. The West initially ignored the Islamist sub-stream, but as sectarianism and conflict bloated their ranks, the Western-projected "spring" label became further and further removed from its autumnal reference point.

Nevertheless, to call the (failed) uprisings an 'Arab Winter' like some disillusioned observers is maybe more a sign of our betrayed collective hope than the labelling of a counter-reality. An authoritarian backlash was to be expected, and while the civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen are astonishing in their repercussions and level of complexity, it is still quite early to really discern the lasting impact of the Arab Spring, especially now when it's so clouded by the violence. As professor Mohammed Bamyeh stated: "successful revolutions always change the culture before they are able to change the political structure."¹ The same is true for the other revolutionary seasons of 1848 and 1989. In the words of Mark Almond:

"Both 1848-49 and the recent experience of the post-Communist revolutions suggest that the process of revolutionary change is not linear but filled with twists and turns. After 1848's sudden collapse of the old order, 1849 saw restorations, but they could not completely turn back the clock. Similarly, within a few years of 1989, old faces were back in high office across the ex-Soviet bloc but the planned economy was dead nonetheless."²

So how did the Arab Spring change the Middle East? That is the main question on which this issue of R/evolutions wants to zoom in. While the timeframe (more than five years) is short to make solid statements about the future of MENA, the authors in this edition take various approaches in order to ponder on what will be the shape of things to come.

Notwithstanding their heterogeneity it is possible to draw at least some parallels between the Arab Spring, the Autumn of Nations or the so-called color revolutions when it comes to the spontaneity of the protests. People do not go out on the streets en masse and occupy central public

¹ See article of M. Bamyeh in this edition.

² Almond 2012: 35-36.

places for sustained periods for any reason. Structural discrimination and socioeconomic grievances lie at the heart of all revolutions. Nonetheless, the states in which they occurred create very different opportunities and pathways for such protests. The international environment has had maybe even more impact: Beck & Hüser stress three regional differences that impede comparison between 1989 and 2011. Firstly, Arab countries have lower ‘external’ incentives for democratization. The conducting influence of the EU in Europe cannot be compared to the weak Arab League or local (failed) efforts to create any kind of ‘pan-Arab’ or even ‘pan-Maghreb’ transnational unity.³ Secondly, the socialist legacy is different:

“It should be noted that the region’s nationalist regimes (with some socialist paint), established in the 1950s, were an indigenous reaction to Western imperialism and colonialism, while socialism in Eastern Europe was externally imposed by the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Eastern European states were able to return to their economic and political heritage, which they shared with Western Europe, but the Arab world faces the challenge of having to redefine itself politically and economically.”⁴

Thirdly, the economic factors which can affect the development and consolidation of democratic institutions likewise diverge. The instability in the wake of the Arab Spring has deterred investors’ confidence.⁵ These connections or linkages between regions and with interfering regional or global great powers diversify their trajectories even further.

This might explain also why the Arab Spring has not spread further south from Northern Africa. Osman Antwi-Boateng explains why the domino effect spread throughout MENA but failed to do so in the southern direction even when the regions share many conditions, such as: a young population, high levels of (youth) unemployment, the challenge of dissident elites and general state crises. At first glance these structural driving forces should be conducive, but other factors such as a common language, a unified media (al-Jazeera), the widespread use of social and digital media, the culture of Pan-Arabism and even the ‘Arab Street’ protest culture seem to have contained the domino-effect solely to the MENA region.⁶

³ Beck, Hüser 2012.

⁴ Beck, Hüser 2012: 19-20.

⁵ Beck, Hüser 2012, Sakbani 2011.

⁶ Antwi-Boateng 2015.

Some enthusiastic observers heralded the 2011 demise of Blaise Compaoré and (almost) peaceful transition in Burkina Faso⁷ as the start of the ‘African Spring’.⁸ This label, however, lacks depth and has been criticized,⁹ as Africa cannot be represented by one country, and as a continent it has its own regions with their respective dynamics. More so, the label seems to forgo the post-Cold War paradigm shift that launched a continent-wide democratization wave throughout Africa. Paraphrasing the words of President Omar Bongo of Gabon: “The winds that shook the coconut trees came from the East”¹⁰ and from this point one is left to wonder in what ways this democratization wave contributed to the Arab uprisings in Tunisia, Morocco and Libya. The ‘African Spring’ however has not taken hold for the aforementioned obvious reasons and – as a graphical proof – a quick google image search of the term will predominantly yield a beautiful color pallet of flowering African landscapes instead of pictures of urban mayhem and burned out cars.

This edition of R/evolutions is divided in three parts. *The Arab Spring in Perspective* contains two texts that provide an overview and the historical context to the Arab Uprisings. In his scientific essay, Dr. Abdellateef Al-Weshah outlines the main formative events of the Arab Spring and highlights their increasing complexity and interconnectedness. The article by Professor Malek Abisaab shows the demise of the Arab left since the 1970s and the dilemmas the movement faced in a globalizing world as these elites had to compete with various Islamist challengers to propose solutions to a growing range of problems.

⁷ Despite the popular protests in Burkina Faso, a creeping coup by the Regiment of Presidential Security was the main player in the transition. Yacouba Isaac Zida was the coup leader and co-opted the opposition leaders, which had no choice if they wanted to avert violence. A later palace coup by a dissident subgroup of the regiment failed, allowing former elites from the Compaoré networks to reestablish their hold on power as their candidate won the subsequent elections.

⁸ Glez 2015.

⁹ Mantzikos 23-08-2012; Keita 21-11-2014; Maiotti 10-05-2015; Piet 09-10-2016.

¹⁰ Nugent 2012: 376.

The second part, *Unraveling the Uprisings*, focuses on the Arab Spring itself by explaining the role of external actors and uncovering some underexplored dimensions. In an interview, Professor Amal Ghazal ponders on the spontaneous nature of the uprisings and how to untangle them from the actions of later actors (both domestic and foreign) that have alarmingly distorted the geopolitical map of MENA today. By comparing earlier revolutions in the region, Professor Mohammed A. Bamyeh zooms in on what could be called the “creative destruction” of the Arab Spring and provides an insightful glimpse of its transformative potential, which full effects can only be assessed by future analysts. Further, Professor miriam cooke presents an underexplored dimension of the Arab Spring in Syria, by presenting the struggle of Syrian activists and artists in its various forms. This part concludes with an interview with Professor Madawi Al-Rasheed, who sheds light on Saudi domestic politics and how the monarchy attempts to navigate their kingdom through the rocky waters of the Arab Spring.

The last part, *New Fault Lines & Legacies* will assess how MENA has been transformed by the Arab uprisings. The first article by Professor Raymond Hinnebusch explains the origins, drivers and impact of sectarianization in the region and lifts the veil of how this will continue to affect the region in the future. Professors Fethi Mansouri & Riccardo Armillei then concentrate on Tunisia, the only successful democratic transition in the region triggered by the Arab Spring. They evaluate which factors have made such change possible and highlight some of the pitfalls and challenges the consolidating democracy awaits. Together the texts in this edition provide an analytical purview on how intractable the region’s conflicts have become and how various (often contradictory) factors are coalescing along new geopolitical fault lines. That is why it will be so hard to determine the future of the MENA region in the years to come.

When the Arab Spring broke out in 2011, it came unexpected, just like the Autumn of Nations in 1989. While predicting the future is impossible, making comparisons, drawing parallels and establishing new theoretical frameworks can advance our understanding of what might come. Scholars need to let go of some standard theoretical reference points, and broaden their research agendas.¹¹ This edition of R/evolutions hopes to contribute to this effort by asking the question: What has changed in the Middle East and North Africa since 2011.

¹¹ Howard, Walters 2014.

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Van den Bosch, J., "Introduction: The Colors and Seasons of the Revolutions," R/evolutions: Global Trends & Regional Issues, Vol 4, No. 1, 2016, (ISSN: 2449-6413), pp. 12-18.

regional
ISSUES

The Legacy of the
ARAB SPRING
New **FORCES**
and **FAULT** Lines

artworks & photos

Denis Bocquet

texts

The Arab Spring in Perspective

Al-Weshah
Abisaab

Unraveling the Uprisings

Ghazal
Bamyeh
cooke
Al-Rasheed

New Fault Lines & Legacies

Hinnebusch
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Armillei



by D. Bocquet

"STREET ART PROTESTING AGAINST THE MILITARY RULE IN EGYPT. "DAMN THE FALL OF THE REGIME – THE REGIME DIDN'T FALL YET! WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE PAST AND NOW? – THERE IS NONE!" – CAIRO 2011 ©DENIS BOCQUET

THE "ARAB SPRING"

– FIVE YEARS AFTER:

THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF THE ANTI-REGIME PROTESTS

ABDELLATEEF AL-WESHAH

abstract

THE ARTICLE PRESENTS THE PROBLEM OF THE SO-CALLED "ARAB SPRING" – A SERIES OF ANTI-AUTOCRATIC PROTESTS IN THE ARAB WORLD THAT DEGENERATED INTO THE SO-CALLED "ARAB WINTER" – A RESURGENCE OF AUTHORITARIANISM COMBINED WITH RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM. THE PROBLEM IS KNOWN TO HISTORIANS AND CONSISTS IN THE FACT THAT TRANSITIONAL PERIODS MAKE AN OPPORTUNE TIME FOR VARIOUS FACTIONS INTENDING TO USE THE MOMENTUM AND INSTABILITY TO SEIZE POWER. THE AUTHOR WILL PRESENT THE BACKGROUND AND CHIEF MECHANISMS OF THE UNDERLYING SOCIAL UPRISINGS OF THE LARGE VARIETY OF COUNTRIES INVOLVED IN THE ARAB SPRING, AND ILLUSTRATE THE SCALE OF THE AFTERMATH OF THE UNFINISHED RAPID TRANSFORMATION THAT HAS BEEN TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF BY VARIOUS AUTOCRATIC AND EXTREMIST FACTIONS. THE MATERIAL IS CONCLUDED WITH A VISION OF THE UNCONCLUDED PROTEST AS AN 'OPEN WOUND' LEAVING THE STATE VULNERABLE TO NEW THREATS.

keywords

ARAB SPRING, ARAB UPRISING, CIVIL WAR, DICTATORSHIP, PROTEST, EGYPT, LIBYA, SYRIA, YEMEN

THE ARAB SPRING IS WIDELY RECOGNIZED AS THE SUM OF THE DEMONSTRATIONS AND REVOLTS THAT TRANSPIRED IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA ESPECIALLY IN THE EARLY 2010S, EVEN THOUGH THE ROOTS OF THE SERIES OF EVENTS CAN BE TRACED BACK TO THE PREVIOUS DECADE. MOREOVER, IN SOME AREAS THE CONFLICTS AND DISPUTES UNTIL TODAY HAVE NOT BEEN SETTLED. ADDITIONALLY, IT MUST BE MENTIONED THAT THE REVOLUTIONARY WAVE OF DEMONSTRATIONS HAS REACHED BEYOND THE BORDERS OF THE MENTIONED GEOPOLITICAL AREA AND TRIGGERED VARIOUS FORMS OF PROTEST IN OTHER AFRICAN COUNTRIES AS WELL AS PARTS OF PERSIA AND EVEN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT.¹

Among the chief causes of the Arab Spring, the ones referred most frequently are a general dissatisfaction with the activities of both local and state governments, and unfavorable economic conditions, visible especially as striking gaps in terms of income levels. Specially, protests were mainly fueled by youth and members of the unions, i.e. people holding a solid educational background and/or a running experience of the occupational employment.²

However, a series of protests of that magnitude could not have been fueled by a narrow selection of socio-economic issues alone that could be addressed through dedicated reforms or via a temporary compromise. In the case of the Arab Spring, there were a number of additional factors that collectively led to the escalation and propagation of protests. The sources commonly point to issues, such as strict or inconsiderate rule based on absolute monarchy or civilian dictatorship, and to a lesser extent also party dictatorship, e.g. in Syria until 2012, as well as the recurrent cases of human rights violations. Wikileaks also revealed unquestionable proof of

¹ Israeli 2013: 282.

² Carlo, Sadian 2012: 29.

political corruption that added credibility to the protests.³ The countries that witnessed revolutions across the MENA region experienced the effects of the economic decline, continuing and/or rising unemployment, and in some cases extreme poverty despite willingness to work. The dissatisfaction among the young generations had erupted due to a number of unfavorable demographic factors,⁴ notably a high percentage of properly educated yet discontented youth unable to find appreciation, opportunities for career development, or even employment.⁵ Together with the salient and striking concentration of riches in the hands of powerful autocrats, paired with unclear patterns of the redistribution of wealth, confirmed cases of corruption, the youth, and professional employees could no longer accept the existing status quo.

While the discussion of the respective stages and territory-specific events included within the Arab Spring are largely beyond the scope of this article, it is sufficient to state that until the end of February 2012, various rulers had been removed from power in multiple countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen.⁶ Nation-wide civil uprisings had started abruptly in Bahrain and Syria, and major protests had been recorded in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Sudan, not counting countries affected by minor and predominantly peaceful protests, e.g. in Mauritania, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Western Sahara, and Palestine.⁷

Considering the scale of the protests, and their mainly anti-regime nature, one should inquire about the outcome of the long-term engagement of the involved social groups, military troops, and external factors. As a matter of fact, the main body of the negative results of the Arab Spring has recently been given the name of Arab Winter or Islamist Winter.⁸ According to various sources, the Arab Winter is defined as the distributed surge in authoritarianism paired with religious extremism,⁹ developed as a negative consequence of the Arab Spring protests across the countries of the MENA region. Reportedly, the notion was first used in an article published by the Washington Post in December 2011.¹⁰ There are scholarly views that the Arab Spring entirely degenerated into a sort of Arab Winter within four years from its onset.¹¹

3 Cockburn 2015.

4 Korotayev, Zinkina 2011: 139-165.

5 Radsch 2014.

6 Gloppen 2014: 168.

7 Zakaria 2015: 68.

8 Phillips 2012.

9 Israeli 2013: 37-39.

10 Byman 2011.

11 Fiedler, Osiewicz 2015: 182.



THE ARAB SPRING ENTIRELY DEGENERATED INTO
A SORT OF ARAB WINTER WITHIN FOUR YEARS
FROM ITS ONSET

The term refers to the rather ironic results of the protests considering their nature described above, consisting in wide-scale instability and numerous acts of violence throughout the region covered by the events of the Arab Spring. The fall of autocratic regimes, and the resulting instability and political fluidity prompted the rapid outbreak of nation-wide civil wars, regional insecurity, and economic as well as demographic decline across the Arab League, not to mention the religious conflicts, often escalating to communal conflict, between Sunni and Shia Muslim groups. Suffice to observe that by summer 2014, the toll of the Arab Winter has reached 250 thousand casualties, not to mention millions of refugees.¹²

Some of the initial results of the Arab Spring may be misleading when studied in isolation from the events they eventually triggered. Yemen, for instance, was initially seen as a successful case of a state affected by the course of the Arab Spring. However, the newly established government ended up being destabilized by the group of Houthis, essentially a faction of Shia rebels, which endangered the already fragile new leadership. In the first half of 2015, the turmoil in Yemen has further escalated after the suicide bombings in the capital city of Sana'a. The events led to fast reactions of the neighboring states. Saudi Arabia conducted a military intervention, but it appears to have only increased the existing divisions among Yemeni factions.¹³

Apart from the Crisis in Yemen, the "Arab Winter" has come to symbolize multiple other conflicts involving the use of hard power and various militias, among others in the Syrian Civil War, the insurgency in Iraq and the resultant civil war, and the Egyptian Crisis. In Egypt the Arab Winter included events that caused the removal of President Mohamed Morsi. State power was seized by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi – the unofficial leader of a largely anti-Muslim Brotherhood campaign.¹⁴ In reference to Egypt the term 'military winter' is sometimes used to denote the transpired political developments, especially the return of authoritarian rule and the accompanying forceful suppression of civil liberties since July 2013. Needless to say, such a transformation remained in stark opposition to the original objectives of the Arab Spring.¹⁵

12 Khallaf 2013: 6.

13 Toska 2015.

14 EuroNews, 08-02-2013.

15 Hayden 2013.

The Libyan Crisis included numerous military groups. Local tribes have also began fighting in Libya following a cessation of negotiations. According to some sources, Libya has constituted the foreground of the Arab Winter scene alongside Syria¹⁶ – the situation in both countries remains highly unstable at the time of writing this article. Furthermore, the areas of Bahrain and Lebanon have also been included as arenas of the Arab Winter.¹⁷



YEMEN, FOR INSTANCE, WAS INITIALLY
SEEN AS A SUCCESSFUL CASE

According to some sources, the conflict in the northern territories of Mali characterized by structurally weak central state authority, that triggered a failed military coup, have been identified as indirectly affected by the Islamist Winter. In 2013 EuroNews stated that political transformations occurring in Tunisia, especially the change of government, also suggested the tendency of the country as “heading into a new Arab Winter.”¹⁸

According to the reports quoted by Rivlin, by January 2014 the total cost of the turmoil and instability caused by Arab Winter throughout the states of the Arab League amounted to approximately 800 billion USD. At the time they calculated that 16 million people residing in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey were to require extensive humanitarian assistance in the year 2014.¹⁹

Moreover, the incessant political chaos and the ensuing acts of violence across the MENA region have led to an enormous displacement of population throughout the Arab and North African world. The most widely publicized was the emergence of the so-called ‘boat-people.’ They included internally displaced individuals and various types of asylum-seekers as well as refugees from Libya and Tunisia, heading towards the shores of the European Union, signifying an adverse unwanted secondary effect of the Arab Winter beyond the MENA region.²⁰ Unsurprisingly, those desperate attempts to pursue safety and escape the violence by the illegal crossing of the Mediterranean Sea ignited waves of fear among European politicians as well as their citizens. The scale of the immigration made some social groups believe the newcomers might eventually “flood” their lands, and disrupt the living conditions at and beyond the shores of the

16 Barnett 2014.

17 Rivlin 2014: 2-3.

18 EuroNews 08-02-2013.

19 Rivlin 2014: 1-2.

20 Khallaf 2013: 8-9.

European Union. The situation initiated a stir of legislative activity across the continent, and increased patrolling of the Mediterranean waters to handle and control the arrivals from Northern Africa.²¹

In early 2015, the refugee crisis was further exacerbated due to the massive exodus by large groups escaping from conflict zones. The waves of refugee immigrants included large numbers of Libyan, Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan people heading towards Europe, mostly through Turkey. All these issues are in line with the analysis of Carlo and Sadian that toppling governments constitutes but “the first step in a long journey towards democratization.” This observation specifically applies to newly democratized countries, where “the polls resulted in the election of Islamist figures [are] less likely to implement genuine democratic reforms.”²²

European repercussions aside, current trends in the MENA region appear alarming. According to a recent account presented in The Economist, the political situation in the Middle East appears to be worsening, and the Arab world is described as “worse off than ever.”²³ Of course, there have been sparse exceptions from the overall negative trend. After the resignation of the Nahda-led government in Tunisia in 2013, the next years were marked by a partial resolution of the political crisis in the following years. In January 2014, a constitution was approved by the Tunisian parliament, and in October the parliamentary elections were won by Nida Tounes’ centrist and secular party, and its leader, Beji Caid Essebsi, was elected president. However, the events of June 2015, when a Jihadist gunman killed 38 people at a beach resort, cast a shadow on Tunisia’s progress.²⁴ Nevertheless, during 2015 the country was announced as the first Arab state in history to be considered as completely ‘free’ by Freedom House, an American organization monitoring civil liberties. Notably, according to Democracy Ranking Association in Vienna, Tunisia has advanced 32 positions upwards in the ranking of all monitored states.²⁵



THE ARAB WORLD IS DESCRIBED AS
“WORSE OFF THAN EVER”

21 Khallaf 2013: 8.

22 Carlo Sadian 2012: 23.

23 The Economist 09-01- 2016.

24 Akbar Drury 2015.

25 The Economist. 09-01- 2016.

The situation remains far from stable particularly in the states of Libya, Syria and Yemen. After the assassination of Qaddafi in 2011, and since the first democratic elections held in Libya in July 2012, during which the independents managed to win most seats in the newly established General National Congress (GNC), the country faced one wave of instability after another. Killing the American ambassador later that year during the Benghazi attack was symbolic of the numerous incidents that were to take place in Libya. In August 2014, a coalition called Libyan Dawn supported by Islamist and ethnic military groups, managed to take the capital city of Tripoli. Two months later Jihadists declared Derna to be under Islamist rule. The beginning of 2015 brought ISIS control over the port city of Sirte – it was also the time when Egypt started bombing ISIS targets in Libyan territories.²⁶

The stability in Yemen has been disturbed by repeating acts of terrorism, protest and armed conflict. Since the events of March 2011, when troops killed 45 protesters in the capital city of Sana'a, and al-Qaeda seized control of the large part of the Abyan province, the country's political stability has not been restored. The rise of petrol prices in 2014 provoked anti-government demonstrations, and forced President Hadi to dismiss the cabinet. In September that year, Houthi fundamentalist rebels captured most of the capital. At the beginning of 2015, Hadi was forced to flee to Aden. Soon afterwards, in March that year, an ISIS bombing resulted in 137 deaths in the capital city – an event, which triggered a military intervention on the part of a Saudi-led coalition.²⁷

The situation in Syria has been receiving considerable media coverage due to the multiple political actors involved in the area: the forces loyal to President Assad, military opposition, US-led coalition, Russia, ISIS, and Jabhat al-Nusra – a Syrian affiliate of Al-Qaeda founded in 2012. Consequently, the number of complexity of military conflicts has risen to horrendous proportions. In March 2013, ISIS assumed control of Raqqa. Later that year, United Nations reports the use of chemical weapons during anti-rebel attacks in the capital city of Damascus. 2014 is marked by the involvement of US-led coalition, and the consolidation of its Iraqi and Syrian territories by ISIS. 2015 brings no resolution to the multi-lateral conflict, and introduces Russian air strikes, chiefly against non-ISIS anti-Assad rebels.²⁸

²⁶ Bacchi 2015.

²⁷ The Economist 09-01- 2016.

²⁸ The Economist 09-01- 2016.

The events transpiring throughout the region speak for themselves. Other countries, even seemingly more stable, such as Egypt, also face difficulties, and their stability cannot be ensured in the long-term perspective. The year 2013 began with more than 50 people being killed during protests. Later that year President Mursi was removed from office through a military coup. During the ensuing anti-coup protests, the police killed over 800 demonstrators, and eventually the Muslim Brotherhood was banned in Egypt. On the positive note, the new constitution agreed on in a referendum in January 2014, and the following victory of the presidential election by Al-Sisi could mark a new turn for Egypt, especially considering the result of parliamentary elections held in December 2015, in which most seats were won by pro-Sisi independents.²⁹

The history of Russian involvement in the Middle East dates back to the times of the Cold War. The underlying goal of the decisions made at that time was to demonstrate the strength of the Soviet Union in the various parts of the Old World. Simultaneously, joint efforts to contain the possible expansion of the Soviet communism were conducted by the USA. In the later period, the Russian involvement in the MENA region can be associated with the cooperation with the local leaders, e.g. Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, after a long break lasting since 1972.³⁰

Considering the development of political events in the early 2010s, Russia is remembered for its air strikes targeted at rebel forces stationed in Syria. Unlike the US-led coalition against ISIS, the Russian offensive was aimed at destroying forces threatening President Assad's rule in Syria. Nevertheless, the ability to act fast and decisively rendered Russia a power to be reckoned with in the MENA region ever since the mid-2010s. The support and approval gained among various Middle Eastern states, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey – commonly believed to be primary strategic partners of the USA – have allowed Russia to extend and strengthen the scope of its political influences in the region to the point where certain sources speak of the Russian reemergence in the area.³¹

The development of events in the MENA region also spawned a rise of tensions on the axis between Saudi Arabian and Iranian influences. Symbolically, one can refer to acts such as arresting Ahmed Ibrahim al-Mughassil, a member of the Saudi Hezbollah, by Saudi intelligence before his attempted journey from Beirut to Tehran. From a broader perspective, such acts reaffirm that Saudi Arabia and Iran have remained in the state

²⁹ The Economist 09-01- 2016.

³⁰ McDermott 2013: 86.

³¹ Hannah 2016.

of the Cold War at least since the 1990s. With the advent of the turbulent period related to and following the events of the Arab Spring, both powers have been seeking to assert their power in the Arab world.³²



TEHRAN SUPPORTS PUTIN'S ACTIONS AGAINST
ANTI-ASSAD REBELS TO THE POINT OF CALLING
IRAN A RUSSIAN ALLY

Both powers have been involved in so-called proxy wars, two of which deserve particular attention. First, Saudi Arabia, under the auspices and support of the USA, has led a military intervention in the neighboring Yemen threatened by the domination of the Houthi rebels, nota bene, supported by Tehran. As already noted, the resultant chaos that erupted in Yemen facilitated the development of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Secondly, Iran has supported Syrian president Al-Assad by supplying arms and fighters, not only directly from Iran, but also from the Lebanese branch of Hezbollah. In the context of the previously discussed Russian influences in the region, it ought to be mentioned that Tehran supports Putin's actions against anti-Assad rebels to the point of calling Iran a Russian ally. Unsurprisingly, Iran's and Russia's actions have been criticized by the USA and Saudi Arabia, with the latter country supporting rebel forces believing in their capacity to remove Assad from office.³³

The most recent events include the complication of the situation in the Northern Syria, where the Kurds and the Turks have been set against each other, especially after capturing the border city of Jarablus controlled not by ISIS, but by a Kurdish military group called the People's Protection Units or 'YPG.' The offensive led by the Syrian army combined with the Turkish incursion resulted in a major fiasco in the YPG-controlled areas of Syria. It must be noted that the Turkish intervention was related to the long-standing perception of YPG as allied with Kurdish independence-seeking groups in Turkey. Note that as largely secular and anti-Jihadist, YPG used to be an ally-of-convenience for the Syrian government.³⁴

On the other hand, Turkish leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has publicly supported Jabhat Al-Nusra, a powerful Jihadist movement operating in Syria. However, as Turkey, as a NATO ally, offered its support of the American case in Syria against ISIS, the cooperation with YPG became a matter of secondary importance. During the Turkish inception, although

³² Powell 2016.

³³ Powell 2016.

³⁴ Mercouris 2016.

technically successful, Kurdish militia were viewed as terrorist forces and forced to withdraw from the area. The act was only mildly criticized by the USA; almost simultaneously, the American power hesitated to criticize the attempted coup in Turkey that transpired in 2016. Having failed to predict the Turkish-Kurdish tensions nearby the border, the USA declared not being involved in the local, often violent, campaigns led by Turkey against the Kurdish population.³⁵

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³⁵ BBC News 29-08-2016.

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"FREEDOM TO THE EMBASSY DETAINEES!" (AHMAD HASSAN AL-BANNA, MO'MEN TAHER FASHEEM [UNCLEAR], YASSER MOHAMMAD FAROUQ, AHMAD ABDEL-KAREEM) – CAIRO 2011/TUNIS 2012 ©DENIS BOCQUET

THE SO-CALLED ARAB SPRING, ISLAMISM AND THE DILEMMA OF THE ARAB LEFT: 1970-2012

MALEK ABISAAB

abstract

THIS ARTICLE ADDRESSES THE GROWING MARGINALIZATION OF THE ARAB LEFT SINCE THE EARLY 1970S, AND ASSESSES ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT, ESPECIALLY, THE RISE AND SPREAD OF NEOLIBERALISM IN FEW ARAB AND MIDDLE EASTERN COUNTRIES AND THE SIMULTANEOUS UPSURGE OF ISLAMISM. THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE SOVIET UNION EXACERBATED THE CRISIS OF THE ARAB LEFT, ESPECIALLY THE MARXISTS, WHO TRIED UNSUCCESSFULLY TO REVISIT AND CRITIQUE THEIR POLITICAL PROGRAMS, OBJECTIVES, AND METHODS AS WELL AS PROPOSE NEW SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS OF STATE AND SOCIETY. DEMOCRACY, THE NATIONAL QUESTION, STATUS OF MINORITIES, WOMEN'S AND HUMAN RIGHTS, TO NAME BUT A FEW CRITICAL ISSUES, APPEARING AT THE POLITICAL AGENDAS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTIES OF MAJOR ARAB COUNTRIES, WERE REFORMULATED OR APPROPRIATED BY VARIOUS ISLAMIST GROUPS ACROSS THE ARAB WORLD. PERPLEXED AND DIVIDED, THESE LEFTIST PARTIES TRIED TO RECLAIM THEIR POSITION AMONG THE MASSES. MANY OF

THEM LENT THEIR NUMBERS TO SECULAR BUT OPPRESSIVE ARAB REGIMES AS WELL AS POPULIST ISLAMIST PARTIES. OTHER LEFTISTS REMAINED OPPOSED TO BOTH SIDES, HAVING RESIGNED THEMSELVES FROM HISTORY, AWAITING A NEW "REVELATION" OR REVOLUTION WHICH FITS THEIR VISION OF AN IDEALIZED SOCIAL CHANGE. I ARGUE THAT DESPITE THE OSTENSIBLE SYNTHESIS BETWEEN ISLAMISM AND NEOLIBERALISM THE LAW OF THESIS-ANTI-THESIS-SYNTHESIS MAY GENERATE NEW SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONFIGURATIONS. IT MAY GIVE RISE TO DISTINCT HISTORICAL GROUPINGS, UNIFIED AROUND BROAD ISSUES, SUCH AS, GENDER EQUALITY, STATE SECULARISM, CONTROL OF PUBLIC SPACE, AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST ISRAEL AND WESTERN HEGEMONY.

NEO-LIBERALISM, ARAB SPRING, ISLAMISM, SECULARISM, ARAB LEFT, SYRIA, EGYPT

keywords

INTRODUCTION

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 augmented the crisis of the Arab Left, especially the Marxists-Leninists, who tried unsuccessfully to revisit and recast earlier political programs and methods of mobilization as well as propose new solutions to the problems of Middle Eastern state and society. Meanwhile, young Muslim reformists and modernists were engaged in exploring as well as critiquing a series of leftist ideas and demands. Democracy, economic modernization, national unity, resistance to Western imperialism, women's rights, human rights, and minorities' representation to name but a few strategic issues, appearing at the political agendas of major Arab Communist parties were reformulated and appropriated by diverse Islamist thinkers and activists across the Arab world. The ability of several Islamist movements to provide a host of social, economic and health services to its members has strengthened their popular appeal and ability to thrive apart from the state.

Today, Arab leftists are struggling to reclaim their lost position among the masses. Perplexed and divided they had lent their numbers either to "secular" but oppressive Arab regimes or to populist Islamist movements. Other leftists remain opposed to both sides of the political spectrum, having

resigned themselves from history, awaiting a new “revelation” or revolution, which fits their classical and probably utopian vision of historical change.

My article examines the growing marginalization of the Arab left since the early 1970s within Arab regional and international historical contexts and the manifestations of such marginalization in the upheavals that came to be known as the Arab Spring. “Arab Spring” refers in this study to the political, social, and civil uprisings, which unfolded from 2011 until today against oppressive states in the Arab World. I shed light on the gradual decline of Arab nationalism, and the forces of neoliberalism as they unfolded in a number of Arab and Middle Eastern countries, shaping religious ideologies and assisting in the emergence of Islamism in its various sociopolitical forms. By taking Egypt and Syria as two examples, I argue that the substantial power, which the Salafi Islamists (and the neo-Salafi) gained was a culmination of a long historical process dating to the 1970s.¹ I underscore the main factors behind the increasing appeal of Islamist discourses under Sadat (1918-1981); in Syria since the coming of Hafiz Asad to power in 1970 and the empowerment of Islamic political and civil organizations. Finally, I assess the current fragmentation and political indecisiveness of the Arab left and their implications for the masses engaged and touched by the Arab Spring. I identify the main positions taken by leftists today and the support they have gained, drawing upon the writings of leading leftist scholars and intellectuals. In the last section of my article, I note that the crisis of the Arab Left, whether through the engagement or disengagement of leftists in the upheavals is beginning to unleash forces which are detrimental to labor and women’s movements as well as to civil activism and resistance to global capital and American neo-imperial policies. Due to the broad geographical references and political connotations of the term Arab Spring, and the complexity and diversity of the term “Arab left,” I have limited myself to the major Marxist-Leninist Leftists in Lebanon and Syria. I should also note that I do not refer or discuss Arab liberal thinkers who have been misrepresented as leftists even if they have drawn in a sketchy way on Marxist class analysis.

¹ *Salaf* means ancestors such as the Prophet Mohammad, his early companions and the leaders of the first Islamic society. As a movement it emerged in mid-18th century in traditional, desert societies of the Arabian Peninsula. Its main inspirational figure was Muhammad ben Abdul Wahhab (1703-1792), the founder of the Wahhabi sect or Wahhabism. The guidelines of Salafism or Wahhabism are the lives, beliefs and practices of the righteous ancestors in order to cleanse religion from dissent, superstitions and paganism of the past. It calls for the elimination of Jahili (pre-Islamic) traditions and allegedly intends to purify religion; to unify Muslims against paganism; and to return to the original and authentic Islam. The following statement of Abdul Wahhab gives a clear idea about the doctrine of contemporary Salafi, or neo-Salafi organizations mainly like al-Qa’ida and its offshoots al-Nusra and ISIS. Abdul Wahhab stated that, “those who do not abide by [my] interpretation of Shari’a should be fought as if they were infidels (...) until they abide by the laws.” For more on Islamic movements read: Abu Samra 2007. For more on Wahhabism, see: AbuKhalil 2004; Dakhil 1998.

ISLAMISM IN EGYPT, 1918-1919

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. Its influence increased significantly in the early 1930s when Egypt was still under British colonial rule.² The Brotherhood cooperated with the Free Officers’ movement, a secret society within the Egyptian army, against King Farouk (1920-1965) and toppled him in 1952. After Nasser’s rise to power, however, the alliance between the Free Officers and the Brotherhood fell apart and the latter tried to assassinate him. Nasser arrested several followers of the Brotherhood and executed its leading members. Meanwhile, he was emerging into an Arab national hero following his confrontation with the British and French colonial powers in 1956. He reformulated socialism and promoted Arab Nationalism, spearheading a short-lived unity with Syria (1958-1961). In this context, he championed the cause of Palestine and its liberation, calling the masses to unite and form a sovereign Arab federation and resist European imperial domination. These hopes were shattered after the defeat (al-Naksa) in the second Arab-Israeli war 1967 but more importantly, Arab Nationalism as a political project received a severe blow. The defeat brought with it long and complex critiques of Arab nationalist thought, secularism, and the postcolonial state in order to arrive at an alternative model of political liberation and anti-Western activism. Islamism, in its Sunnite salafi and neo-salafi forms provided a powerful challenge to Western modernism and secular nationalism, which attracted many youth during the late 1960s. More importantly, the socio-economic and political forces of neoliberalism during the reign of Sadat (r. 1970-1981) helped buttress Islamist activities in Egypt. Sadat saw the Muslim Brotherhood as a counter balance to the Nasserites and the Communists, who opposed his neo-liberal economic policies as well as his plans to forge a peace treaty with Israel.³ Sadat aimed to alleviate Egypt’s huge economic strain caused by recurring wars with Israel. He solicited US support for a future peace agreement with Israel by expelling the 20,000 Soviet military experts from Egypt in July 1972.⁴ Before starting negotiations for peace, however, Sadat tried to restore the image of Egypt, by launching along with Syria a military attack on Israel on October 6, 1973. In 1978, he promulgated the Camp David Accords.

The Brotherhood welcomed Sadat’s ascendancy as President of Egypt, depicting him as a “devout Muslim.”⁵ The relationship between Sadat and the Brotherhood goes back to the early 1940s as Sadat had contacts with

² Cleveland, Bunton 2009; Rubin 2010; Egypt Muslim Brotherhood Documentary.

³ Salah 2001.

⁴ Cleveland, Bunton 2009: 374.

⁵ Salah 2001.

Hassan Banna and often attended his lectures and sermons. Nasser had relied on Sadat's liaison with Banna to appease the Brotherhood and also give an Islamic face to his regime. To that end, Nasser chose Sadat in 1965 to chair the Organization of the Islamic Conference to embellish the regime's Islamic character and increase its appeal to Muslims outside Egypt. Sadat released several members of the Brotherhood arrested in mid-1950s by Nasser and stressed the importance of building a state based on the twin elements of "Science and Faith."⁶

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IN 1980, THE RELIGIOUS PROGRAMS ON
THE LOCAL RADIO AND TV STATIONS
WITNESSED A 21% INCREASE

The official TV and radio stations broadcasted Muslim prayers five times a day while some state legislations were based on Shari'a (Islamic Law) injunctions. Sadat also reached an agreement with 'Umar al-Tilimsani' the Supreme Guide of the Brotherhood (1973-1986), to release Islamists on condition that they go to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet army. In this atmosphere of relative stability for the Islamists, salafi ideas and practices were publicly promoted and spread through a myriad of free booklets and books originating in Saudi Arabia (the Brotherhood's own literature was still officially banned). Sadat allowed a few Brotherhood intellectuals to assume their former occupations and appointed two former leaders of the Brotherhood as ministers. The first, Dr. Kamil became minister of the awqaf (religious endowments) and all the mosques in Egypt were put under the supervision of this ministry. The second, Dr. Majid, became the minister of information (controlling the radio and television, and a number of newspapers and journals). In 1980, the religious programs on the local radio and TV stations witnessed a 21% increase.⁷ Reference to Islam (particularly the shari'a) was dominant in plays, songs and daily news. Most TV stations were airing live performances of religious rituals like Friday prayer. Sadat legalized the major journal of the Brotherhood, Al-Da'wa (The Call), which served to improve the Brotherhood's public image and to spread their political message nation-wide. In this atmosphere, the co-opted Brotherhood leaders and intellectuals hardly commented on Sadat's domestic policies, or raised awareness about his relationship to the US and Israel.⁸

⁶ Salah 2001.

⁷ Salah 2001.

⁸ Salah 2001.

On their part, the Islamists held that Sadat was using them for his own goals and that his espousal of religion was not genuine. To them, Sadat appeared to be indifferent to Islamic law and pietistic practices.⁹ The Brotherhood however learnt to benefit from the "Open" policy of Sadat, as their followers grew in number especially among university students and recent migrants to Cairo from rural areas. Meanwhile militant puritanical Islamist groups were gaining ground, such as al-Jihad, al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Group) and al-Takfir wa-al-Hijra (Excommunication and Emigration). The last group rejected Sadat's policies and pledged to overthrow him due to his, "disgraceful peace treaty with the Jews" as they called it.¹⁰ Thus, on October 6, 1981 Sadat was assassinated while attending a military parade celebrating the 1973 October War.

Militant Islamist members were arrested, and others executed along with Muhammad Abdul al-Salam Faraj, the operation's mastermind. Shortly after (October 8th), the Egyptian police force launched a campaign against the city of Asyut, a stronghold for these Islamists. They committed a massacre but failed to take control of the city.¹¹ Leaders of these militant groups, who were imprisoned at the time of Nasser, were inspired by the teachings of Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), which formed the basis for most militant Islamist movements in the twentieth century. Qutb's views about Islam, modernism and the West radicalized a generation of young men recruited by Islamist movements world-wide. He was accused of planning to assassinate Nasser in 1954 before he and 18,000 members of the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested. Qutb was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor but was released in 1964 to be rearrested and executed in 1966 for the ideas he spread in his book, Ma'alim Fi al-Tariq (Milestones).¹² In Milestones, which acted as the Islamist Manifesto for the radicalized youth, Qutb argued that the salvation of humanity through Islam is an ultimate and absolute truth. He called on all Muslim believers to strive by all means to implement Islam and to eradicate all other systems of rule. In his view, all forms of rule and governments outside the framework of shari'a and Islam should be rejected because they have actually intercepted and seized the role of God through their secular (liberal or socialist) nature. Accordingly, the ultimate goal of the Islamists would be

⁹ Salah 2001.

¹⁰ Salah 2001.

¹¹ Salah 2001.

¹² Haddad 1983: 67-99.

to build al-Hakimiyya (God's rule on earth), which can only be achieved through the categorical destruction of the existing systems of governance.¹³

During the 1940s and the 1950s, the Muslim Brotherhood attracted a following among rural migrants to Cairo and urban middle class students and civil servants.¹⁴ During the time of Nasser, the Brotherhood's cadres suffered major blows as I noted earlier. But under Sadat, as Carrie Rosefsky Wickham noted, Islamist student associations, combining prospective specialists in the medical sciences, engineering, pharmacy, and agriculture, rejuvenated the Brotherhood's activities in Cairo and Alexandria.¹⁵ At the same time, these associations created diverse reformist and militant Islamist trends, with varied approaches to the state. Sadat's regime had encouraged religious activism on university campuses in order to suppress and marginalize the leftists. The Brotherhood's representatives, who enjoyed the support of community and family networks, were gaining new ground. They proselytized about their Islamic vision within the framework of socio-religious activities, such as "annual summer camps financed in part by government subsidies."¹⁶ Over the years, Salafi local leaders and not merely the Brotherhood, extended a range of social and economic services to depressed urban neighborhoods, especially in Alexandria.¹⁷ Much like the Brotherhood, however, their organizations attracted wealthy businessmen and professionals.

ISLAMISM IN SYRIA

Families of notables and large landholders dominated urban politics in Syria, who impeded the development of an organized and unified peasantry, and helped fuel its restlessness.¹⁸ In 1960, Hafiz Asad (1930-2000), Salah Jadid (1926-1993), Muhammad `Umran (1922-1972); Abdul Karim al-Jundi (1932-1968) and Ahmad al-Mir (b. 1920/21), who were residing in Egypt formed a secret organization within the Arab Nationalist Ba`th party, the

¹³ Sayyid Qutb believed that Islam is "the way of life ordained by God for all mankind, and this way establishes the Lordship of God alone – that is, the sovereignty of God – and orders practical life in all its daily details. Jihad in Islam is simply a name for striving to make this system of life dominant in the world. As far as belief is concerned, it clearly depends upon personal opinion, under the protection of a general system in which all obstacles to freedom of personal belief have been removed. Clearly this is an entirely different matter and throws a completely new light on the Islamic Jihad." (Qutb 2006: 86) For more on al-Hakimiyya read in full chapter 4, "Jihad in the Cause of Allah" (Qutb 2006: 63-86).

¹⁴ Munson 1988: 77.

¹⁵ Rosefsky Wickham 2013: 35-39.

¹⁶ Rosefsky Wickham 2013: 35.

¹⁷ Rosefsky Wickham 2013: 251-252.

¹⁸ Lefevre 2014: 28.

"Military Committee," which later became the military wing of the Syrian Ba`th Party.¹⁹ It aimed to reconstitute the party, as Hanna Batatu stated, and to purge the Syrian army from potential enemies, that is, those loyal to Nasser. Against Batatu, Umar Abdullah notes that the army strove in fact to recruit members of loyal sectarian communities, namely, the Alawite, the Druze and the Christian, three minority sects in Syria.²⁰ Asad's economic plans undermined the interests of local artisans and small traders as Rafael Lefevre noted.²¹ These elements coalesced with the discontent of marginalized Sunni dignitaries, as well as religious leaders drawing support from the middle and lower classes in major Sunni-dominated cities and neighborhoods.

After the disintegration of the United Arab Republic in 1961, the Military Committee started to gain influence within the ranks of the Ba`th party in Syria at large. This was exemplified by the coup of 1966 as gradually Asad, Jadid and `Umran had become the strongmen of Syria. Then, in 1968 the Syrian Ba`th party split into two factions: the first was led by Jadid and the other by Asad. The two fractions competed over decision-making within the party and the army, culminating in 1970 with Asad's coup against Jadid. He emerged as the single ruler of Syria and gradually controlled the army, the secret police and various intelligence agencies. In addition, all high-ranking positions in the army, state and the Party were given to loyal Ba`th members. Two historical events paved the way for Asad's ascendancy: The first was the loss of the Golan Heights in the second Arab Israeli war (1967):²² Asad, who was the minister of defense, accused Jadid and others of corruption and adventurism and held them responsible for the humiliating defeat of the Syrian army. The second was the 1970 Black September when king Husayn of Jordan (1935-1999) launched a military campaign against the PLO and Palestinian refugee camps in Amman. Asad refused to help the Palestinians unlike Jadid who sent the Syrian tanks to protect them only to be destroyed by the Jordanian air force.²³ Asad emerged unscathed while thousands of Palestinians were killed and the PLO moved its offices to Beirut.

After the 1973 Third Arab-Israeli war Asad tried to bring Syria closer to Western countries especially the US and its allies in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Lebanon. He supported harsh policies against the PLO

¹⁹ On the history of the Ba`th party read the seminal book of Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry: The Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and their Politics* (Batatu 1999: 144-155).

²⁰ Abdallah 1983: 52-53.

²¹ Abdallah 1983: 63.

²² Batatu 1999: 145.

²³ Batatu 1999: 174.

and attempted to bring it under his control. He also blocked any weapon transportation to the Palestinians and leftist parties during the first phase of the civil war (1975-1982). On the contrary, in 1976 the Syrian army intervened in Lebanon against the PLO-Leftist coalition and prevented the collapse of the right-wing Christian coalition. The American foreign minister at the time, Henry Kissinger, announced that peace would not come to the Middle East until Syria had taken administrative control of Lebanon. The US feared the creation of a strong leftist regime in Lebanon similar to that in Cuba.²⁴ The Syrian army, under the orders of Asad, helped the right-wing militiamen destroy a major Palestinian refugee camp, Tall al-Za`tar (5,000 were killed), and in 1977 assassinated Kamal Junblat (1917-1977), a leftist leader of the Lebanese National Movement.²⁵ The Syrian army helped the right wing Christian parties to rebuild their powers, and weakened the PLO-Nationalist Movement politically and militarily.²⁶ The Syrian policy in Lebanon started to change in 1978 when Egyptian president Sadat started peace negotiations with Israel. The Asad regime shifted its alliances drawing new ties with the PLO and the Lebanese Nationalist Movement and regionally with Libya, Algeria and Southern Yemen. In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon and the Syrian army was forced to evacuate most of the territories in Lebanon except for the Northern and the Eastern areas. They re-entered Lebanon in 1987 to end the explosive civil war but left the country again in 2005 as a consequence of the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri (1944-2005).²⁷

The initial attempts to found a branch of the Brotherhood in Syria occurred in Aleppo in 1935 by a group of university students who had studied in Egypt. Their efforts led to the unification of several Sunnite Muslim charitable organizations, and culminated in 1945 in the formation of an association called Shabab Muhammad. The latter's name was changed to the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁸ Dr. Mustafa Siba`i (1915-1964) became its first supreme guide until 1961. The Syrian Brotherhood spread among Sunnite Muslims in the cities and attracted the middle class, urban merchants, residents of the old city of Damascus, the ulama (religious scholars and

²⁴ Abdallah 1983: 68-79.

²⁵ The Lebanese National Movement (LNM), a coalition formed at the brink of the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990) and made up of secular national and leftist parties. It championed a political campaign to eliminate sectarianism. It called for the founding of civil courts, promotion of civil marriages across religious lines, and most importantly it proposed a democratic political system where resources and power sharing should be based on equity and merit rather than religious identity. It established an alliance with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) to achieve the proposed political reforms of the LNM; to defend the Palestinian revolution and refugee camps in Lebanon; and to support resistance against Israel. (Jurdi Abisaab, Abisaab 2014).

²⁶ Jurdi Abisaab, Abisaab 2014.

²⁷ Jurdi Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 106, 127, 213-214.

²⁸ Shamieh 2013: 349.



THE US FEARED THE CREATION OF A STRONG
LEFTIST REGIME IN LEBANON
SIMILAR TO THAT IN CUBA

jurists), and professional groups. Unlike the Egyptian Brotherhood it could not penetrate the Syrian army, most likely because of Syria's diverse sectarian and ethnic composition.²⁹

The Syrian Brotherhood rejected the policies of withdrawal and "quietism" known to the Sufi groups and adopted political activism and social action.³⁰ Under Siba`i the Brotherhood became one of the principle founders of the Socialist Islamist Front (SIF) as four of its members won parliamentary seats in 1949. Siba`i himself became the deputy chairman of the parliament. In 1961 the Brotherhood won 10 seats in the parliament and formed a bloc called the Islamic Cooperative league.³¹ In addition to partaking in parliamentary politics, the Brotherhood became involved in the war efforts against the Zionists during the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948, and in later years sent volunteers to be trained in military camps established by the PLO in Jordan.³² The model for this activism was the line of Jihad (sacred war for the purpose of converting non-Muslims to Islam) provided in their view by Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, the al-Salaf al-Salih (the virtuous companions of Prophet Muhammad covering the first three generations of Islam).³³ In the early 1950s a radical wing emerged among young members of the Syrian Brotherhood who perceived Siba`i's policies as a deviation from the ideal commitments of the organization. They attempted through their ties with members of the Egyptian al-Tanzim al-Khas (special military wing), to form a similar military unit in their own organization in Syria.³⁴ The militant Syrian Islamists who were part of this

²⁹ Abdallah 1983: 88-95.

³⁰ *Sufi* (from the Arabic word *tasawwuf*) is an Islamic mystical tradition which seeks to contemplate God through inner reflection and at times physical-spiritual exercise. The Sufis seek gnosis which is direct knowledge of God based on revelation or apocalyptic vision. The gnostic vision brings forth the idea that all worshippers of diverse creeds are similar and one. For more on Sufism see: Mathewson Denny 1994: 211-237.

³¹ Shamieh 2013: 352-355.

³² Shamieh 2013.

³³ Abdallah 1983: 88-95.

³⁴ The Egyptian Al-Tanzim al-Khas (TK) was founded in 1940 initially to fight colonialism and Zionism. Membership was strictly selective as only men (military or civilians) who displayed commitment and loyalty to the Brotherhood would be nominated. The nominated member should possess a great tolerance for secrecy, solid faith, and readiness to make sacrifices. During the 1940s the TK attacked British soldiers in coffee shops and night clubs and bombed military trains transporting British soldiers. In addition, they assassinated two Egyptian prime ministers in 1945 and 1948: Ahmad Maher (1888-1945) who opposed the candidacy of the Brotherhood in the 1944 parliamentary elections and Nuqrashi Pasha (1888-1948) for signing of the Bevin-Sidqi Protocol 1946 (revision of the 1936 Treaty between Britain

unit planned and executed several attacks on theatres and musical events. In 1964 the same Syrian Islamist unit instigated the 1964 Hama insurrection. Historians of the Islamic movement in Syria argued that the militant Islamists in the Brotherhood were terrified by the resolutions of the 1963 Conference of the Ba`th Party, which had come to power. The young Ba`th regime adopted a host of socialist economic, cultural, socio-religious, and legal reforms.³⁵ It called for the elimination of the Islamic waqf (religious endowments) system, and study of the religious sciences, and took steps to secularize personal status law. The Kata'ib Muhammad (Muhammad's Brigades) became the name of the organization of the militant Islamists who in 1964 organized an uprising in Hama, the third major Syrian city, and called on all Syrians to join their jihad against the Ba`th regime, which they branded not merely as un-Islamic or secular but ultimately atheist.³⁶ The uprising lasted 29 days. The Syrian Prime Minister, Amin al-Hafiz (1921-2009), ordered the army to quell the uprising at any cost.³⁷

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THE UPRISING LASTED 29 DAYS. THE SYRIAN
PRIME MINISTER, ORDERED THE ARMY TO QUELL
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The conflict between the state and the Syrian Ba`th party goes back then to the early 1960s during which time the Brotherhood elected new leaders and called for a change in the party's methods and Jihadist goals. A split occurred in 1969 between the Brotherhood branch in Damascus represented by `Isam `Attar (r. 1957), which rejected militancy against the Ba`th regime and other branches of the party. In northern Syria, Brotherhood leaders rose against `Attar and declared the necessity of armed Jihad against the state. In 1973 the Syrian President Hafiz Asad (1930-2000) proposed a new national constitution, which stressed the secular identity of the president. It was met with outright rejection from the Brotherhood who organized massive popular demonstrations and riots in the cities of Hims and Hama, the hotbed of the current Arab Spring. The regime crushed the demonstrations by force but the constitution was also ameliorated. It asserted that the

and Egypt). During the 1948 Arab-Israeli war the TK mobilized a number of military units to participate in the first Arab-Israeli war. The TK attempted to assassinate president Jamal Abdul Nasser in 1954. For more on the Syrian radical Islamists see: Barout, Darraj 2000: 260.

³⁵ It should be noted that the Ba`th version of socialism is distinctly different from the Marxist-Leninist concept of socialism or so-called 'scientific socialism.' Unlike the latter, which is premised on class struggle, the Ba`thist socialism is conflated with Arab nationalism that calls for the cooperation and unity of classes in Arab society against foreign aggression and feudalism.

³⁶ Barout, Darraj 2000: 268-269.

³⁷ Shamieh 2013: 356.

president of Syria must be a Muslim. Asad went as far as publicizing his conversion to Sunni Islam and started to observe Friday prayer.³⁸

The popular base of the Islamists grew in the late 1970s, which allowed the Lawyers' Union of Damascus and the General Conference of the Engineers, to call for an end to Martial law, and the emergency courts and stressed the need for a democratic regime. A general strike spread in major Syrian cities (outside Damascus) but yielded no political victories.³⁹ The radical Islamists then started to launch violent attacks against the regime. Marwan Hadid (1934-1976), a leading member and a co-founder of al-Tali'a al-Muqatila (the militant vanguard), called all Muslims to perform their "obligatory duty" to start Jihad (sacred struggle) against the 'atheist' regime of Asad.⁴⁰ Thus, on June 1979 they attacked the Artillery School of Aleppo and killed no less than 60 army officers and in February 1982 seized control of parts of the city of Hama and called on all the Syrians to join the Jihad.⁴¹ The retaliation of Asad's regime was severe: heavy artillery shelled the old urban center of Hama, and then tanks marched into the city destroying buildings, churches, mosques: an entire district was razed. Civilian casualties were also high as at least 10,000 inhabitants were killed. Then Asad promulgated the 'Law 49,' which categorized membership in the Brotherhood as a crime punishable by death. As a result, thousands who were siblings of Brotherhood members, friends and associates were arrested and executed without trial. Some others fled the country to Western capital cities where they formed the Islamic Front in Syria (IFS) that declared Jihad against the Asad regime.⁴²

Hafiz Asad died in 2000 and was succeeded by his son Bashar. Bashar initiated a few economic changes and liberal reforms. The growing frustration with the regime as such came not only from sectarian and ideological currents represented by the Sunnite Islamists. Bashar had allowed more investments in the economy through private capital and reduced state intervention. He also lifted the oil subsidy, farm subsidies, and significantly facilitated trade

³⁸ Cleveland, Bunton 2009: 400-401.

³⁹ Abdallah 1983: 112.

⁴⁰ In 1975, al-Tali'a al-Muqatila was founded by Marwan Hadid, an agronomist from Hama, and Said Hawwa (1935-1989), a teacher from the same city. Hadid was instrumental and effective in developing the Tali'a. He studied agronomy at the University of `Ayn Shams in Egypt and earned another degree in philosophy from the University of Damascus. He joined the Muslim Brotherhood at an early age and had a direct connection with Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. He also played a major role in the 1964 Hama insurrection and in the resistance against the 1973 secular Constitution. He was arrested in 1975 after a clash with the intelligence police forces (mukhabarat) and died under torture in 1976. (Barout, Darraj 2000: footnote 49; 320, 275).

⁴¹ Barout, Darraj 2000: 279.

⁴² Cleveland, Bunton 2009: 407.

with Turkey (thus encouraging limited neo-liberal reforms). These reforms led to the formation of a “new bourgeoisie” or the “third generation of Ba`thists” (or “the fat cats” as the new bourgeoisie groups were called in Sadat’s Egypt). Supported by the regime, “the fat cats” eventually dominated critical sectors of the economy, which had flourished through globalism, such as the import export business; the new banks; the new airline companies, and the new telecommunicating companies.⁴³ But this limited economic liberalization was not accompanied by fundamental socio-political and legal reforms associated with democratization. Consequently, the new bourgeoisie enjoyed a level of free movement, protected by the regime, while the vast majority of Syrians remained politically marginalized with no say in the decision making processes. Those who felt the brunt of Syrian neo-liberalism were largely the peasants, the urban poor and local merchants of the remote provinces whose interests were undermined by the “open” economic exchanges with Turkey. This may explain, to some extent why the earlier protests of the Arab Spring started out in rural areas and towns like Idlib, Dar`a, Homs, Hama and the like.

In line with the argument of Yasin al-Haj Salih, Muhammad Jamal Barout, a Syrian scholar and international researcher finds that:

“The most violent episodes in Syria since 2011 have taken place in peripheral cities such as Deraa [Dar`a], then Douma, which carried the brunt of these episodes, and the cities of Rif Dimashq, all of which suffered from multidimensional marginalization, oppression by local authorities, and repression by an arbitrary central government, and received a few benefits from [the country’s] economic growth.”⁴⁴

The Syrian left (members of the ruling National Front) have already been co-opted by the ruling Ba`th party, while the independent leftists are largely ineffective consisting of a few prominent intellectuals who have no social base and capabilities for mobilizing the youth. The Islamists, in comparison, have publicized their views among hundreds of young men and women through an array of civil organizations. They received strong financial and political support from major Arab oil countries, Turkey, and Western governments, which paved the way for their forceful and massive participation in the current civil war in Syria. It is important to note, however, that the diverse religious and sectarian composition of the Syrian population sets it apart from Egypt and Tunisia where Muslim minorities play no role in supporting the state. The presence of militant

⁴³ Al-Haj Salih 2008.

⁴⁴ Barout 2011: 1.

Salafi Sunnites in the Syrian opposition forms a real threat to the status and existence of several Muslim minority groups such as the `Alawites, the Druze, the Twelver Shi`ites and the Isma`ilis as well as the Christians including Armenians and Assyrians.

Evidently, much of the energies of the leftist parties around the Arab World have been absorbed by struggles against oppressive systems of governance leading to physical extermination of whole cadres of Communist parties. The Syrian-Lebanese Communists, much like their counterparts in Iraq and the Sudan, have nurtured traditions of resistance to state tyranny, global capital, and colonialism. The programs proposed by the Iraqi Communists stressed agrarian reforms that would limit abuses by the large landholders, decrease taxes, offer governmental loans, and, more important, give small lots of land for landless peasants.⁴⁵ They also supported secularization and state-directed initiatives to privatize religion and prevent the clerics from shaping questions of political representation, public education, and family law. The Syrian-Lebanese Communists, much like the Iraqis, were directly touched by the Arab Spring. They too have called since the inception of their parties, for abolishing of economic concessions given to foreign companies in countries adjacent to Israel. They struggled to build independent trade union movements, and women, youth, and labor associations. They brought attention to the way British and French colonialism in Greater Syria as well as militant Zionism has destroyed local production, decreased the value of the land, and created unemployment in rural and urban locales. The founders of the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), inspired by the Soviet Union, proposed a program for social modernization and economic development distinct from the model offered by capitalist Europe, which the majority of people associated with colonialism.⁴⁶ During the Cold War (1947-1991), they played an important role in anti-state and anti-Israeli resistance movements, allying themselves with the PLO and other leftist organizations, which came to form the Lebanese National Movement. Following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the departure of the Palestinian Liberation Movement (PLO), the Communists launched an armed resistance to liberate South Lebanon from Israeli occupation. Gradually, they clashed with political organizations supported by Syria, and lost ground to powerful foes, namely, Islamist organizations. Several leading Communist figures, thinkers, journalist, teachers, and unionists, were assassinated by militant Islamists, and scores of leftists were denied access to areas historically known to be loyal to the Communists. Meanwhile, the disintegration of communism in the Soviet Union during the early 1990s

⁴⁵ Jurdi Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: Chapter 4.

⁴⁶ Jurdi Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 82. For more on the spread of communism among students, see: Batatu 1978.

dealt a blow to their political programs, and commitments. Unlike the Islamists, who pushed forward their agendas, programs, and aims during the Arab Spring, the Communists were for the most spectators, trying to find a way to shape the views of the rebellious masses and lead them.

With these historical experiences and backgrounds to Arab leftist activism, we are better equipped to understand the diverse approaches as well as the confusion surrounding the reception of the Arab Spring reflected in the statements of Communist thinkers. Notwithstanding, they have attempted to suggest ways in which the leftists should act in the face of the massive upheavals and destructive wars unfolding in the region, and discuss the approach, which leftists must take toward the Islamists and the Arab regimes involved in these upheavals.

THE LEFT AND THE ARAB SPRING

The waves of street protests and demonstrations, which swept the Arab cities, were quickly described by many Arab leftist organizations and thinkers, as revolts for freedom, bread and dignity.⁴⁷ The left recognized the anger of the masses and sympathized with their needs, hoping that profound transformations will ensue.⁴⁸ This spontaneous enthusiasm for the Arab Spring soon started to change paving the way for a cacophony of leftist critiques. Some leftists watched with dismay the outcome of the parliamentary elections in Egypt and Tunisia and questioned the support of Western powers as well as Saudi Arabia and Qatar for these developments. A number of leftists cautioned against optimism noting that the demise of Asad's regime in Syria would signal a new phase in American domination over Arab politics because Syria is "the last bastion of Arab nationalism."⁴⁹ Another group of leftists, however, retained their earlier optimism insisting on the need to respect liberal principles of democracy, political diversity and human rights, without turning to the local realities of the Syrian and Egyptian settings. This group, hardly familiar with the ideas and practices of the Islamists and their sources of legitimacy have underestimated their power and placed their trust in the promises of "revolutions" and something else which I will describe as a teleology. This teleology shows that history is a progress, and its "natural" course is change in the direction of a secular democracy, a change away from public religion. They draw support for this teleology from Europe itself.⁵⁰ Fawwaz Traboulsi, a Marxist

47 Traboulsi 2012a: 6, 7.

48 Mroue 2014: 328.

49 Hamzi (interview) 27-04-2012.

50 Khalil Salim finds that the Egyptian Islamists do not have a socio-economic and



THE DEMISE OF ASAD'S REGIME IN SYRIA
WOULD SIGNAL A NEW PHASE IN AMERICAN
DOMINATION OVER ARAB POLITICS
BECAUSE SYRIA IS "THE LAST BASTION
OF ARAB NATIONALISM"

thinker articulates this discourse as he divides the current Arab left into two neat clusters.⁵¹ The first, he argues consists of nationalist leftists and Communists who support "dictatorships" like the Syrian regime merely on the basis of its anti-American alliances and resistance to Israel. The second group, he adds, are liberals and former Marxists who expect a Western military intervention (following the Libyan scenario) to deliver democracy to Arab countries. Traboulsi fails, however, to account for the leftists' understanding of the Islamists' role in the power structure following the Arab Spring.⁵² Clearly, the leftists who looked with suspicion at the Syrian opposition viewed the Salafis as an impediment to democratic change but also as an extension of Western Imperialism. The leftists who supported the toppling of the Syrian regime through militancy or/and external intervention have given little consideration to the role of the Islamists in the new configurations. This is the position of those who fetishize the poll box, supporting the removal of a dictatorship even if there is a good chance it may lead to another one.⁵³

What does it mean to be a leftist today, is a central question that Traboulsi raises in one of his recent essays. The leftist, he answers, is someone who connects the issue of freedom to equality. Attaining democracy is as such imperative and an ultimate goal. It requires the destruction of dictatorships and replacing them with republican, civil and democratic laws and institutions. Traboulsi makes no mention of what type of a democratic model he is seeking, nor the pitfalls of a capitalist-driven and Western-styled liberal system. The teleology of progress, the modern separation of state and society, privatization of religion are all embedded in this Western-based narrative of democratic change but the socio-economic features

political platform to solve the problems that necessitated the revolution. He thus expected the Egyptian youth to reject an authority that relies on pre-modern laws to rule Egypt and address the crisis (Salim 2012).

51 Traboulsi 2012b.

52 Traboulsi 2012b.

53 Sa'adallah Mazra'ani, a leading figure of the Lebanese Communist party, argues that instead of criticizing democracy, which is a "civilizational achievement that has a timeless value," we, he meant the left, should focus our attacks on imperialism and its agents. (Mazra'ani 2012: 9).

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OPPRESSION IS WORSE THAN COLONIALISM
OR OCCUPATION

of this secular state remain vague. Traboulsi, envisions the desired democratic state to be a neutral body disentangled from the surrounding regional and international socio-political struggles. This demands “a political procedure that leads to the prohibition of religious institutions from intervening in the state and the state from meddling in religious institutions.”⁵⁴ Needless to say, the violence unleashed by the Syrian and Iraqi Ba`th regimes were both done in the name of prohibiting religious institutions from intervening in the state. So, how is this alternative viable? Traboulsi’s imagined future state could be considered a liberal state along Western democratic lines. In other words, he dismisses the complex reality of non-Western post-colonial modern states and their political and economic dependency, and the position they occupy in the world system. Moreover, he overlooks the Islamists’ hegemony on politics and public life in several parts of the Arab world, treating it simply a phase or chapter in this teleology. As such, neither the Islamists nor the alternative secular forces are treated in any depth or importance in leftist accounts.

The other limitation of the liberal and quasi-Marxist perspectives on the Arab Spring is their total neglect of the intricate regional and international dimensions of the conflicts taking place within national borders. On the one hand, these perspectives lump many diverse social classes under the term “the masses” and come to venerate them as independent local actors who want to change their conditions through “revolt” read as any form of armed uprising. They brush aside the complex international networks, which has been created in globalized ways, which have precisely undermined and minimized the effectiveness of local actors and their intentions and goals. They overlook also subtle forms of imperial intervention and schemes of international powers shaping and changing reality as seen and experienced locally. Muhammad Sayyid Rasas, a Syrian leftist thinker, draws attention to foreign factors and how they were adapted by Syrian insurgents, especially leftists, who oppose the Asad regime.⁵⁵ He draws attention to the statement, made by a leading member of the Arab Workers Revolutionary Party (AWRP), in Fall 2002, on the eve of the American invasion of Iraq, that, “Oppression is more dangerous than Colonialism.”⁵⁶ This idea, according to Rasas, gained momentum

among leftist parties [read Marxists] in Syria, [and the Arab world at large] after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, and the disillusionment experienced by thousands of Marxists. Riyad al-Turk, a leading figure in Syria’s Communist movement, popularized the same problematic and convoluted idea through his notion of, “the Colonial zero.” He argued that the American invasion of Iraq elevated the country from the level, “below zero” to “zero.” He gave credence to the notion that oppression is worse than colonialism [read American imperialism] or occupation [Israel].⁵⁷ In 1998, al-Turk embarked on visits to Europe and Canada, where was he was expected to give lectures and meet with Arab expatriates. During his stay in Canada, Rasas wrote, met secretly with American foreign policy officials.⁵⁸ This visit paved the way for the succeeding changes in his political agenda and the statements he made against his own earlier leftist positions. Years before the unfolding of the Arab Spring, al-Turk declared that:

“Western winds will rage in on Damascus. We have to be ready for them by putting on a new garb, one that is different from the Communist-Marxist one, and we should have a new political platform suitable to thwart these winds but without entering into a confrontation with them.”⁵⁹

Rasas continues to deconstruct the new political line of al-Turk who in 2003, encouraged the Central Committee of the Syrian Communist Party – the Politburo – to adopt a political agenda suitable for the coming of “Western winds” and asked the Committee to change the party’s name and abandon Marxist ideology. This move coincided with the passing of a law by the US Congress in 2003 known as the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSRA). According to Rasas, it was not until the US administration’s approach to the Syrian upheavals became known that al-Turk and his comrades in the Syrian opposition realized that they were betrayed by the American government. The latter declared that its target was to change certain policies of the Syrian regime in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine rather changing the regime itself. Indeed, al-Turk’s political project fell apart due to his abandonment of Marxist activism and its national-democratic principles.⁶⁰

54 Traboulsi 2012a: 9.

55 Rasas 2016.

56 Rasas 2016.

57 Rasas 2016.

58 Rasas 2016.

59 Rasas 2016.

60 Rasas 2016.

In conclusion, the dialectical historical forces of thesis-anti-thesis-synthesis may very well generate a new socio-political configuration, one that transforms the relationship between the left, Islamism and neoliberalism. The struggle against Israel and American imperial aims in the Middle East has become the basis for a new historical grouping of certain Islamists, neoliberals and leftists. At the same time, the demand for secularism, state democracy, espousal of gender equality and minority rights have become a rallying point for another historical grouping of leftists and neoliberals drawing their inspiration from experiences particular to the West. There is little hope at the moment that the leftist-liberal narrative of progress toward a secular liberal society free of Islamists will be shaken off to pave the way for more complex and fruitful understanding of the relationship between political economy, secularity and public religion in Arab society. Leftists will have to revisit their current perspectives, and approaches toward religion in general, and various forms of Islamism in particular. I suggest that studying and learning from the experiences of Latin American leftist groups, including those tied to the liberation theology movements is an important step in this direction. It should be coupled with a serious attempt to cooperate and collaborate with selective Islamist groups against Imperial hegemonic powers to achieve concrete goals tied to the attainment of social justice, such as, equal distribution of wealth, resistance to globalized capital, prevention of environmental disasters, to name but a few. These goals have to be pertinent to both leftists and Islamists, rather than being transient. Leftists are required to deconstruct Western liberalism and universalistic values of secularism in order to accommodate new models of resistance, and utilize the potential of religious subjects and activists, who are supportive of leftist goals.

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by D. Bocquet

"FREEDOM TO ALAA' ABD – AL FATTAH!" – CAIRO 2011 ©DENIS BOCQUET

UNTANGLING THE LEVIATHANS OF THE ARAB SPRING

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WHEN WE SAY THAT THE 'ARAB SPRING' TURNED INTO AN 'ARAB WINTER,' WE ARE NOT REALLY UNDERSTANDING HERE THE DYNAMICS OF POPULAR UPHEAVALS AND REVOLUTIONARY PROCESSES, NOR THE POLITICAL MAPS AND THE POLITICAL GAMES OF THE ARAB WORLD." – CONCLUDES PROFESSOR AMAL GHAZAL FROM DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY, SPECIALIZING IN MIDDLE EASTERN HISTORY.

INTERVIEW WITH **AMAL GHAZAL**
BY LASHA MARKOZASHVILI

It takes enormous effort and resources to organize a revolt of the scale of Arab Spring; were there observable early warning signs of preparing the stage for the revolutions [for instance activities of interest groups, foreign impulses etc.]?

We have to differentiate between two phenomena here: the spontaneity that characterized the eruption of the uprisings, collectively known as the 'Arab Spring,' and their deep-rooted causes. The warning signs had always been there but those were neither the activities of interest groups nor

foreign impulses. Those had been (and remain) the miserable political and economic conditions in the Arab countries. The uprisings took us by surprise precisely because they had no particular a priori form of organization. Yet this does not mean that we did not immediately understand what they were about. As such, the uprisings are about a chain of events that had been in the making for decades, yet erupted spontaneously; they were ignited by an immediate grievance, yet caused by political repression, rampant corruption, poverty, neo-liberal economic policies and lack of equal economic development, and the collapse of the social contract between the rulers and the ruled.

Let us remember the chain of events called the 'Arab Spring:' 'Thawrat al-Bouazizi' (the al-Bouazizi's Revolution), then 'Thawrat Tunis,' (Tunisia's Revolution), then 'al-Thawrāt al-Arabiyya' (The Arab Revolutions). If anything, this mirrors the process itself and how the immediate cause embodied in an individual grievance was symptomatic of both national and regional grievances. The efforts to organize followed, rather than preceded, the uprisings. Organization was done at several levels and in stages. First, you had local activists and political parties trying to organize and coordinate efforts on the ground to keep the momentum going, to press for changes, and to prevent a return to the status quo. Organization was more of an ad hoc process, lacking discipline, a clear agenda and any specific hierarchy – all elements that provided the uprisings with a democratic tenor. Then you had the state and its institutions as well as foreign powers also trying to organize counter responses and contain the situation as it quickly unfolded. But once the uprising spread beyond Tunisia, we moved into a different level of organization by all parties involved, and of containment. In terms of the latter, it became not a matter of merely foreign impulses, but foreign direct interference, as well as regional interference, to shape the course and outcome of the uprisings.

Considering the first question, did you expect that the movements would end up with regime changes (at least in some cases)? We have seen many uprisings however without real results, especially in the MENA countries where the anciens régimes have been strong for decades. What made the process itself so successful?

I cannot say I expected regime transitions per se right at the onset of the uprisings, although there was always the hope for regime change.

I expected some ‘change’ though, and I was not sure first in what form or shape it would come. It all depended on the resilience of the protestors; the more they persisted and refused to abandon the squares and the streets, the more a regime change was becoming a possibility to entertain. The first slogan of the protestors in Tunisia was “dégage,” which means “leave.” No doubt Tunisians wanted not just Zayn al-Abidin bin Ali to leave, but also the regime itself that he represented. Given the level of political repression the Arab political regimes have been known for and what was at stake for the Arab regimes threatened by the uprisings, one was worried about the level of brutality with which those regimes could push back to bring the uprisings to an end. The resilience of the Tunisian uprising as well as the neutrality of the Tunisian army turned that hope into an expectation – a cautious one however – for regime change. It was one thing for bin Ali to flee the country, it was another for his regime to just dissipate. The different actors in the Tunisian uprising knew the fight was far from over after Ali’s departure. In an article for the Middle East Research Project, the journalist Graham Usher divided the Tunisian uprisings into two parts, with the second one between January 30, when bin Ali fled to Saudi Arabia and March 4, when the interim Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi called for national elections for a Constituent Assembly. It is during the second that Tunisians were adamant about a regime change and not just cosmetic changes.

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THERE WAS NO DOUBT THAT THE
ARMY WAS SACRIFICING MUBARAK TO
PRESERVE THE REGIME

However, Egypt was a different case, especially in terms of its army’s position in the country’s politics and economy, and Egypt’s significance in regional and global politics, not the least because of its borders with Israel. Surely, Mubarak’s rule had witnessed the rise of a new economic elite not directly tied to the army, but he nevertheless represented the army rule and interests. When the army’s spokesperson announced the deposition of Mubarak, like many, I was ecstatic. That was not a small achievement for those who dared tanks and bullets, persisted and provided us with one of the most historic moments we had witnessed. Nevertheless, we knew that this was not going to be regime change per se. Despite the sense of victory we had, there was no doubt that the army was sacrificing Mubarak to preserve the regime. We waited to see how that would unfold. Many observers, including myself, doubted the wisdom and the sincerity of the most significant organized power during the uprising, the

Muslim Brotherhood, to lead the transition into a new regime. They surely did not disappoint and mismanaged the transition period.

It had by then become clear that the uprisings had seriously destabilized regional politics and that a firmer pushback from regional and international powers was to be expected. The other sites of popular uprisings were Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen, with Syria gradually becoming one as well. Bahrain became the litmus test for how far regional powers were willing to go to contain and derail the uprisings. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates sent their troops on March 1, 2011, effectively putting an end to any possibility of a regime change. Libya witnessed a regime collapse, not so much change (if by the latter we mean that the prior political regime would be replaced by a new one representing anything of a ‘regime’). International military intervention, due to local, regional and international calls, ensured the regime collapse but also contributed to the difficulty of establishing a new regime. Similarly, regional and international interference in Yemen and Syria have locked horns in a bid to either affect regime change or prevent it. The uprisings by then were no longer local acts of rebellion and revolt. They were used as platforms for civil and proxy wars.

So, what made the process of shaping the results so successful? Military intervention and brute force (Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen), lack of political experience and maturity in the opposition (Libya and Syria), the sectarian scarecrow (Bahrain, Syria and Yemen), the reckless behavior of those who led the transition period (the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as a primary example). While Tunisia is considered a success story in terms of regime change, the process is being seriously undermined by a poor economy and regional instability, with the situation in Libya in particular weighing heavily on Tunisia’s economy and stability.

Do you think that it was a real revolt of the masses? If we evaluate the amount of involvement of elites, can we say that the wave of revolutions was an outcome of grass roots incentives?

I have no doubt that it was a revolt of the masses. Those who filled the streets were students, middle-class professionals, civil-society activists, workers, unemployed and people of all walks of life who were fed up and looked for a better future. While the middle class played a significant role, not much could have been done without the participation of the working class, and the unemployed. Popular

uprisings have their own momentum and their own architecture. Larbi Sadiki, one of the first scholars to analyze them in contemporary Arab societies, has highlighted the key role in popular uprisings of the Khubz-istes, the bread seekers whose livelihood was threatened, and that of the Hit-istes, the unemployed who abandoned quietism during protests. That is exactly what we witnessed during the recent uprisings. Without the Khubz-istes and the Hit-istes, they wouldn't be 'popular' uprisings. Moreover, the uprisings were preceded by protests on a smaller scale in previous years, mainly by disenfranchised workers in Tunisia and Egypt. The works of Joel Beinin and John Chalcraft are most pertinent here in order to understand this genealogy. Yemen too had been witnessing grassroots mobilization for two decades prior to the uprisings. Thus, the uprisings were by the masses and for the masses, before elites stepped in. Whether we are talking about an economic elite, a political one or a religious one, when they got involved, they did so realizing the uprisings either provided opportunities or threatened their status and privileges. Their role was either to make gains from the uprisings, or to co-opt and derail them. They neither caused them nor led them.

What was a general response from the religious leaders [elites] and how did their response portray on political processes?

It was very clear from the very beginning that the uprisings would benefit the religious movements who had played an oppositional role to the state, such as al-Nahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, Syria and Libya, the Houthis and others in Yemen, and the various Shii groups in Bahrain. They had the numbers and the means for mobilization and organization. In both Tunisia and Egypt, they played no role, as parties or political movements, in the initial stage of the uprisings. They were caught by surprise and took some time to assess the situation and decide what steps to take. The Nahda assumed a role after the ousting of bin Ali, and the Muslim Brothers held back their participation during the "Day of Rage" on January 25, 2011 and waited until January 28 – mostly under pressure from the Brotherhood youth – to participate in the demonstrations. As such, none of these two can claim any role in the early stage of the uprisings despite their efforts to rewrite history and change the narrative. This is not meant to deny the importance of their experiences and rhetoric, as active opposition movements, in the collective spirit of state-opposition nor to deny their effective roles in the uprisings once they decided to participate. As for Bahrain, Libya, Syria and



THE RACE TO CLAIM RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY CONTINUES

Yemen, each has its different story, with Bahrain, Syria and Yemen's uprisings containing sectarian dimensions that have further enabled their manipulation. Whatever the case is, the significant role religious movements have played since the uprisings and the appeal they have had as movements able to lead political processes and transition periods – regardless of their degree of success – have added fuel to an ongoing debate about who can claim and represent religious authority, and how to conceive the relationship between Islam and politics. The contenders are many, not just movements with a broad popular base, but also smaller ones, in addition to the state itself, and its religious institutions, such as al-Azhar in Egypt. As a pushback against the uprisings and their ripples across the region, and as a tool of both domestic and foreign policies, some Arab states have been actively seeking to present Islam as a 'quietist' religion that should be uncoupled from political activism. In this case, protest is presented as akin to fitna (discord), that leads to disorder and chaos. Islam's role here is to maintain the status quo, not to challenge it; to delegitimize protest, not be one of its vehicles. Such efforts have been led by the governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that have far-reaching media to articulate such definitions of Islam.

Will they be successful? Not really. The uprisings are by their very nature very politicized events that articulate economic and political grievances. Only temporarily and only among few would this whole rhetoric of fitna work. Much money needs to be spent addressing the underlying grievances for a "quietist" Islam to make a significant difference. While Qatar's role during the uprisings was to provide platforms and support for religious movements endorsing the uprisings, namely the Muslim Brothers, its goal did not differ much from that of Saudi Arabia and the UAE: to co-opt and contain the uprisings. The battle to define the relationship between Islam and politics and the race to claim religious authority continues. The emergence of ISIS has made the battles fiercer and more urgent.

How do you assess the reaction of the international community to developments of the Arab Spring?

The reaction was what one expected. Stability has always been the rule of the game when it comes to the international powers. Stability secures the international powers' access to resources and markets, as

well as the rules of the political games they have sponsored, including the stability of Israel's borders. To be sure, we are not here talking about the broad meaning of stability, one that concerns the livelihood and safety of the citizens of Arab countries. Citizens are invisible for international powers, as long as they do not threaten the stability of the regimes who are the custodians of foreign interests. Thus, the uprisings set the alarms and set international powers on a race to try and determine or contain the immediate outcomes. They did so in collusion with both local regimes and regional powers. Syria serves as the ultimate example here. The Syrian case also illustrates how the responses to the uprisings provided an opportunity for new international power brokers, such as Russia, to not only have an influence on local and regional developments but also to make Syria a site of international competition reminiscent of the Cold War.

“ THE UPRISINGS WERE EVENTS THAT PUNCTURED A LONG WINTER OF POLITICAL OPPRESSION AND ECONOMIC CRISES, RATHER THAN A SPRING THAT FOLLOWED A WINTER

While we should not think of the international powers' interests in isolation from local regimes and regional powers, we should not think of regional powers as having no interests of their own. For example, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, all allies of the USA, played a significant role in determining the outcome of the uprisings, not necessarily in coordination with the USA. These are stakeholders and competitors for regional influence and dominance. They have their own sponsored actors and own agendas. Thus, the international powers' meddling in the uprisings is not to be seen in isolation of regional meddling and the latter is not to be seen as merely a surrogate of the international one.

What is your general evaluation of the outcome? What can we expect in five-ten years from now?

The Arab uprisings have been called the 'Arab Spring' to capture collective euphoric moments in contemporary Arab politics, and to point to the hope in positive change that fueled the uprisings and to the strong will of the people to bring about that change. However, to equate political upheaval, social unrest and economic hardship with a 'Spring' and to employ 'Spring' as a metaphor imposes certain

expectations and overburdens the actors seeking change. Given that it was Western media that described the uprisings as the 'Arab Spring,' I wonder if Arabs themselves, whose conditions engendered the uprisings, would have ever conceived their uprisings as such, knowing well what challenges, risks, threats and dangers their uprisings posed. Many were aware that what lay ahead was no less challenging than the conditions they sought to change. We should not forget that the masses had no particular leadership or hierarchy and had no specific strategy. Thus, there was no roadmap and no detailed plan to follow that would determine what would come next. They knew they wanted change, better economic conditions, more freedom and less repression. They demanded those. Answering their demands was not something that fell on their shoulders, or on their shoulders alone. Their agency had its limits. Moreover, when we say that the 'Arab Spring' turned into an 'Arab Winter,' we are not really understanding here the dynamics of popular upheavals and revolutionary processes, nor the political maps and the political games of the Arab world. If anything, the uprisings were events that punctured a long Winter of political oppression and economic crises, rather than a Spring that followed a Winter. The uprisings, cannot, alone, usher in a spring.

Unless we understand the uprisings as being part of an ongoing process, and what has followed as an interregnum with "morbid symptoms," to use Gilbert Achcar's analytical framework, we can't serve them justice. The uprisings functioned as earthquakes that upset the status quo and that brought all the problems, crises and malaise of the Arab countries to the surface. For example, when assessing the outcomes, instead of lamenting how the collapse of the Gadhafi regime led to the break-up of the Libyan state, we should rather look at how such regimes had destroyed civil society, failed to invest in civil citizenship, and impoverished the population, both economically and intellectually, providing them with no tools to effectively manage political upheaval. The same applies to Syria. Although it has not witnessed regime change, it is in the worst shape. What the Syrian case reveals – among other things – is the extent to which the regime is willing, with help from regional and international powers, to destroy the country and the future of its citizens for the sake of survival. The regime's supporters say that it is a bulwark against an Islamist takeover, but what are those feared Islamists but the products of Arab regimes' policies?

Thus, I would not link the outcomes of the uprisings – in terms of wars, chaos and instability – to the uprisings themselves. The outcomes we witness today have historical roots that moments of upheaval could not remedy but have tried to dislodge. The outcomes have mostly depended on other actors, those with power in its different forms

and shapes, and at the local, regional and international levels. When Saudi Arabia and the UAE decided to send troops to Bahrain, this was not the protestors' fault. When Yemen and Syria turned into proxy-wars, you do not blame the protestors who asked for better living conditions and more political freedom. When al-Sisi took over, the blame is on the system itself that has made the Egyptian military what it is, and on the Muslim Brotherhood for gambling with the fate of the country while in the transition period, out of short-sightedness and misplaced self-confidence. Whatever the case is, today's outcomes are not the definitive or the ultimate ones. This is a phase of brutal backlash to the uprisings, but it is not the end of the story.

So what do I expect 5-10 years from now? Not much in terms of stability and institution building. Egypt is heading towards a disaster, most likely towards another popular uprising that will be characterized by chaos and violence, and most likely the next one will be completely headless. Tunisia, considered a success story, is seriously threatened by a dire economic situation, by the impact of environmental changes on already impoverished regions, by the persistence of corruption and by the violence and chaos in Libya. What the near future holds for Algeria will also leave its huge imprint on Tunisia and may throw the whole situation in North Africa off balance. Unless we see changes in Saudi Arabia's regional policies and in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, no significant progress will be made in Bahrain, Syria or Yemen. What international powers decide remains the determining factor. And there is the Palestinian question that has been a casualty of the aftermath of the uprisings. Given the general tumult in the region, it has been relegated to the backburner although it has its central place in the genealogy of Arab popular uprisings. How things eventually unfold in Gaza and the West Bank and how they connect to the regional situation is something to be kept in mind.

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POLITICAL ISLAM NEEDS TO BE UNCOUPLED FROM THE UTOPIAN VISION TO WHICH IT HAS ATTACHED ITSELF, AND WHICH IS GROUNDED IN NEITHER HISTORY NOR REALITY

Thus, any discussion of expectations in the next 5-10 years is fraught with risk. There is much unpredictability given the many parties involved and the dependency of any major developments on regional and international factors and actors. Whatever happens, the long-term disasters in Syria and Yemen are regional challenges that may overshadow or undermine any future positive developments. Their devastating humanitarian situation will cast a dark shadow

for a long time. At another level, there is one outcome worth taking into consideration. This pertains to what we call political Islam, represented by the various movements and parties advocating the rule of the Sharia and the Islamization of politics. Of whatever stripes and colors they are, they have (ab)used people's grievances to promote themselves as alternatives to the status quo with the "Islam is the solution" mantra. As the uprisings and their aftermath have revealed that there is an appetite by a good majority of people to give this a try, defining the relationship between Islam and politics, the religion's role in state institutions and state policies, and who claims religious authority over whom, are questions that will shape the future. If unaddressed and unresolved, they have the potential to continuously undermine stability and state building in the region. However this settles, it needs to be uncoupled from the utopian vision to which it has attached itself, and which is grounded in neither history nor reality.

Regardless of the outcomes, and regardless of the future, we had every right to celebrate the popular uprisings. As Arabs of the generations post-1967, the uprisings changed our collective political psyche. Along with the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, they were events that provided us with precious moments of enormous hope and pride, and restored faith in our collective will and in a better future. The aftermath brought us back to a bitter reality but the uprisings have already taught us that changing reality is always a possibility.

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by D. Bocquet

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WILL **THE SPRING** COME AGAIN?

MOHAMMED A. BAMYEH

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abstract

THREE PROCESSES ARE CENTRAL TO UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE EARLY PROMISE OF THE ARAB SPRING, AND ITS TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS FIVE YEARS LATER: (1) COUNTER-REVOLUTION: UNDERTAKEN BY THE INTERESTS THAT BENEFITED FROM THE OLD REGIMES, AND THAT SOUGHT TO KEEP IN PLACE AS MUCH OF THE OLD ORDER AS POSSIBLE. (2) MILITARIZATION: WHAT HAD BEGUN AS PEACEFUL PROTEST SURROUNDED BY GREAT LOCAL MAJORITIES, GAVE RISE TO A SCENE IN WHICH NO FACTION COULD RELIABLY CLAIM TO REPRESENT "THE PEOPLE" AS A WHOLE. (3) GEOPOLITICS: WHAT BEGAN AS POPULAR, INDIGENOUS PROTESTS IN WHICH NO EXTERNAL POWER HAD ANY ROLE, GRADUALLY TURNED INTO INTERNATIONAL CRISES, IN WHICH KEY DECISIONS WERE ONCE AGAIN IN THE HANDS OF GEOPOLITICAL ACTORS, AND NO LONGER IN THE HANDS OF POPULAR MOVEMENTS. THIS ARTICLE DISCUSSES THE ORIGINS AND DYNAMICS OF THESE THREE FACTORS, AND ENDS BY ARGUING THAT LOOKING AT CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

BEHIND THE CURRENT FAÇADE OF ARAB POLITICS, IS KEY TO APPRECIATING THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF THE ARAB SPRING.

ARAB SPRING, REVOLUTION, CIVIL WAR, GEOPOLITICS

keywords

THOSE WHO JOIN REVOLUTIONS SUDDENLY AND IN LARGE NUMBERS TEND TO EXPECT THEM TO BE SHORT EPISODES THAT WILL DELIVER UTOPIAN RESULTS. IN REALITY, REVOLUTIONS TEND TO BECOME LONG PROCESSES WITH INCREASING COMPLEXITY. THESE DEVELOPMENTS MAKE REVOLUTIONS ALWAYS SEEM DISAPPOINTING, ESPECIALLY GIVEN THAT THEY ARE UNLEASHED BY EXPECTATIONS OF QUICK DELIVERANCE, AND AN IDEOLOGY OF SIMPLE, EVIDENT TRUTH.

Now we know that the Arab revolutions that began during the last days of 2010 will be no exception to this general rule. The reasons are many: firstly, the interests that benefited from the old regimes fought back, as one would expect, to keep in place as much of the old order as possible. This is what we typically call the 'counter-revolution;' secondly, what began as peaceful protest everywhere, apparently surrounded by great local majorities, was in many cases replaced by a violent civil war in which no faction could reliably claim to represent 'the people' as a whole, the original agent of the uprisings; and thirdly, what began as popular, indigenous protests in which no external power had any role gradually turned into international crises in which key decisions were once again in the hands of geopolitical actors, and no longer in the hands of popular movements.

All of the above is part of the character of the current scene, five years after the beginning of a new era in modern Arab history. I would like to devote this article to describing how these three dynamics emerged, but suggest at the end that what I had once described as "the Arab dark age (1973-2011)" is actually over. Not because bad things do not happen, nor because the revolutions will reach their destination soon. Rather, the dark age is over because of a new social dynamism in Arab culture that cannot be detected if we focus entirely on the dismal political scene.

The tendency of revolutions to reach generally acceptable destinations (not utopia) in the long-run is rooted in the fact that revolutions change the culture of those who had experienced them long before they change any real politics. Long-term change, after all, can only be based on cultural

change, not on occasional change of the instruments of power. Indeed, it can be said that the very last thing that a revolution changes in any society is its political structures.

THE COUNTER-REVOLUTION

The counter-revolution had its roots in the revolution itself. Since the Arab Uprisings possessed neither centralized leadership nor centralized organization, they found themselves relying on the 'clean part' of the old regime to finish the revolution on their behalf. The fact that part of the old regime was expected to complete the revolution may seem strange, but is not uncommon in revolutionary history generally, and in Arab conditions it has been the pattern everywhere. In Tunisia, the first post-Ben Ali government was led by members of the old regime, just as was the case in Egypt shortly after, as well as Yemen. Even in Libya, where the former regime was destroyed more substantially than anywhere else, the first revolutionary leadership, the National Transitional Council, consisted to a large extent of formerly high-ranking members of the old regime, including a substantial number of ambassadors. To gain perspective, we may compare these Arab revolutionary conditions to the more classical Iranian Revolution three decades earlier, which witnessed about 20,000 executions in its first two years – that is, an effective destruction of the old regime in its entirety. This of course is not to say that the Iranian Revolution was better. The point is to highlight the contrast, which helps us understand the origin of the counter-revolution in the current Arab setting.



THE VERY LAST THING THAT A REVOLUTION
CHANGES IN ANY SOCIETY IS
ITS POLITICAL STRUCTURES

But the point above needs a qualification: structural issues alone, such as the lack of either identifiable revolutionary leadership or common organization, do not necessarily mean that the clean part of the old regime would be expected to finish the revolution. That expectation was there only because a substantial part of the Arab Uprisings consisted of a reformist wing that lived well with the notion that the old regime contained a reformed wing that could be relied upon for the task. The size of this wing is evident in the first post-uprising referenda and elections in Tunisia and Egypt, which, because generally open and eliciting of relatively large participation rates, may serve as good barometers of the popular sentiment of those moments. In both countries, the winners, both Islamists and secular liberals, tended to be those who were more keen on reforming the old state than overthrowing

it in its entirety. In the first round of the Egyptian presidential elections in 2012, the 76% of the vote that went to candidates identifying with various wings of the Egyptian Revolution consisted of two camps almost equal in size. Hamdeen Sabahi and Abdul Moneim Abu al-Futuh, representing then the more radical wing of the revolution, gained together 40% of the vote, just slightly more than the combined total of the revolution's more reformist wing, represented by Mohammed Morsi and Amr Musa.¹

While the Arab Uprisings were anarchist in their method, they contained a substantial reformist wing.² This reality meant that an eventual counter-revolution did not need to go through the laborious process of mobilizing forces marginalized by the revolution. Rather, the counter-revolution could simply gather itself within existing state structures, since those were never destroyed, and gain momentum at the first signs of trouble or disaffection, inevitable as these are in any post-revolutionary period.

The counter-revolution is not simply old regime personnel taking over again. Much more seriously, it is a set of counter-revolutionary ideas that are disseminated among the populace and are clearly intended to delegitimize the spirit, thoughts, art, hopes, and experiences of the revolution. These ideas are designed to persuade the populace that while some reform may be needed, the revolution itself was a mistake. Egypt, where the counter-revolutionary project has advanced furthest, also provides the clearest example of how the counter-revolution consists not merely of institutions, namely those of the old regime such as the military, security forces, much of the judiciary, and the entire deep state, but also of a set of ideas.

Elsewhere, I outlined three main ideas that form the core of the ideological arsenal of the counter-revolution³: Firstly, the displacement of the role of the 'ordinary person' experienced during the revolution by the notion of a 'savior leader' as the real maker of history (See no. 1 in Figure 1); Secondly, the denigration of 'peoplehood' from one of a noble creator of new reality and an ultimate source of legitimacy to one of a mass defined largely by its ignorance and savagery, and thus in need of a strong protective hand (2); and finally, changing the meaning of 'realism' away from any revolutionary associations, outlining it only as a posture that shows the error of the revolution, rather than as an approach to systematic change (3).

¹ I should clarify that when I speak of the "forces of the revolution" here, I refer to all actors who took part in it; the fact that those actors joined for different reasons and ended up in mortal conflicts with each other does not change that original reality. Mass revolts are never homogenous bodies, even if they are imagined to be such by their advocates.

² For a more detailed analysis of the tension between anarchism as style and liberalism as ideology in these uprisings, see: Bamyeh 2013: 188-202.

³ Bamyeh 2014.

Figure 1. Core Ideological Propositions of the Counter-Revolution

PROPOSITIONS OF		REVOLUTION	COUNTER-REVOLUTION
1	MAKER OF HISTORY	THE ORDINARY PERSON	THE SAVIOUR LEADER
2	MENTAL CHARACTER OF "THE PEOPLE"	ENLIGHTENED	IGNORANT
3	MEANING OF "REALISM"	GRADUAL CHANGE TOWARD ULTIMATE REVOLUTIONARY GOALS	REJECTING REVOLUTIONARY GOALS

MILITARIZATION

The violent conditions that have emerged after the original uprisings in Syria, Yemen, and Libya have made us forget the relatively peaceful few months with which the Arab Spring had begun. Yet that early peaceful phase must be counted as representing the demographic essence of the uprisings, since it was the only period in which such an abstraction as 'the people' could be seen to be acting as a concrete entity. Why did the uprisings take on a military or violent turn in these cases? When did the violent turn begin? And what are its consequences?

After the two early successes of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, other vulnerable Arab regimes began to consider new strategies of survival. The eight weeks witnessing the collapse of those two regimes (December 17, 2010 to February 11, 2011), was an intense learning period: the clear lesson was that the old Arab order could not survive a relatively peaceful (and likely for that reason unified) popular movement. The next logical old regimes' option was to seek survival through a divisive civil war. The main evidence that this was the new survival strategy was that it was put into practice against similar uprising in other countries following February 11: later in February 2011 in Libya, and less than a month later in Yemen and Syria.

In other countries, we saw a modified version of the civil war plan, with the underlying logic being the same: to transform a mass popular movement into something divisive, that is, to anything other than an expression of unified peoplehood. In Bahrain, the protest movement gradually transformed from a mass national movement into a sectarian conflict, just a step short of civil war. In that case, the transformation was a result of both a calculated regime strategy and an outcome of the presence on the scene of a strong factional party, Wifāq [Concord], that had widely been regarded as a vehicle for Shi'a demands. The Bahraini equation was

eventually 'resolved' with a foreign invasion that provided a weak local regime with the functional equivalent of a civil war it could not fight on its own. In other countries, such as Jordan, Morocco or Oman, the regimes faced popular movements that were less insistent on regime overthrow, and thus those regimes never had to engage the civil war scenario.

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GENOCIDE IN LIBYA WAS LIKELY AVERTED

But in its basic logic the Bahraini case was similar to obvious attempts elsewhere by the old order to generate civil wars. In Yemen, several deadly attacks on the protestors in Taghyir Square were clearly intended to compel the peaceful occupation into violent reaction. The split of the armed forces, however, weakened the regime's ability to proceed with a civil war scenario, although it did not dampen its resolve to engineer a civil war after it had abdicated the office of the presidency about a year later.

In Libya, the violent turn was almost immediate, but even here it is forgotten that the Libyan uprising, too, had a few early peaceful days, notably in Benghazi, and that the militarization of the opposition depended on local capacities, was clearly amateurish, and lacked central command. In Syria, the disastrous consequences of the regime's early decision to methodically meet peaceful demonstrations with deadly violence are obvious today. However, it is forgotten that the Syrian uprising took several months before becoming militarized. Between March and early September of 2011, the Syrian revolution was largely peaceful, and most violence was exercised unilaterally by the regime, as was the case in Tunisia during the four weeks between the beginning of the mass protests and the ousting of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. In Libya, by contrast, the peaceful phase, which began on February 21, 2011, lasted less than a week. In all cases, the dynamics resulting in militarization of conflict were initiated by the regime. The old Arab regimes were less concerned about the specter of civil war than about their own downfall. In Syria, this preference for civil war was spelled out in the streets by the regime's supporters' explicit forewarning that they were prepared to torch the country should calls Asad's removal persist.

The same applies to Libya, where the first reaction to the protest was a speech by Muammar Qaddafi's son, Sayf al-Islam, followed by one by Qaddafi himself, both consisting of explicit genocidal threats against the opposition. Here, the proposition that a genocide in Libya was likely averted must be part of the analysis when we assess the various critiques of the Western intervention there. These critiques⁴ were based either on a principled rejection of foreign intervention or the opposite point of view

4 For example, Forte 2011.

– namely that the intervention was not sufficient or sustained enough to prevent ungovernability and chaos after the fall of the old regime. Typically, critics of the NATO intervention in Libya argue that there was no ‘empirical’ or ‘specific’ proof that genocide was imminent. Strangely, they ignore the clearest empirical proof, namely Qaddafi’s own explicit threats to exterminate his enemies and his dehumanization of them, all enunciated in his speech on February 22, 2011, as his forces, led by his sons, were poised for the task.⁵

In any case, the militarization of the uprisings, wherever that was the case, changed the latter’s course and nature. First, the militarized opposition could not count on popular unanimity of support, as appeared to be the case during the peaceful phases, since by its nature militarization excluded the large portion of the original opposition that did not wish to be part of a more violent phase. Second, while the number of willing participants in the military phase was far smaller than the number of peaceful protesters, peaceful protest dwindled into insignificance after the beginning of the military phase, even though militarization originally appeared to promise quick salvation. Third, militarization involved more hierarchical structures than was needed for the peaceful phase. The peaceful phase had required less control, discipline, and even coordination than the military phase did, and relied on spontaneous action, individual initiative, and relative freedom from organizations and group constraints. Fourth, militarization raised more concerns about the nature of the post-revolutionary period for everyone involved, since it became increasingly evident that if a regime was to lose the war, the post-revolutionary order would likely be determined by the best positioned military contingent of the revolution, rather than by a unified peoplehood, as presaged during the peaceful phase.

In every respect, therefore, militarization did alter the dynamics of the uprisings, with the eventual result being the enhancement of the role of factors other than those of united peoplehood – the original demographic material of the uprisings. The most important of these other factors was geopolitics.

GEOPOLITICS

Until they cross borders, civil wars in important world regions tend to become global wars played out on confined territory. That was the case of

⁵ I am not arguing that NATO’s intervention was altruistic, but it appears to have been the result of calculations, notably on the part of then French president Nicolas Sarkozy, that the West must make an attempt to insert itself as a friendly force on the side of the agents of regional change that was already underway. The fact that Western powers were ill-prepared for the aftermath and had no clear strategy as to what to do in case the transition in Libya proved more difficult than originally anticipated does not invalidate this proposition.

Lebanon, whose long civil war (1975- 1991) lasted so long precisely because it had become a war among regional states and large powers, played out on Lebanese territory. That meant that the war could end only when the large geopolitical actors involved agreed on a formula for its resolution. The same has been happening to Syria since 2011, although it is also the case in Yemen and Libya now.

In all these cases, local militias and competing local governments all have external backers. As in the earlier case of Lebanon, a settlement now requires not only the exhaustion of the local actors, which eventually happens in all civil wars that reach a stalemate, but also an agreement by geopolitical actors on a compromise formula. Since those who are likely to design this formula are not “the people” who had started the uprising, “the people” will be treated as mere spectators to a resolution that will be distant from their original hopes.

The return of geopolitics means that while the conflicts began with popular movements, they are ultimately resolved by actors that have little interest in such movements. This is easy to show. The Syrian uprising, like all other Arab Uprisings of 2011, called for a civic state, citizenship rights, end of corruption, popular will, and universal democracy. Yet it was supported by Saudi Arabia, the most reactionary force in the Arab World, and the regime that at its core is the expressed enemy of all such values. As we know, the Saudi support for the uprising was based not on love for what it stood for, but because the Saudi regime saw the uprising entirely from the point of view of geopolitics: as an opportunity to weaken Iran, upon which the Saudi regime fixates as its main nemesis.

In Yemen, the positions are reversed, but the principle is the same: the Iranian leadership saw the Yemeni uprising merely as an opportunity to extend its regional influence, and never in the civic terms that had ignited it and kept it going until the departure of Ali Abdullah Saleh. In Libya, the country has become so fractured not merely due to internal dynamics, but because those dynamics have been magnified manifold by external geopolitics. The military regime in Egypt assesses the Libyan situation only in terms of its own conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood, and thus supports – along with the UAE – one government, while other regional actors support the other government or local militias, thus insuring that local reconciliation would require geopolitical reconciliation.

Geopolitics, therefore, cannot be regarded as a helpful factor, even when diplomacy succeeds. Regional powers may eventually help resolve the crises in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, but then they would be only resolving crises that they themselves had magnified. The expansion of the so-called Islamic State may be traced not to its ideology, but to the fact that it is resolutely independent of all actors, and thus remains unsullied by any external or

geopolitical games – even though it could scarcely claim to speak on behalf of ‘the people’.

The greatest shift caused by the return of geopolitics to the dynamics of the Arab Spring consists in taking the initiative, once again, away from popular movements. The most significant sociological fact of 2011 concerned the degree to which popular initiatives from below pulled the rug from underneath all geopolitical actors, as well as from the organized opposition in all countries. For a brief moment, it appeared that the mightiest powers had little influence on the course of events, that the most important authorities that had so thoroughly controlled the lot of their people had suddenly become helpless and clueless when facing a determined and relatively unified peoplehood. In a sense, the brief triumph of peoplehood over geopolitics can be traced to the early sociological character of the Arab Spring itself, as a headless movement that resisted being encapsulated by any authorities.⁶

REVOLUTION IN THE LONG RUN

The three developments summed up above may have the effect of producing a sense of hopelessness. However, taken together they suggest that the Arab Uprisings possess similar features to those accompanying long term, historical revolutions. A counter-revolution is always to be expected given the size and power of the interests invested in the old regimes. Likewise, geopolitics always comes to play a role when revolutions last long enough for neighboring states and concerned external powers to devise strategies to deal with them. Neighboring states and external powers cannot be expected to remain inactive in the face of popular revolutions; it is to be expected that they will seek to channel popular energy in a direction that serves their own interests, however they define it. And while militarization is not an inevitable prospect, we see it in this case to be an outcome of those two other processes. But militarization is a symptom of the decay of the old order, not simply a symptom of misguided popular energies. Viewing rebellion mainly as a security threat above all else is a sign of what I had

⁶ Indeed, the earliest attempts by Arab regimes to discredit the uprisings consisted of claims that they were the work of ‘foreign elements,’ in the words of Mubarak’s vice president Omar Suleiman. The old regimes, in other words, wanted to see or at least portray the uprisings as anything but a popular movement. This standpoint was obviously intended to discredit the uprisings. At the same time, it corresponded to the old regimes’ familiar world image: that the world was designed everywhere by men of power; and that the abstraction called ‘the people’ had no voice in that grand theatre, except as spectator. Rulers knew how to deal with each other, and the Machiavellian handbook contained the instructions they all knew. It was much easier for them to follow such rules than to deal with popular movements that were unpredictable and had their own rulers. Geopolitics therefore could live well with the counter-revolution, since both processes contained the same basic elements.



SUCCESSFUL REVOLUTIONS ALWAYS CHANGE
THE CULTURE BEFORE THEY ARE ABLE TO
CHANGE THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE

originally called “autocratic deafness,”⁷ namely the incapacity of the old regimes to hear protest other than as undifferentiated noise, and thus as a source of generalized existential threat.

Today, five years after the beginning salvos of the Arab Spring, the old order seems to be entrenched still. With very measured exceptions like Tunisia, none of the grievances associated with the uprisings have been met, and in Egypt, the counter-revolutionary regime seems to have learned only that the revolution had happened because not enough repression was used. The intellectual mediocrity of the counter-revolutionary governments, so evident in a sequence of embarrassing public statements, and frequent government reshuffles since General Sisi’s ascension to power, is part of a larger Zeitgeist that characterizes the whole scene of the Arab counter-revolution: a conservative-defensive posture that is entirely focused on regime survival, rather than on addressing any of the grievances that were at the heart of the uprising. Nowhere do we see a genuine plan for more representative or participatory governance, no plan at all for catering to the future of the huge populations of unemployed but more politically conscious youth, zero interest in combatting corruption, which feeds the old elites, and a complete lack of imagination when it comes to regional and global issues, which are completely reduced to a calculus of security threats. It is hard to imagine how an order so wretched can meet any of the challenges of the twenty first century. Which is another way of saying: another spring will eventually come. It may be less spectacular in appearance than the spring of 2011, or more focused in its ideology, or differently organized. But the ground material for it has already been laid down in the slow moving cultural transformations that have begun in 2011.

Ultimate hope resides not in a military victory of the opposition over the regime, or one wing of it over other wings. In none of these cases one can speak of a triumph of ‘popular will,’ only of the triumph of the will of a specific, well-resourced, organized, and capable group.⁸ One has to look under the surface of the current noise of conflict to detect long term cultural transformations, which are the only processes by which revolutions build a lasting reservoir of new ideals.

⁷ Bamyeh 2011.

⁸ To date, Tunisia has remained the exception, even though the elections have delivered winning and losing parties. But ‘popular will,’ especially in revolutionary times, cannot be measured by election results. Rather, it is any process surrounded by relative popular consensus. In the Tunisian case, such a process was delivered through the National Dialogue Quartet, which propelled the constitutional process along, and in the process kept the country from sliding into a civil war or its equivalent.

Successful revolutions always change the culture before they are able to change the political structure so that it acquires at least a minimally credible relation to the spirit of the revolution. In the case of the Arab Spring, processes of cultural change can be seen when we study the youth: new types of intellectual activity in the public sphere and, generally, new ways of looking by ordinary individuals that highlight long-term vision over episodic change. For the youth, the revolutions were formative life experiences, whose real significance is not yet apparent. The capacity to participate in purposeful action oriented to collective social and political transformation is a relatively new experience for a large number of Arab youths, even though the ultimate lesson that will be learned from this process will not be uniform.⁹

However, for the first time in modern Arab history, we note the mobilization of a large proportion of the Arab youth in protest movements, whose primary sociological feature is their own action on behalf of change that they themselves enunciate, rather than as supporters of one organized movement or a savior leader. Other tendencies are also doubtlessly part of the equation, and they do include a fascist potential as one of the ultimate options. There is no question that the part of the demographics of current Jihadism that is traceable to Arab youth who took part in the 2011 uprisings is one part of the search for grand meaning that is always associated with witnessing a grand historical epic. Other parts of the same process are less noisy and slower in motion. The formation of debating clubs, for example, as well as virtual and physical forums for the exchange of ideas, are part of the current scene as well. The intellectual scene I have observed under the current political climate in Egypt, for example, includes a great deal of fear, as one would expect under repressive environments. But the degree to which authorities are contested by organized civil society as well as in unauthorized street protests is astonishing, precisely given the overwhelming repressive response of state authorities.

Even more demographically significant is the rise of new actors in the public sphere who would not have had any such roles under the old regimes. In Libya, for example, we hear much about the role of armed militias and the competing governments, but little about the work of the likes of Alaa Murabit, who has been establishing new networks and specifically aiming to provide more voice to marginalized groups, notably women and the youth, or the Shaghaf [infatuation] movement in Jordan, which enlists

⁹ Studies of the Arab youth are scarce, and observations that seem meaningful tend to be anecdotal. More work here is needed. However, it is important to point out models of study that are ill-advised, most famously the Arab Youth Surveys of Asda'a Burson-Marsteller. Although it received a good deal of attention, this survey suffers from what I regard to be fatal methodological flaws: the unjustified over-representation of nationals from the Gulf region; the ties of the polling company to the UAE government; and the unclear meaning of the survey questions themselves.

thousands of horizontally organized youth who seek to take part of politics outside of the official channels and in their own creative ways. This work represents the more silent cultural revolution that has accompanied the



WE HAVE MADE THE REVOLUTION FOR OUR
CHILDREN, NOT OURSELVES

Arab Spring: the rise of actors of a new type, who do not simply contest state power as much as activate new sectors of the population that have never before thought of themselves as proper carriers of political and social ideals larger than themselves. In places such as Tunisia, where political party life has been established, these new energies may be channeled into it, although political parties are not the only or necessary depositories of such new forces.

All of the above resonates with what I have been hearing, especially in my fieldwork in Egypt, from slightly older individuals than the youth segment – namely those in their 30s – who seem to be expressing what they have learned from the events of 2011: we have made the revolution for our children, not ourselves, they tend to say now. This of course is a new perspective, not one expressed by anyone back in 2011, when utopia was expected to be just around the corner. The explanations I hear about this new, long-term perspective on revolutions vary, but central to them is a belief that the revolution happens because reality requires a lot of work – indeed, the revolution could not have happened had that not been the case. What is that work? In one sense it is structural, aiming to dismantle gradually the vast power apparatus that has benefited from the old regimes and that would be expected to fight to death to defend its accumulated interests. But more significantly, the work is psychological, which seems from my observations to be a more widespread explanation: we have become too damaged because we grew up in a system so corrupt that it required a revolution.

The conclusion they draw is that it may therefore be too late for us as grown-ups to change. But our children will eventually reap the psychological benefits of the revolutions, and their culture will be different from ours. That is perhaps what one has to say when one feels that a dark age is dissipating, yet at a much slower pace than anticipated by the revolutionary imagination.

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by D. Bocquet

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CREATIVITY AND RESILIENCE IN THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION

MIRIAM COOKE

IN SYRIA, A COUNTRY COWED INTO SILENCE AND COMPLIANCE FOR FORTY YEARS, A REVOLUTION BROKE OUT IN MARCH 2011. IN DIGITAL AND PLASTIC ARTS, IN VIDEOS, STILL IMAGES AND FILMS, IN NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES, ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THEIR COUNTRY CRAFTED WORKS THAT EMERGED OUT OF THE REVOLUTION, INSISTED ON ITS PERSISTENCE AS A REVOLUTION AND POINTED TOWARD A FUTURE IT MIGHT YET ENGENDER. TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IS BEHIND THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION, ITS RUTHLESS REPRESSION, THE MASS MOVEMENT OF CITIZENS IT PRECIPITATED AND THE CULTURAL MOVEMENT IT PRODUCED, I WILL LOOK BACK TO THE LAST CENTURY AND ALSO FORWARD TO SPECULATE ON THE FUTURE ROLE OF SYRIAN REVOLUTIONARY INTELLECTUALS IN IMAGINING A NEW FORM OF GOVERNANCE AND CREATING A MEMORY FOR THE FUTURE.

INTRODUCTION

After World War I, the French and the British carved up the eastern region of the Mediterranean into zones of control. While Jordan, Palestine and Iraq (for a short twelve years) became British Mandates, Lebanon and Syria fell under French mandatory rule. In each country, resistance to European rule was intense. The French left Lebanon in 1943 and Syria in 1946, the same year that Jordan was separated from Palestine and given autonomy. In 1948, the British handed Palestine over to the newly established Jewish state of Israel. 750,000 Palestinians fled their homes into neighboring countries and those who did not leave became second-class citizens in their ancestral homeland. The Palestinian resistance, begun under the British, persists until today.

For many Arabs, the Palestinian crisis became emblematic of the condition of most Arab countries that the colonizers had left but where their influence remained in the form and practices of local leaderships that soon proved to be corrupt and unjust. The neo-colonialism of post-independence Arab governments mirrored the *modus operandi* of the Israeli state vis-à-vis its Palestinian citizens. Independence movements, and their failures, gave birth to leftwing Arab intellectualism. How could the formerly principled opponents of the European occupation of their lands have failed their people so badly? What could be done to right those wrongs?

From Iraq to Morocco, the Palestinian cause galvanized socialist and Arabist secular agendas as well as burgeoning Islamist projects. The right of the Palestinians to their land, freedom and dignity symbolized the Arabs' right to enjoy freedom and prosperity in the lands of their birth. With Edward Said at the helm, exiled intellectuals theorized the situation and responsibility of Arabs to critique their governments and to demand accountability. Poet Mahmud Darwish connected Palestinian expropriation with that of the Muslims and Jews in 15th and 16th century Andalusia and of Native Americans shortly thereafter. The lost land, whether Palestine or any Arab country toiling under unjust rule, had to be redeemed no matter how long the struggle might last. Syrians, Egyptians, Algerians, Iraqis and Tunisians, who found themselves as oppressed under their own leaders as they had been under the Europeans resisted, even if only quite quietly and at great risk. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the persecution of critical intellectuals and the recognition of time done in prison as constituting a badge of honor for having dared to speak truth to power. Intellectuals became moral signposts; their words shaped public opinion.

THE ASADS' SYRIA

Although French colonial presence in Syria had ended in 1946, its legacy lingered in the chaos that followed. Coup after coup brought a succession of leaders who could not deal with the sectarianism and other divisions that the French had fostered. In 1970, Hafiz Asad, an Alawite from the North, took over power. Corrupt and tyrannical, he clamped down on dissent. His most committed opponents were the Sunni Muslims who had traditionally ruled Syria, and among them the Muslim Brothers were the most restive. Any attempted coups, any questioning of status quo were viciously quashed during the forty years of draconian Asad repression.

To prove absolute loyalty, citizens publicly paraded their love of the Asads with posters pasted on office walls and car windows. Knowing full well that any form of dissent could be reported to the powerful mukhabarat, or secret police, citizens did not talk openly about politics even in the privacy of their own homes. Fear of incarceration or disappearance created an atmosphere of distrust of everyone, what Arendt called “atomization.” When I was there in the mid-1990s, people told me in confidence that the walls are ears, they do not merely have ears. They told me these things because, as one friend explained, I was safe; I did not know to whom to report any slip in loyalty.

Despite widespread terror of the regime, some did articulate their dissension from the norm of tolerance of tyranny. Although many intellectuals left the country when the strain of silence had become overwhelming, some stayed. Knowing that critique of the system only has meaning when produced inside where words have power because they court danger, some writers, filmmakers and artists dared to produce coded oppositional work. The problem with much of this cultural production was its allusiveness. Consequently, their revolutionary messages remained locked except for the cognoscenti. Historical allegories remained historical. Interpretations and suggested contemporary parallels were disavowed.

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PEOPLE TOLD ME IN CONFIDENCE THAT THE
WALLS ARE EARS, THEY DO NOT
MERELY HAVE EARS

In his 1995 play *Al-Ghoul*, poet and playwright Mamduh 'Adwan warned the tyrant Jamal Pasha, the architect of the Armenian genocide during World War I: “You shall not escape us even while you sleep. Your victims’ vengeance will pursue you for blood (...) Even if you muzzle their complaints they will haunt you as ghosts (...) From now on we shall begin

our great duty: This tyranny shall never recur.”¹ At a time when the mere whispering of dissent, let alone critique of the state and, above all, of the president, risked prison or death, 'Adwan empowered readers and theater audiences to think the unthinkable: coercion is not normal; stolen dignity must be redeemed; liberty seized. But, of course, when asked about the similarity between Jamal Pasha and Hafiz Asad, he was outraged.

Prison writers were the most circumspect and the most difficult to understand, but with the key to their codes one could tell how audacious their art was, how inspiring! These Hafiz-era public intellectuals did not believe that their works could do more than raise awareness of injustice. They had no idea that they might become the pioneers of a revolution that would challenge and perhaps eventually overthrow a dictatorship-turned-dynasty. Yet today, some are looking back to these men and women and discovering their works that presaged a new revolutionary era.

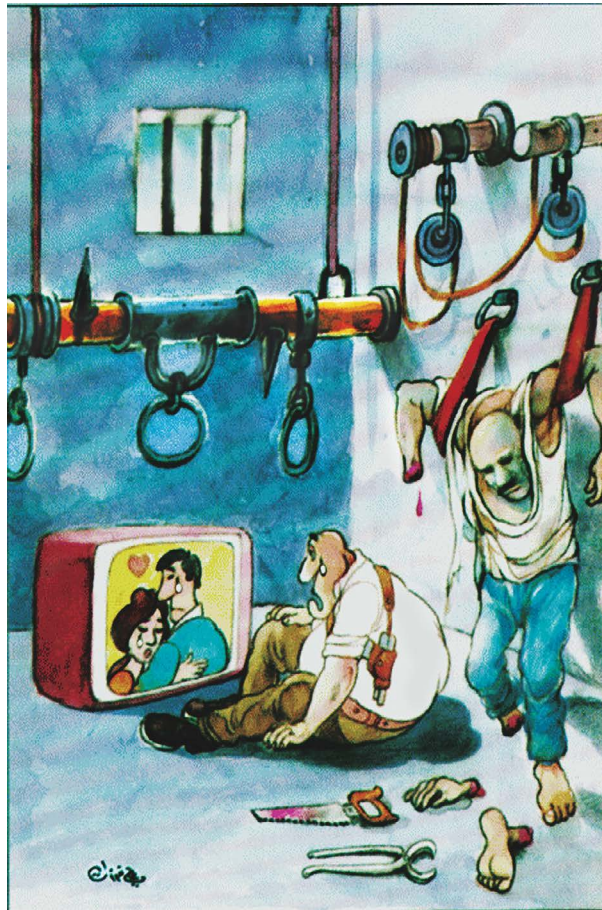
In June 2000, Hafiz Asad died and his son Bashar took over. The oldest son Basil had been groomed for the presidency even though the constitution clearly stated that Syria was a republic with a president who had to be elected. In 1994, Basil died in a car crash and his younger brother Bashar was recalled from London where he was studying ophthalmology. During the following six years, he learned the ropes under the tutelage of his father’s men. These politicians retained their power when the reins of office passed into the hands of their charge. But before he could “legitimately” sit on the throne his father had occupied for thirty years, Bashar Asad authorized a constitutional amendment “to reduce the head of state’s minimum age from 40 to 34 (Bashaar’s age) (...) a republican monarchy was born. The dictatorship passed smoothly from father to son. Otherwise put, the Eternal Leader would rule from the grave for another eleven years.”² During the first year of his rule, Bashar allowed the Damascus Spring to flower. Unprecedented freedoms were allowed, including the two-year “publication of Syria’s first independent newspaper in almost forty years – the satirical weekly *Al-Domari* (the Lamplighter), managed by renowned cartoonist Ali Farzat.”³ Although he did not critique regime individuals, Farzat threw caution to the winds, as in this explicit depiction of a cell in Tadmor prison, the dreaded Kingdom of Death near the ancient site of Palmyra.

¹ cooke 2007: 81, 90.

² Yassin-Kassab, al-Shami 2016: 15.

³ Yassin-Kassab, al-Shami 2016: 20.

Figure 1: Ali Farzat, "Prison Cell" ⁴



Some interrogation tools are attached to the walls of the cell and others are scattered on the floor. The prisoner, hand and foot amputated, hangs dying from straps, his blood drip dropping on to the floor. Meanwhile, his torturer having completed his assignment relaxes a bit and weeps at the tenderness of a television romance.

Modernization, liberalization and development had briefly been the mots du jour until the situation, exacerbated by the 2006 drought that drove over two million Syrians into extreme poverty, started to spin out of control.⁵ Media censorship returned, and social fora that intellectuals had opened up for political discussions were closed down. The genie, however, was out of the bottle, even if the increasingly visible opposition was small and disunited. Thin cracks in the wall of fear that the Asads had carefully erected over forty years began to widen.

⁴ ©Ali Farzat – Fair use (commentary & criticism).

⁵ Yassin-Kassab, al-Shami 2016: 33.

REVOLUTION

Then in early 2011, the Arab Spring exploded from Tunisia and spread quickly to Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. In early March, some schoolboys from the southern city of Daraa, picking up the mood of the moment, scribbled slogans on a wall: "The people want the regime to fall" and "Go away, Bashar." The boys were arrested and tortured. The popular response was immediate. Despite decades of prohibition on freedom of thought, speech and assembly, Syrians flooded the streets and demanded justice and the ouster of Bashar. They organized Friday demonstrations that persist until today. Across the entire country, citizens chose Friday for their protests because the Friday communal midday prayer in mosques is the only time and place Syrians have official permission to meet. On 25 May 2012, a Friday remembered for the brutal murder of the children of Houla, there were 939 demonstrations throughout the country.⁶ These demonstrations were regularly repressed. By spring of 2016, 450,000 had been killed – over half civilians. 9 million were internally displaced; countless numbers had been disappeared, many into Bashar Asad's prisons, and almost five million refugees were wandering the world in search of safety.

The more ferocious the repression – and it was and still is beyond belief vicious – the more people joined the opposition. They knew that they were living an extraordinary moment in history. Their revolution continues in 2016 as the weekly banners broadcast from the village of Kafranbel announce. So what is a revolution? In her influential *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt theorizes the conditions shaping socially transformative revolutions in order to distinguish them from popular uprisings, as the Arab Spring revolutions have been characterized: "It is frequently very difficult to say where the mere desire for liberation, to be free from oppression, ends, and the desire for freedom as the political way of life begins," she writes. "Only where change occurs in the sense of a new beginning, where violence is used to constitute an altogether different form of government, to bring about the formation of a new body politic, where the liberation from oppression aims at least at the constitution of freedom can we speak of revolution."⁷ Frantz Fanon's calls for sacred violence in 1960s revolutionary French Algeria echo this text. The Arab Spring revolutionaries wanted liberation from oppression that in several cases they achieved when they ousted entrenched autocrats. Importantly, they also demanded the constitution of a different form of government that might bring about the formation of what Arendt calls a new body politic "which guarantees the space where freedom can appear."⁸ Like their Egyptian, Tunisian, Libyan,

⁶ Majed 2014: 65, 72-73.

⁷ Arendt 1964: 33, 35 (author's emphasis).

⁸ Arendt 1964: 125.

Bahraini and Yemeni co-revolutionaries, Syrians remain committed to creating a new social order based in freedom, dignity and justice.

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THE GENIE, HOWEVER, WAS OUT OF THE BOTTLE, EVEN IF THE INCREASINGLY VISIBLE OPPOSITION WAS SMALL AND DISUNITED

Some Syrians fought for this new order by demonstrating in the streets and exposing their bodies to lethal danger. Songs were especially effective in mobilizing mass protests. In Tunisia and Egypt, rappers had been instrumental in massing demonstrations. In Syria, two singers became emblems of the revolution: Ibrahim Qashush and Abd al-Basit Sarut. The first was murdered the day after he led a crowd in a long liturgy commanding Bashar to go; the second became the star of *Our Terrible Country*, a 2014 film about his transition from soccer star to revolutionary hero whipping up the crowd through song and leading them into the heart of devastated Homs to fight regime forces.

CORPSES EVERYWHERE

The brutality of the regime response to the protests and then of the international collaborators and then of Islamic State has been mind-numbing. Death is everywhere, trying to drown the revolution. There are corpses to be buried, so many that the only way to dispose of them has been in mass graves. Killed by barrel bombs, chemical gases, starvation, and sectarian skirmishes and Islamist beheadings, Syrians lie scattered in city streets unapproachable because of vigilant snipers. They line roadsides, pile so high in morgues that some are thrown out. This disaster is happening in a country where the fate of the corpse marks the honor and dignity of the family. Regardless of who the dead were in life, they must be properly buried; that means they must be found, washed, shrouded and then buried with all due rituals. People killed while fleeing violence in a panic or disappeared into prisons or buried under the rubble of a destroyed building present a challenge to the living. Where are their dead loved ones? If they can find them what shape will they be in? How can they honor them?

This is the Edgar Allen Poe scenario that novelist Khalid Khalifa detailed in *Death is Hard Work*, a novel he published in 2016. A father, or what is left of his decomposing body, is finally buried after a three-day journey

that should have lasted a few hours. We are taken on a 400-kilometer road trip from Damascus to the northern border through a dark landscape strewn with corpses. Militiamen and ill-intentioned foreigners man the innumerable checkpoints as though the country was theirs. This is no ordinary trip. Three siblings risk life and freedom to bury the body of a father they had not much loved. He had died of natural causes in a country pervaded with death and no one but them cares. And, we wonder, why do they care. Despite misgivings and temptations to throw the putrefying body out of their microbus, they persevere. The dying man's last wish was to be buried in his village near the Turkish border. Constantly stopped, their six-hour trip takes three days. Stage by agonizing stage of the journey, we watch and smell the corpse decompose. It turns blue and swells and they “breathed their father's death, it penetrated their skin and flowed in their blood.”⁹ At the last checkpoint where Islamic State men interrogate and imprison one of the sons for not knowing his Islam, his sister is struck with aphasia. Her terror is palpable. Worms had crawled out of cracks in the skin of the cadaver, they had covered the microbus window and seats and her frozen lap.¹⁰ When they do finally reach the village, the remains of the body are washed, shrouded and buried.

Why did burial in the kingdom of death matter so much? The corpse, Khalifa explained, represents the dignity of the family. If at all possible, it must be properly buried. This Faulknerian novel emerged out of his own anxiety about burial after he had suffered a heart attack in 2013. Lying in the hospital bed, he had wondered what would happen to his body were he to die. He started to write. The imaginary journey became so grim that at times he had to stop writing. Some of the scenes in the novel, like corpses thrown out of a morgue to make room for regime soldier corpses, he had personally witnessed.¹¹ When the story reached the last checkpoint Khalifa knew that he could no longer write in Syria, where he still lives. He flew to Malta and there for two months he wrote the final section.¹²

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THE MORE FEROCIOUS THE REPRESSION – AND IT WAS AND STILL IS BEYOND BELIEF VICIOUS – THE MORE PEOPLE JOINED THE OPPOSITION.

Khalifa's novel did what citizen journalists with their cell phones ever at the ready rarely could. He created the affect that their shock photographs and videos lost during the early days. Even the thousands of gruesome

⁹ Khalifa 2016: 114.

¹⁰ Khalifa 2016: 142.

¹¹ Khalifa 2016: 50.

¹² Conversation Durham NC 12-02-2016.

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DEATH IS EVERYWHERE, TRYING
TO DROWN THE REVOLUTION

images of corpses bearing the marks of torture and starvation that Caesar, “a defected military police photographer who recorded deaths in regime custody over a two-year period,”¹³ and in January 2014 distributed around the world lost their power when people refused to look at the unimaginable return of the repressed from the Holocaust. Art succeeded where reality failed.

ART ACTIVISM

From March 2011, artist-activists wrote, rapped, painted and filmed their rejection of the violence, and of the regime that perpetrated it. Some artworks ridicule the butcher Bashar, while others express their horror at the extent of the humanitarian crisis, their need to document the atrocities for the future and their determination to maintain the momentum of a revolution that daily exacts its terrible price. As Zuhour Mahmoud wrote in March 2016: “Perhaps the difference between art and political art lies in the fact that the former gives something to the world, while the latter borrows something from the world and gives it back.”¹⁴ One such political artist is Ali Farzat.

In August 2011, Farzat’s license to mock expired: he was kidnapped, beaten and left for dead in a deserted area near the Damascus airport. A brief spell in hospital was not enough to dampen his spirits. Undeterred, he soon returned to his drawing board. Early in 2012, he penned this cartoon mocking international hypocrisy at the terrible fate of the people. Representatives of world powers visit Syria to drop a few crocodile tears in the outstretched bowl of a member of the opposition. The ground around them is strewn with the newspapers that daily deliver the count of Syrian dead to a heedless world.

¹³ Yassin-Kassab, al-Shami 2016: 147.

¹⁴ Mahmoud 2016.

Figure 2: Ali Farzat, “International Hypocrisy”¹⁵

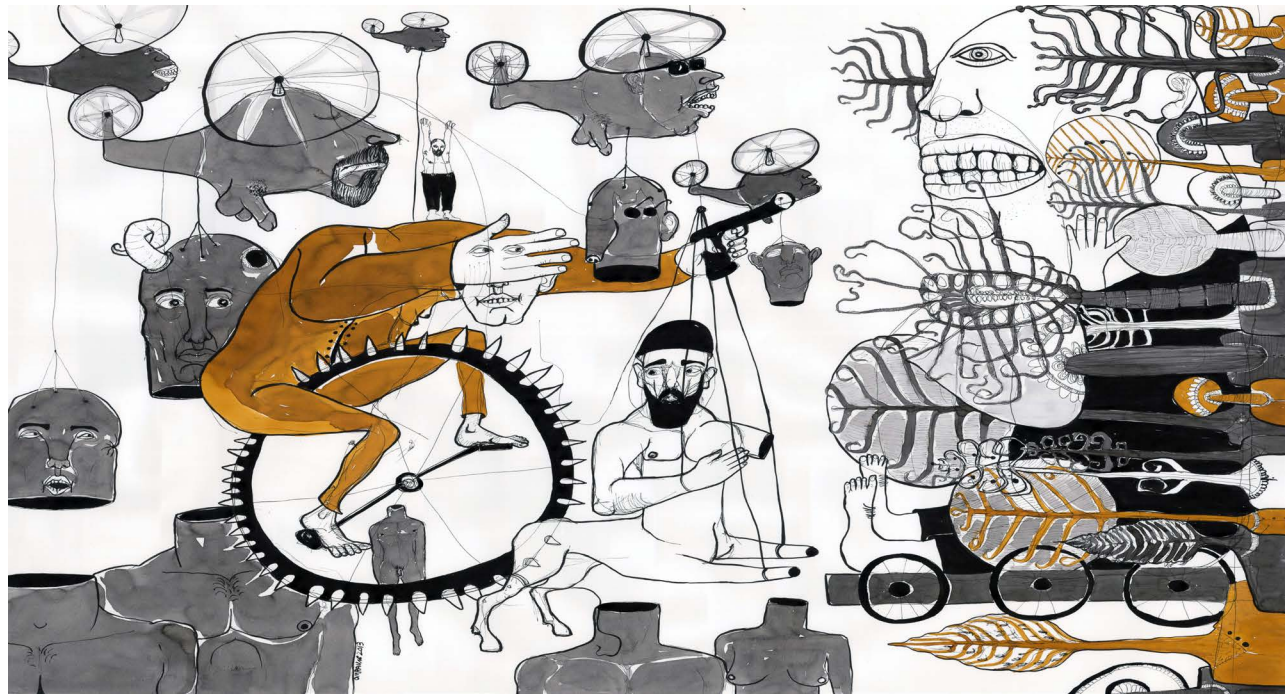


This cartoon is one of the first items uploaded to Sana Yazigi’s Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution site that features thousands of cultural works from inside Syria and outside.

Plastic artists have been very productive also, knowing that their work does not have to wait for a gallery to approve and exhibit but rather it can be circulated on social media platforms. In this 2013 artwork, Muhammad Omran depicts Hafiz Asad, the puppeteer beyond the grave, still running the show.

¹⁵ ©Ali Farzat – Fair use (commentary & criticism).

Figure 3: Muhammad Omran, "Untitled" ¹⁶



In 2013 during a Copenhagen workshop, Muhammad Omran had collaborated with poet Golan Haji to create four works on the revolution. One day, Haji wrote "Eyes:"

*At noon, the wind is silent.
The curtain is a banner; time has obliterated the letters.
Behind it, two eyes are scanning
an alley, empty
as a long trench for castrating the dead.
Helicopters are flying away.
Parachutists are ejected like the sperm of rapists.
The present is an eye with amputated lids.
The glance is bleeding.
The sun in the south is a merciless eye,
an eye of a fevered Cyclops.
Two hands on the balcony feel its heated rails
like someone in a circus clutching the bars of a cage,*

¹⁶ Permission 21-02-2016.

*one half of which has disappeared.
The shadows that striate your blue nightgown
will not vanish when you hide again.
Shadows imprison you.*

I have cited the entire poem so that the reader can trace the collaborative process between poet and artist. While Haji was writing Omran painted his parallel version of a Syrian inferno with civilians beheaded and the mukhabarat wearing their signature sunglasses and flying as human helicopters surveying the land for further prey. Like so many of these revolutionary works, this one is "Untitled" – the new freedom to express does not mean that cultural workers have thrown all caution to the winds.

The number of revolutionary videos, paintings, sculptures, graffiti, banners and digital works circulating in the Internet is beyond calculation. The intensity of this creative outpouring may well signify an awareness that this art as memory for the future is finding a response among those whom artists are hoping to reach and to touch. At a time when the world seems to have turned its back on this humanitarian crisis, artists fill the vacuum. Why are we not paying them the same attention that we pay to the numerous instigators of violence?

The Internet has of course facilitated the production and circulation of hundreds of thousands of these works that broadcast the catastrophe from places that the Asad regime has closed to international reporters. Several sites have been archiving some of this work, none more systematically and profusely than Sana Yazigi's Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution opened in mid-2012. In an interview with my student Melissa Zhang, Yazigi confirmed, "These artists are adopting the revolution and dedicating their work to the revolution. [The artist] is not only doing the caricature because of the beauty of the work – no, he doesn't care about the beauty – he cares about participating. This participation is very important and very new for a society that was forbidden from participating in any issue – social, economic, political."¹⁷

Despite so much energy, resilience and creativity the revolution floundered. There are many reasons. Activists talk of decades of atomization and, almost enviously, about the Islamists who were united by ideology and were able to organize collectively. In the beginning, demonstrators met without concern for creed or level of education or class: "We didn't know what we were doing, but the experience made us think, discuss and learn. We worked

¹⁷ Cited in Zhang's final research paper for my course "Refugee Lives: Violence, Identity and Politics in 21st Century Arab World" Spring 2016.

hard to coordinate the slogans of the revolution across the country.”¹⁸ At a meeting of expatriate and refugee activists in Paris in the summer of 2015, I heard a recently arrived Syrian say, “we had no experience in mobilizing action, no leadership and we had no unifying ideology.” But, of course, that is less than half the story. Had Bashar’s Shiite allies Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah not supported him he would not have survived the growing organization of the opposition. Had Islamic State not taken advantage of the chaos, the people would not have had to fight on yet another front. Had Russia not always quietly but then in 2015 overtly supported the regime, the people’s demands for freedom and release from Asad tyranny might have succeeded.

But even without success, the revolution and its creative outpouring persist. According to graphic designer Fares Cachoux, Syrian artists are:

“telling the story of the Syrian Revolution. Today, and years after the war is over, we will see hundreds and thousands of artworks, each showing the conflict in its own way. From Daraa’s children [in 2011], to the final solution to the crisis, we will see a very clear timeline consisting of works of art. Despite the fading memory of the peaceful revolution, Syrian artists believe that years from now, the artistic memory of Syria will bear witness to the uprising turned civil war turned multi-pronged proxy war that has torn the nation apart.”¹⁹

Art is not solace as the PBS ArtBeat series on Syrian art²⁰ would have it – though sometimes it may be; it is not cathartic—though it may be; it is not therapeutic – though it may be. More than anything else, art is proof of resolute commitment to a cause; it provides a timeline and an archive.

DANCING FOR THE REVOLUTION

In an oil painting, Wissam al-Jazairi has brilliantly represented the people, and especially the women’s, defiance of the tanks and the fires raging around them. No matter how hard the regime tries to kill its citizens they will not give up. They have seen too much, suffered too greatly not to dance on the flames and the rubble of destroyed homes to prove their unflagging faith in the revolution.

¹⁸ Yassin-Kassab, al-Shami 2016: 58.

¹⁹ Yassin-Kassab, al-Shami 2016: 58.

²⁰ PBS Artbeat 10-10-2016.

Defiantly dancing,²¹ the revolutionaries refuse to be called victims; they refuse to return to silence and acquiescence. Dance proves that the revolution goes on, and that is why there are so many extraordinary examples of dance in Syrian revolutionary art. With this sculpture of a muscled man dancing on the edge of a barrel soaked with blood, Sari Kiwan announces to the world that no amount of regime barrel bombs will stop the people from celebrating their revolution with dance.

Figure 4: Sari Kiwan: “Dancing on a Barrel Bomb”²²



²¹ Hence the title of my forthcoming book *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience and the Syrian Revolution* (cooke 2016).

²² Artist’s permission 10-07-2015.

Tammam Azzam has developed a new technique for his representation of the people's defiance. Photo shopping images of European masterpieces and superimposing them on to found images of newly destroyed buildings, he produces intericonic digital works that insist on the survival of the human in inhuman circumstances. In this image, Azzam has superimposed Matisse's *Dancers* on to a pile of rubble. In their crazy wild dance the naked red figures scream survival and defiance.

Figure 5: Tammam Azzam: "Dancing on the Ruins" ²³



CONCLUSION

In December 2015, thirty-five collaborating artists from Kafranbel, the town that weekly produced revolutionary banners to be broadcast around the world, unveiled a spectacular 24-meter, one million stone mosaic wall entitled "Revolution Panorama." Featuring the faces and stages of the revolution, the mosaic documents in intricate detail the revolution from its beginnings in March 2011 until today.

²³ Artist's permission 12-02-2016.

Figure 6: Kafranbel "Revolution Panorama" ²⁴



Many have buried the Arab Spring and especially the Syrian Revolution, but I have argued in *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience and the Syrian Revolution* that these people's movements need to be placed into the larger context of modern Arab intellectual history. These revolutionaries are not rabble to be dismissed because without leader, ideology and agenda – doomed to fail. They are part of a hinge moment in their nations' histories. As Wassim al-Adl asserts, the "revolution was not about an ideology or a religion, and it wasn't about grand political scheming, it was about normal people who stopped what they were doing to stand up for what they believed in, and they did that even though they were afraid and, in many cases, would lose their lives."²⁵

The revolution was not only about the surprising resilience of normal people but also of artist-activists. Their indefatigable creativity while witnessing wickedness has created the conditions for the emergence of a new stage in the complicated relationship that Arab intellectuals have had with the people and the powers ruling their countries.

With the explosion of the Arab Spring, moral authority has been democratized. Social media and the Internet have played their role in all of the 2011 revolutions, nowhere more so than in Syria. Artist-activists have emerged as Gramsci's organic intellectuals who are replacing the singular, prophetic intellectual of the 1960s who had become emblematic of the Arabs' resistance to colonialism and its lingering legacy. Sole source of wisdom, the postcolonial intellectual had provided guidance through

²⁴ Internet fair use.

²⁵ Yassin-Kassab, al-Shami 2016: 210.

the maze of colonial legacies that lurked in the interstices of indigenous authoritarian regimes. Graffitiists, digital artists, sculptors, musicians and writers are now filling the ether with their creations that call not for ideological warfare but for loyalty to the revolution with its goal to transform a repressive system into the Arendtian new body politic which guarantees the space where freedom can appear and unite a country that for forty years had been atomized.

Wissam al-Jazairi, Muhammad Omran, Sari Kiwan, the people of Kafranbel and Tammam Azzam have greater moral authority than the veteran Syrian poet Adonis who had long stood at the vanguard to Arab intellectualism. When he could not come out in full support of the revolution or denounce the Asad regime he hammered the last nail in the coffin of the traditional Arab intellectual standing high on Mount Olympus. These revolutionary artist-activists refuse *ihbat*, meaning frustration, a word that has become the mantra of so many Arab Spring activists who have given up on their revolutions. Their creative works that social media daily distribute around the world maintain the revolutionary momentum, and expand it into a transnational terrain of committed cultural praxis.

Ideology is now the monopoly of Islamist groups like Islamic State whose destructive worldview is failing to deliver on its promises. This may be the best outcome for a revolution without ideology – it leaves open a space for something new to emerge –Arendt’s “new beginning.” This new may be a different relationship to power – horizontal rather than vertical, alongside rather than directly oppositional, democratic rather than elitist, speaking for oneself and not for the people. No longer relying on elite others to articulate their grievances and fight for them, these organic intellectuals are assuming the burden of representation and action.

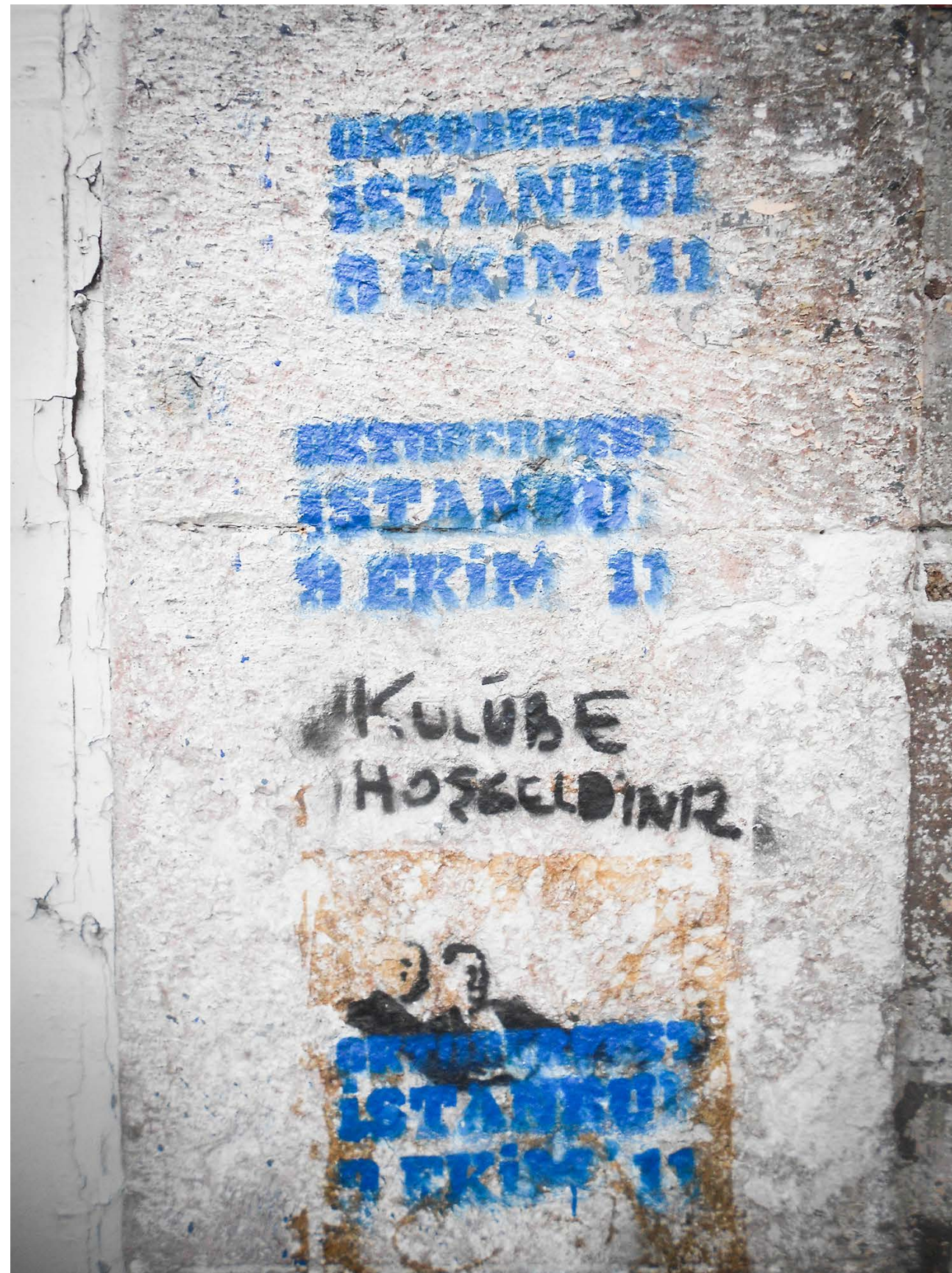
In closing, I would like to return to the corpse in the car that Khaled Khalifa describes so vividly in *Al-mawt ‘amal shaqq* and ask who is this father of the three siblings who could not stand the old man but who cannot think of abandoning the corpse that after three days in a microbus is stinking, swelling, its skin splitting with worms crawling out of the stinking, decomposing flesh? This fictive father may be the legitimacy of the Asad dynasty that is dying and however evil it may have been it must be ritually buried for the honor and dignity of the country to be salvaged. He may be the idealized Arab postcolonial intellectual whose unmatched moral authority as spokesperson for the abstract people dissipated. He may be all of these and also the moribund institutions from a defunct past that are calling for a burial that will salvage Syrian honor and dignity and allow for a new beginning when Syrians can return home and dance in the streets of Damascus.

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by D. Bocquet

KING OR CHAOS: SAUDI ARABIA AND THE ARAB SPRING

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WHEN THE SHIA DEMONSTRATED, THEY WERE DESCRIBED AS A FIFTH COLUMN, MOBILIZED BY IRAN TO UNDERMINE SAUDI SECURITY. WHEN SUNNIS RESORT TO PEACEFUL PROTEST, THEY ARE REPRESSED AS THEY ARE DESCRIBED AS AGITATORS OR TERRORISTS. SO THESE NARRATIVES ISOLATE ACTIVISTS AND PREVENT THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATION-WIDE SOLIDARITIES THAT CAN THREATEN THE REGIME” – SO PROFESSOR MADAWI AL-RASHEED FROM THE MIDDLE EAST CENTRE, THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS, ASSESSES THE TACTICS OF CONTROL OF THE SAUDI REGIME.

INTERVIEW WITH **MADAWI AL-RASHEED**
BY JEROEN VAN DEN BOSCH

How and to what extent has the Arab Spring affected and antagonized the population of Saudi Arabia itself? Looking back now, five years after its start, has society been ‘changed’ in a fundamental way?

Saudi Arabia did not witness the same level of protest that was seen in other Arab countries in 2011. However sporadic protest erupted in the Eastern Province, mainly among the Shia minority immediately after their co-religionists in Bahrain took to the streets of Manama. Also, small pockets of protest

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PROTEST IN SAUDI ARABIA REMAINS VIRTUAL, USING SOCIAL MEDIA AS A VEHICLE FOR DISSENTING OPINIONS AND VOICES

were observed in other parts of Saudi Arabia. All these protests called for the release of political prisoners and the respect of their rights. There were no overt calls for the downfall of the regime except at a later stage in the protest among the Shia. However, the regime quickly moved to repress the protesters and clamp down on mobilisation. A group of Saudis established a political and civil right civil society and another group announced the establishment of a political party. As Saudi Arabia does not accept independent civil society organisations, the founders of these two initiatives were immediately imprisoned after a long period of trials. This was followed by more detentions among lawyers and activists. So by 2013 all forms of protest disappeared in reality but some activists continued to voice critical opinions on social media. At the moment, one can say that protest in Saudi Arabia remains virtual, using social media as a vehicle for dissenting opinions and voices. The regime also promised to create jobs, distribute benefits and services in an attempt to contain the wave of small demonstrations. This was during the reign of King Abdullah who benefited from a period of affluence as oil prices were high at the time and the Saudi budget had substantial surplus.

While initially many in Saudi Arabia were optimistic about the impact of the Arab uprisings as they dreamed about a structural change that would usher a new period of constitutional monarchy, elected consultative council and more transparency and reform, they were intimidated by the violence that erupted in other Arab countries. The situation in Syria strongly impacted on their perception of change. Many preferred to remain acquiescent, as they feared the disintegration of the kingdom, the loss of security and the upheaval. So more than five years after the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia remains calm, although there are some problems that might cause upheaval in the future. For example the austerity measures that the new king, Salman, introduced since 2015 as oil prices plummeted to a low level are beginning to be resented. It remains to be seen whether the oil crisis is more dangerous to an oil country than the protest that swept the Arab world.

Scholars have noticed that repression and accommodation are two sides of the same coin in order to maintain power in autocracies. Did the Saudi monarchy’s position weaken since 2011?

The position of the Saudi regime did not weaken after the Arab uprisings but it became more volatile in its domestic and regional policies. It increased repression and surveillance to intimidate activists but also tried to contain dissent which was minimal anyway, compared with that in North Africa or Syria. The regime mobilized the loyal Wahhabi establishment to ban demonstrations and criminalise protest, albeit peaceful. This helped to suppress dissidents and delegitimize their actions.

Was there a noticeable shift from one tactic (repression vs. accommodation) to another in Saudi Arabia's domestic policy?

The regime tries to strike a balance between the sticks and the carrots. But this balance is dependent on the availability of resources to distribute benefits. In order to understand why the regime has survived, one need to go beyond oil. The regime plays an important role in dividing the population along many lines. For example the Sunni-Shia divide prevents serious national politics from emerging and delays national solidarities. When the Shia demonstrated, they were described as a fifth column, mobilized by Iran to undermine Saudi security. When Sunnis resort to peaceful protest, they are repressed as they are described as agitators or terrorists. So these narratives isolate activists and prevent the development of nationwide solidarities that can threaten the regime. Fragmenting the Saudi population along sectarian, regional and tribal lines prevent grass-root politics from being consolidated in the kingdom.

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THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE PREVENTS
SERIOUS NATIONAL POLITICS FROM
EMERGING AND DELAYS
NATIONAL SOLIDARITIES

Is rising sectarianism one of the main causes of this shift?

Sectarianism, the politicization of religious difference, is not new in Saudi Arabia. But today it becomes important as it divides the population along rigid lines and prevents various groups from coming together. So the Shia try to demand reform and rights on the basis of their real and imagined victimization while the rest of the population watches how the regime deals with their demands. The occasional violence in the Eastern Province where security forces

target Shia activists has little impact on the rest of the population. But also occasionally violent Shia groups target the security forces. This enforces the regime narrative that the Shias threaten security and expect the rest of the population to support the regime against dissident and radical groups.

Was the start of the Arab Spring itself a turning point in Saudi Arabia's regional policy, or did that come later when new fault lines started forming in the region?

The Saudi regime felt threatened by the Arab uprisings as these were mass protests that cannot be ignored. So it immediately jumped on the opportunity to rescue the friendly regimes in Tunisia and Egypt while supporting the poor monarchies of Morocco and Jordan financially. The regime wanted to preserve monarchies across the Arab region.

In the Arabian Peninsula, the Saudis intervened militarily to save the Bahrain monarchy. However, the main turning point in the Saudi regional policy was to adopt military strategies in Yemen. It launched Operation Decisive Storm against Yemen. This proved to be an important strategy to silence potential dissent at home. The regime adopted a narrative that it is targeted on its southern borders by the Houthis, who are supported by Iran. This absorbed any dissent and silenced those who may have wanted to challenge the regime or put pressure on it to introduce political reforms. It also adopted the Syrian uprising and financed rebel groups in an attempt to bring down Bashar al-Assad, also supported by Iran.

The term 'Arab Cold War' has been dropped in regard to the proxy wars for influence that Saudi Arabia and Iran are both fuelling. Will this state-of-affairs become the new reality for the foreseeable future or do you think this is a temporary realignment of Middle Eastern Realpolitik?

Yes. It is a Cold War but it is heated and threatens to destroy the security of several countries in the region. Syria, Iraq, and Yemen are now the platforms for the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. What complicates the situation is the proxy militias (always sponsored and supported by other regimes) that are deployed to fight this war. On both sides we find that these militias weaken central authorities. Both the Syrian regime and the Iraqi government no longer control security and both countries are threatened with more fragmentation

regardless of whether the regimes survive or not. This also applies to Yemen where several armed groups compete for power on the basis of their territorial expansion in their own countries. Here again, the armed groups are armed by rival regimes in the Middle East.

Finally, the international community has a role to play in this regional struggle. From Russia to the US, we find superpowers adopting opaque policies. The US supports Saudis in the war in Yemen; the central Iraqi government, the Syrian rebels, and the Kurdish parties with the stated objective of defeating the Islamic State. But US support for the Saudis in Yemen has strengthened rather than weakened radical groups such as al-Qaida and IS. On the other hand, the Russians are determined to keep al-Assad in power. So this confusion has so far resulted in human loss and stalemates. The battles in Aleppo and Mosul may be critical but without political solutions and sharing of power in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, it is difficult to see how military solutions will lead to stabilization and eventually peace.

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by D. Bocquet

"BOYCOTT IT – IT IS ROTTEN!" (ABOUT THE WRITTEN MEDIA) – CAIRO 2011 ©DENIS BOCQUET

THE SECTARIAN REVOLUTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

RAYMOND HINNEBUSCH

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abstract

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES THE CURRENT SECTARIANIZATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST. IT BEGINS WITH A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SECTARIANISM, DISTINGUISHES KINDS OF SECTARIANISM AND EXAMINES THE FACTORS THAT DETERMINE WHICH VERSIONS OF SECTARIANISM DOMINATE AT A PARTICULAR TIME. IT SURVEYS THE PRECONDITIONS OF SECTARIANIZATION – UNEQUAL MODERNIZATION, INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF IDENTITY IN REGIME POWER-BUILDING PRACTICES; THE INITIAL PRECIPITANT OF SECTARIANIZATION, THE US INVASION OF IRAQ; AND THE IMPACT OF THE ARAB UPRISINGS, IN WHICH SECTARIANISM WAS INSTRUMENTALIZED BY REGIMES AND OPPOSITIONS. INSTRUMENTALIZED SECTARIANISM REACHED THE GRASSROOTS AND WAS TRANSMUTED INTO MILITANT SECTARIANISM BY THE SECURITY DILEMMA, COMPETITIVE INTERFERENCE IN FAILED STATES, AND TRANS-STATE DIFFUSION OF SECTARIAN DISCOURSES. THE CONSEQUENCES OF

SECTARIANIZATION INCLUDE ITS CHALLENGE TO STATE FORMATION AND ITS TENDENCY TO EMPOWER AUTHORITARIANISM. CIVIL WAR HAS UNLEASHED MILITANT SECTARIANISM LEADING TO EXCLUSIVIST PRACTICES AMONG BOTH REGIMES AND OPPOSITION. THE REGIONAL POWER STRUGGLE HAS TAKEN THE FORM OF SECTARIAN BI-POLARIZATION BETWEEN SUNNI AND SHIA CAMPS. SECTARIANIZATION CAN ONLY BE REVERSED BY AN END TO THE CURRENT CIVIL WARS IN SYRIA, IRAQ AND YEMEN AND THE REGIONAL POWER STRUGGLES THAT KEEP THEM GOING.

SECTARIANISM, ARAB UPRISINGS, FAILED STATES, CIVIL WAR, REGIONAL POWER STRUGGLE, SUNNI, SHIA

keywords

INTRODUCTION

There is a wide consensus that the Middle East is in the grip of a sectarian wave, despite much disagreement about its dimensions, causes and consequences. While sectarianism has always been an element of the MENA cultural fabric, the recent surge of politicized and militant sectarianism and the bi-polarization between Sunni and Shia is unprecedented in the modern history of the region. Not only has it introduced virulent and violent practices into inter-state competition, but it is also fracturing multi-sectarian states across the region and re-empowering authoritarian forms of governance.¹

Insofar as it has transformed pre-existing power structures, then the sectarian surge in MENA has a revolutionary dimension: identities have undergone significant and rapid change; an unprecedented number of states have failed, relatively empowering trans-state movements; the balance of power among states has been radically upset; and state borders are being challenged. In other respects, however, sectarianism has been a vehicle of counter-revolution that has blocked the transformation of the region envisioned by those who launched the Arab Uprisings starting in 2010. The Middle East looks, in many respects, entirely different than before this sectarian surge; but the outcome is an Arab winter, not an Arab spring

This paper will seek to explain the sectarian phenomenon, particularly its rapid diffusion across the region, and to analyze its impact on the

¹ Gause 2014; Salloukh 2015.

stability of fragile states, its implications for forms of governance and its effect on the regional power struggle and the stability of the regional states system.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THINKING ABOUT SECTARIANISM

Sectarianism has two characteristics, an identity, perhaps political, which defines a community to which individuals belong and normative prescriptions, that is, the norms and roles attached to the identity.

1) Identity: Multiple & Constructed

Thinking about the construction of sectarianism as an identity usefully departs from the debates over political identity between primordialists, modernists, and instrumentalists. Since primordialists focus on the historical roots of identities, modernism focuses on contemporary structural context and instrumentalists on agency, an adequate approach needs to combine the insights of each. From such a synthesis, it is possible to derive a number of starting points.²

First, political identity is plastic, not fixed or unchanging. Yet, identities cannot be arbitrarily invented, for, as primordialists insist, their credibility and popular resonance depends on memories of long historical experience and inherited shared ingredients such as language, which are only constructed over the *longue durée*; once constructed, identity becomes a durable 'social fact,' part of structure which constrains agency. Moreover, as people are born into an identity – such as sect – it is primordial, appearing 'natural,' 'everyday' and 'banal,' even though it must be continually reproduced by early socialization, kin, peer groups, schools, religious institutions, etc.

Vali Nasr remarks that "how you pray decides who you are"³ but, in fact, religion is only one factor in MENA peoples' identity. Indeed, there are, especially in the Middle East, multiple credible identities, located at different 'levels:' some are small, particularistic and exclusivistic (family, tribe); others define larger more universalistic and inclusive identities (the state, supra-state (Arabism, Pan-Islam)). Sect is therefore only one such identity, located somewhere between the two poles and, as such, by no means inevitably dominant. Also, people may hold several identities simultaneously perhaps because some are not politicized or because they overlap in content, being

² The following section builds on and synthesizes material from the analyses in: Matthieson 2015; Chapter 1; Varshney 2007; Malmvig 2012; Hinnebusch 2016a.

³ POMED 2012.

compatible in their norms; thus, people may simultaneously identify with their sect, their state and a larger Arab or Islamic community. For example, as long as their sectarian identity remained banal and unpoliticized, educated Shia in Lebanon and Iraq were often communists and Sunnis and Christians in Syria were Arab nationalists. With many identities in competition, their salience alters over time, a product of the practices of political entrepreneurs and structural conditions, as instrumentalists and modernists demonstrate.

2) Sectarian Variations

Sectarianism is not a homogeneous phenomenon, but rather varies according to levels of politicization and intensity.⁴ Sectarianism is an identity marker combined with norms but the balance between these components makes for differences in its intensity, producing at least three major variants, banal, instrumentalized and militant sectarianisms.

Everyday (or banal) sectarianism is a relatively un-politicized identity marker in multi-sectarian societies, operative largely at the local level, with few national normative implications and therefore compatible with sectarian co-existence and with state and supra-state identities (e.g. Arabism).

Instrumentalized sectarianism – The first step toward sectarianization is the politicization of sectarian differences for instrumental ends: political entrepreneurs are incentivized to instrumentalize sectarianism to mobilize sects in intra-state competition over resources, as famously in Lebanon, and individuals to use sectarianism to gain access to clientele networks. This 'instrumental sectarianism' has little doctrinal implications or necessary incompatibility with sectarian coexistence. Instrumentalism does not imply that identities are merely tools in struggles over material resources for if identities reflect the interests of those who construct them, once constructed identity shapes conceptions of interests by those who hold to them and identity is an ideational interest in its own right that people will defend when under threat; thus in times of high insecurity, instrumental sectarianism facilitates defensive collective action (e.g. the minorities in the Syrian civil war).⁵

Militant sectarianism – in the Muslim world jihadism – has an intense normative content, seeks to impose (universalize), if need be by force, a one true interpretation of religion – usually a fundamentalist one – in the public sphere; it demonizes those who do not comply as infidels and often embraces martyrdom for the cause. The main

⁴ Haddad 2011.

⁵ Malmvig 2012.

indicator of militant sectarianism is the denunciation of the other as an unbeliever, liable to persecution – takfir or the process of declaring others non-believers. Unlike an instrumentalist pursuit of material goods, which can be compromised by adjusting shares among the contenders, a public religious vision cannot readily be compromised.

It should be stressed that this last form of sectarianism – jihadism – with its revolutionary dimension, has been a distinctly minority variant of Islam. Most variants of Islam are non-political (such as Sufism) and jihadism has to be distinguished from other kinds of political Islam, such as Salafism (especially its Saudi exported version Wahhabism), a highly fundamentalist variant that is often deferent to authority, and the modernist Muslim Brotherhood which is both more tolerant and open to *ijtihad* (reinterpretation). Militant sectarianism flourishes amongst intense power struggles and insecurity, particularly that fostered by civil war and state failure and is often promoted across boundaries by trans-state movements and discourses; under these conditions mainstream Islam tends to be on the defensive and other varieties of political Islam, especially Salafism, can mutate into jihadism.⁶ Sectarianism of this variety is a particularly powerful identity in that it tightly combines a sub-state particularistic identity (where people are “born into” a sect at the ‘grassroots’) with the supra/or trans-state level in which states, movements and networks seek to mobilize supporters and delegitimize rivals via a universalizing discourse.

3) The Determinants of Identity: Agency-Structure Interaction

Identity change or reproduction is promoted by ‘political entrepreneurs’ motivated by power and ideology, as instrumentalists argue. Agency is most empowered in periods when several identities are competing, as is typical of the modern Middle East where no one identity has achieved hegemony for long; entrepreneurs, have, in this situation, more potential to politicize unpoliticized primordial identities and to shift dominant identities from one level to the other. However, the power of a particular identity depends on its congruence with material conditions, which encourage some identities and discourage others; thus, modernists would argue that broadened mass identities, such as identification with the state, are enabled by modernization; whether state builders practices are inclusive or exclusive, will affect whether people identify with the state; and in periods when material conditions are fluid, such as revolutions, collective action by identity movements can further change identities, as in the rise of jihadist movements in the Syrian civil war. In summary, which,

6 Brubaker 2015.

among several credible identities dominates at a given time and situation depends on a complex interaction of structure and agency. Departing from this viewpoint, explanations for the unprecedented sectarian surge of the contemporary period are attempted in the following section.

DRIVERS OF SECTARIANIZATION

Scholars have long recognized the exceptional power of identity in the Middle East and the permeability of regional states to trans-state identity discourses.⁷ Barnett and Lynch argued that identity is shaped by discourse competition in a trans-state public space;⁸ in the regional states system rival states bid for hegemony using trans-state discourses;⁹ and the main threats against which many regimes balance has not been from armies but ideational subversion challenging their domestic legitimacy.¹⁰ After several decades of post-independence Pan-Arab hegemony in the Arab world, oil-bolstered states appeared to be consolidated and less permeable to trans-state identities for a period peaking in the 1980s; but this proved ephemeral and what Salloukh called “the return of the weak state” – indeed failing states have re-empowered identity wars.¹¹ Yet, if identity has always more or less mattered for regional politics, the identities instrumentalized in this rivalry have hitherto chiefly been inclusive state, Pan-Arab or Pan-Islamic identities. Now, however rival states and movements exploit the highly divisive sectarian dichotomy between Sunni and Shia. What explains the rapid diffusion and apparent hegemony of sectarian discourse and practices across the region? Several tendencies, each of which, in themselves, cannot explain it, and each of which contains counter tendencies, nevertheless when cumulative and combined, have constituted powerful drivers of sectarianism.

1) Pre-Conditions of the Sectarian Surge

Modernization – social mobilization (education, mobility, market integration) driven by capitalist development tends to broaden identities toward the state level, while capitalism also drives class formation and class

7 Salloukh, Brynen 2004.

8 Barnett 1993; Lynch 1999.

9 Kienle 1990: 1-30.

10 Gause 2003/04; Rubin 2014.

11 Salloukh 2016.

identity that may compete with more particularistic sub-state identities.¹² Yet because, in transition societies, modernization also greatly increases aspirations and competition for scarce resources, it can have the opposite effect: migrants to the city may broaden their identity from village (where sectarianism may be banal) to a larger sectarian community (of an activist instrumentalist kind) without it further extending to the nation-state and sectarian solidarity may become a vehicle for competition for scarce resources.¹³ Where resources are distributed by the state via clientele networks this effect is amplified; the instrumentalization of sectarianism is facilitated by its utility for overcoming the collective action problem thereby allowing people to organize for more effective competition over scarce resources. Where increased supply scarcity intensifies competition, communal solidarity is further amplified. In the Middle East job creation has been lagging behind large increases in education, hence frustrating aspirations among youth. Massive population growth (in rural areas on fairly fixed land resources), fueling large-scale urbanization, was also typical, aggravated in the case of Syria by an unprecedented drought. Finally, the greatly increased inequality in the distribution of wealth resulting from the global move to neo-liberalism, reflected in MENA by the move from populist to post-populist authoritarianism,¹⁴ greatly exacerbates communal tensions.¹⁵ In such conditions, losers often attribute outcomes to sectarian discrimination, raising sectarian consciousness – what we might call ‘aggrieved sectarianism.’

Power building practices – Sectarianism’s use as part of authoritarian regime building in MENA’s multi-sectarian societies further politicized it. In such identity-divided societies latent primordial identities, notably sectarianism, seem ‘ready-made’ for exploitation in power struggles. Ruling politicians have a strong incentive to instrumentalize sectarian asayibbya to construct their power bases and oppositions are incentivized to use a counter-sectarian identity to mobilize support against the rulers. Thus, patrimonial practices, such as reliance on trusted sectarians, were used to foster cohesive ruling groups in Ba’thist Syria and Iraq. However, this was initially balanced by cross-sectarian co-optation of wider social forces, via bureaucratic institutions. These authoritarian regimes both used and contained sectarianism; this helps explain their remarkably durable rule over fragmented societies. Conversely, when the balance between patrimonial practices and inclusion through bureaucratic practices tilts toward the former, the excluded may feel themselves victims of sectarian discrimination (‘aggrieved sectarianism’), hence, tend to embrace a sectarian counter-identity. However, as long as state governance remains

intact, grievances take the form of grumbling and competition centers on *wasta* (clientele connections), not violence; it is state failure that paves the way for instrumental sectarianism to become militant and violent. State failure was, however, by no means inevitable: the region’s neo-patrimonial states seemed self-reproducing and it required external intervention to catalyze their de-stabilization.

2) Precipitating the Sectarian Struggle: Global Intrusion

The current sectarianization is a recent phenomenon precipitated by the unprecedented intrusion of the US global hegemon into the regional power struggle. The destruction of the Iraqi state amidst massive violence (shock and awe) unleashed Sunni-Shia civil war in Iraq. The US constructed a replacement political system that institutionalized instrumental sectarianism. The invasion also opened the door for intense penetration of Iraq by Iranian backed Iraqi Shia exiles and for international jihadists, including al-Qaida, to stir up sectarianism (by targeting Shia mosques) – an unprecedented transnationalization of sectarian conflict. The Iraq conflict spilled over in the region by stimulating sectarian discourse in the Iraqi and the trans-state media.¹⁶

It also precipitated the so-called “New Arab Cold War” pitting the Sunni moderate states aligned with the US in spite of their opposition to the invasion against those that overtly opposed it – the Resistance Axis. The Sunni states, alarmed that the overthrown of the Sunni Saddam regime had allowed Iran to penetrate Iraq through allied Shia parties that had ridden to power on the back of a Shia majority and also by the growing power of Shia Hizbollah in Lebanon, deployed overt sectarian discourse against what they saw as Iran’s encroachment in Arab affairs. King Abdullah of Jordan famously warned of a “Shia Crescent.” Despite this, sectarianism found little resonance on the Arab street where Nasrallah, Assad and Ahmadinejad were the most popular regional leaders – for their resistance to what was still seen as the main enemy – Israel.¹⁷ So what turned this elite level instrumentalization of sectarian discourse into a much more dangerous grassroots sectarianism?

¹² Deutsch 1961; Hobsbaum 1990.

¹³ Nagel, Olzak 1982.

¹⁴ Hinnebusch 2015b.

¹⁵ Prasch 2012.

¹⁶ Dodge 2014; Al-Rawi 2013; Byman 2014; Al-Qarawee 2014.

¹⁷ Valbjorn, Bank 2011.

3) The Arab Uprising: From Instrumental Sectarianism to Grassroots Sectarianization

The Arab Uprising further intensified the struggle for power inside and among states, thereby unleashing the sectarian demon. To be sure, few of the protestors that launched the uprisings instrumentalized sectarianism; rather, the discourse of the youthful middle class protestors who dominated the early period of the uprisings stressed non-violence and cross-sectarian appeal – in a bid to neutralize regimes’ sectarian divide-and-rule tactics and also to get Western support by advertising their liberal credentials. In sectarian divided states like Syria, there were plenty of covert sectarian grievances operative and the protestors demand for equal citizenship conveyed resentment of what was perceived as the regime’s sectarian discrimination. Still, the uprisings were everywhere chiefly driven by socio-economic and political grievances notably associated by the move to post-populism and the frustration of expectations that economic liberalization would be paralleled by political opening. In the more identity-homogeneous states, this tended to shape mobilization along class lines and to enable broad cross-class anti-regime coalitions (with both workers and the middle class joining against the regime), which in Tunisia and Egypt were sufficient to marginalize relatively minor sectarian differences and sweep presidents out of office. In highly identity-fragmented societies, such as Syria, differential distribution of costs and benefits from post-populist crony capitalism were interpreted as sectarian discrimination; hence sectarian and class cleavages reinforced each other among the main victims, politically-unconnected small businessmen in the medium towns and the rural underclass. However, at the same time, sectarian cleavages cut across and diluted anti-regime mobilization, with significant societal segments declining to join the uprising or aligning with the regime, partly on class, partly sectarian lines. In Syria, there was enough mobilization against the regime to destabilize it but not for revolution from below, instead setting up the conditions for potential stalemate and civil war.

In this structural situation, the instrumentalism of sectarianism provided the tipping point into civil war. Even if non-violent, the flooding of the streets across the Arab world with mass protest that challenged regimes for control of public spaces, was a potent instrument in a struggle for power between counter-elites and ruling regimes, and particularly once protestors demanded the “fall of the regime” it was inevitable that regimes would fight back violently and with whatever tools were at their disposal. Unsurprisingly, once regimes were existentially challenged in Syria, Iraq and Bahrain, elites turned to sectarianism to consolidate their support bases, thereby provoking counter-sectarianism among oppositions. Rivals in power struggles ended up resorting to sectarianism, even if, as was

often so, their own identities were not necessarily sectarian, because it was understood to work in mobilizing followers and demonizing enemies. Regimes framed the threat from the ‘Other’ in sectarian terms, oppositions then relied on militant sectarian discourse to mobilize fighters and fighting spirit (to make up for their usually inferior weaponry) and regimes were then pushed to rely more and more on defensive sectarian *asabiyya*. But what has made this elite and counter-elite instrumentalization of sectarianism, that for many years had failed to move the Arab street, so potent that it rapidly polarized the mass grass roots, increasing squeezing out all those in the middle? What had changed was the unprecedented wave of state failures unleashed by the uprisings inside several states – Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen – in which central governments lost their monopoly of legitimate violence to armed oppositions and lost control of swathes of territory as well as their ability to deliver security and services on which citizen loyalty was contingent.¹⁸

Internal drivers – Inside states, civil wars between forces that could be represented as ‘sectarian,’ during which unrestrained violence was deployed in a zero-sum power struggle, turned fighters on both sides to militant versions of sectarianism; the spilling of blood encouraging an embrace of religion. Jihadism intensified the violence as its adherents embraced martyrdom, e.g. suicide bombers. The ‘takfir-ization’ of the ‘Other’ deterred the compromises needed to stop the escalation of conflict. Second, the ‘security dilemma’ pushed all sides to fall back on their communal group for protection;¹⁹ each group, seeing the other as a threat, acted pre-emptively to increase its own security in a way that made all less secure, by increasing group solidarity, demonization of the ‘Other,’ creation of sectarian militias and sectarian cleansing of neighborhoods. These practices entrenched sectarianism at the grassroots in Arab failed states. Many people have been permanently seared, especially youth whose political formation came in parallel to civil war, their identity transformed from inclusive to much more particularistic identities.

Third, the security dilemma was reinforced by the emergence of war economies: as normal economic life collapsed amidst civil war, people joined fighting factions that provided a minimum livelihood; since Gulf funding gave jihadist groups resource advantages over less sectarian ones, they were more successful in recruitment and, once incorporated, previously non-ideological recruits were subjected to intense socialization by the peer group. Thus, identities were further transformed in a sectarian direction and moderate, secular, middle forces weakened.

Fourth, once civil wars led to state failure, the territory of states became contested and divided up between warring patrimonial regime remnants

¹⁸ Hinnebusch 2014; Byman 2014.

¹⁹ Posen 1993.

and charismatic opposition movements, both drawing on the historically successful 'Khaldounian' practices – co-opting and sustaining loyalty or mobilizing followers on the basis of assabiyeh, some combination of blood kinship and shared religious vision – to build or sustain power. In multi-sectarian societies this takes the form of sectarianism. The result is that regimes and counter-regimes become much more sectarian than had been the case when the uprisings first started.

External drivers – Simultaneously, internal conflicts in failed states not only spilled over to the regional level, but regional forces, at the same time, exacerbated sectarian conflict in individual states. Scholarship has shown that communal conflicts can be contagious, with kindred groups in several states that share grievances mobilized by a demonstration effect, and violent and successful insurgencies spreading readily across state boundaries.²⁰ The shared culture, language, and in some cases, similar sectarian makeup, of the Arab states facilitates such spillover. But it was the widespread weakening of states in the Uprising that made them so much more permeable than hitherto to the diffusion of sectarianism by extensive transnational linkages – discourses of preachers, activist networks and armed movements.

At the trans-state level, state weakening and civil war sectarianized discourse, and, specifically, the media. This began with Iraq's 2003 deconstruction and was intensified by the uprisings, especially in Syria,²¹ with highly sectarian discourses in the satellite and social media readily crossing borders, extremist narratives getting disproportionate attention and few voices pushing back against them.²² This trans-state transmission of sectarianism was not even limited to states with sectarian pluralism or civil war. Sectarianization has increased even in states where there is no civil war, few sectarian minorities and little external interference. Social media and radical preachers, particularly on Gulf-run Arab satellite TV, spread sectarian animosities far from states experiencing civil war.

As sectarianism demonstratively seemed to "work" in mobilizing support and demonizing enemies, trans-state movements emulated each other in its exploitation. Notably in the Levant, the renewed permeability of states' borders allowed Sunni Salafist jihadists to intervene on one side and a counter-coalition of Shia-led minorities (hulf al-aqalliyyat) on the other; militias from one country, recruited via long-distance sectarian networks, regularly transited to neighboring countries, while an unprecedented movement of foreign Muslim fighters poured into disputed states, altogether propelling an unprecedented transnationalization of opposing sectarian movements and networks.

In parallel, where states failed, vacuums were created inviting competitive external intervention in which rival powers instrumentalized sectarian discourse and provided arms and financing to bring sectarian-affiliated allies to power in uprising states. As the rival regional powers backed the most sectarian factions – partly because they were the best fighters – the latter came to enjoy greater resources, precipitating a 'bandwagoning' of more "moderate" factions to the jihadist poles. Rival states emulated each other in what might be called "tit-for-tat sectarianism" – when one side frames the struggle in sectarian terms, its success leads its rivals to similarly respond.²³

At the same time, at the regional level, the violence of civil wars combined with competition for leadership within sects promoted outbidding by radical sectarian entrepreneurs that marginalized moderates within each of the two main confessions. Within Sunnism the normative balance has shifted away from the previously majority non-violent versions that accepted co-existence, notably Sufis whose 'everyday sectarianism' was non-political and accommodationist with secular authorities and other sects. Sufism suffered from the rise of Salafist fundamentalism, which, particularly in failed states such as Syria, easily slipped into jihadism. At the same time, the modernists of the Muslim Brotherhood brand struggled to sustain their discourse on a civil state, squeezed between regimes' repression and jihadi mobilization. Within Shiism, too, politicized militias, composed of zealots ready for martyrdom in defense of Shia shrines and neighborhoods, joined the fighting in Syria and Iraq. The rise of ISIS in Iraq provoked the mobilization of the overtly sectarian Shiite Hasht al-Shaabi, which tended to elevate a trans-Shia identity over Iraqi national identity (which would embrace both Shia and Sunnis); Iran used the ISIS threat to encourage Iraqi Shia into joining such groups as these were its most reliable Iraqi clients.²⁴ Yemen's Zaidi identity, not hitherto anti-Sunni, took on a more Shia color amidst a civil war with Saudi backed Salafists.

This stimulated a powerful cumulative tendency to bi-polarize the region between Sunni and Shia sectarianism in which the moderate secular center was compressed, if not squeezed out. This is not to say that this bi-polarization is uncontested or necessarily permanent. Class, local and tribal identities cross-cut sectarianism and civic identities compete with it. Neither Christians nor Kurds align with the two main sectarian camps. Both the "Sunni" and "Shia" camps are heterogeneous. There are social forces and moderate voices that have resisted sectarianization: Sufis, secular youth with a civic identity; modernist Islamists, Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq and Alawi dissidents who rejected the Syrian regime's alliance with Iran. People have many identities and the embrace of militant sectarianism

20 Lawson 2016.

21 Byman 2014; Al-Rawi 2013.

22 Lynch 2016b; Wehrey 2016.

23 Wehrey 2016.

24 Almarzoqi 2015.

is a function of the current violent conflicts and its instrumentalization in the regional power struggle. But as long as the fighting continues middle voices tend to be either disempowered or impelled to bandwagon with the radicals. The dynamics of violent conflict have shifted the normative balance within Islam away from co-existence and toward takfiri practices. Once let out, this deep sectarianism is very difficult to put back in the box.

Thus, similar structural factors (state failure, civil war) combined with trans-state penetration and intervention made states and populations susceptible to unprecedented sectarian diffusion. What have the consequences of this been? One impact is a deleterious effect on both state cohesion and forms of governance.

CONSEQUENCES OF SECTARIANIZATION

Sectarianism & State Formation/De-formation

As Huntington famously said, the most important differences between countries is not the type of government but the amount of it, that is, their level of state formation.²⁵ For him, state building proceeded through phases, first the concentration of power in an elite center; then an expansion of power through a single party that mobilized supporters, combined with reformism of the Ataturk type that forged a common national identity and a middle class; and thirdly the diffusion of power via multi-party electoralism. As we will see, sectarianism introduces complications into this formula.

Sectarianism and state formation appear inversely related, at least in the long run: strong states constrain sectarianism and failed states are breeding grounds for it. MENA state formation levels, hence the region's vulnerability to trans-state penetration, including sectarianization, has varied considerably. Over time it describes a bell shaped curve, rising from a period of readily penetrated weak states after independence to a peak in the 1980s when authoritarian states were "hardened" against such penetration by oil-funded bureaucratic expansion and co-optation, thereafter declining through the 1990s and 2000s as resources contracted, ending in a new watershed of multiple state failures precipitated by the Arab Uprising, which again exposed many of them to trans-state penetration, largely by rival sectarian movements, networks and discourse.²⁶ Within each time period, too, states varied in their levels of internal consolidation, with those having a historical identity congruent with their borders (such

²⁵ Huntington 1968.

²⁶ Salloukh 2016; Hinnebusch 2015b; Saouli 2015.



IN MENA, THE DOMINANT REGIME/STATE BUILDING PRACTICE WAS (AND IS) NEO-PATRIMONIALISM, AN AUTHORITARIAN HYBRID OF PERSONAL AND BUREAUCRATIC AUTHORITY

as Egypt), and/or co-optative patronage from exceptional oil revenues (such as Saudi Arabia) better able to resist the post-1980 decline. Stronger states are better able to construct identities compatible with statehood and to defend their territory from trans-state penetration. Identities tend to be constructed against an 'Other' and it takes a stronger state to direct such enmity outward to other states while weak states are vulnerable to penetration by rival identities that divide them within and make them potential victims of the former.

On the other hand, sectarianism poses obstacles to state formation. It is most difficult where there are several large sectarian groups, as opposed to relative homogeneity with small minorities or identity fragmentation (with many groups) or where multiple identities cross-cut each other. Most dangerous is when there are large minorities excluded from governance by a majority or when a minority seems to rule over a majority, as in Iraq and Syria.

This danger is amplified where, as in these states, a counter-balancing identification with the state itself was retarded because imperialist-imposed borders were incongruent with historic identities, thereby making states more vulnerable to competing sub- and supra-state identities, including sectarianism. Thus, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq were constructed to suit French and British interests, throwing together groups that did not want to share a state, cutting them off from kin in neighboring territory and mutilating the larger community with which many people identified. In such 'artificial' states, regime building may drive state building and if the regime fails, the state is also put at risk. Yet, even if regime and state overlap, they are not identical and their requisites of success can actually contradict each other.

Given this scenario, what pathways to state building are available in such identity-fragmented weak states? In MENA, the dominant regime/state building practice was (and is) neo-patrimonialism, an authoritarian hybrid of personal and bureaucratic authority.²⁷ Personal authority prioritizes empowerment of those most loyal to the ruler and in multi-sectarian societies this typically means those who share a sectarian identity with him; this elite core approximates what we mean by the 'regime.' Bureaucratic authority, which rests on the creation of state institutions – civil administration, professional army, legislatures and party systems –

²⁷ Bank, Richter 2010; Anceschi et al. 2014.

is more inclusive since recruitment is by merit and party bureaucracies incorporate activists and co-opt constituents. Only cross-class and cross-sectarian coalitions have the capacity to expand or consolidate state power and these require the construction of bureaucratic and political institutions able to incorporate such wider social forces. In Huntington's terms, neo-patrimonial regimes use patrimonial practices, including sectarianism, in the power concentration phase; as such in the short term, at least, sectarianism can be an asset in regime formation, as well as problem for state formation. In the power expansion phase, regimes deploy bureaucratic inclusionary practices in order to contain the negative side of patrimonial practices, which include the alienation of those excluded from high office or institutions on ascriptive (identity) grounds and the inefficiency introduced into state institutions. The more the bureaucratic side constrains the patrimonial one (Egypt), the more rational bureaucracy and political inclusion of pro-regime constituencies strengthens the state; the more personal authority debilitates the bureaucratic capabilities (e.g. Yemen), the less inclusion is possible and the weaker the state. Thus, the balance between the relative salience of the two authority practices, and specifically, sufficient development of bureaucratic institutions, determines the capacity of a given neo-patrimonial regime to include and satisfy actors who, if excluded, embrace communal grievances. Sect is, in this process, both an asset, particularly for regime-building, yet a potential liability in the creation of institutional authority (state-building).

Different institutional configurations are often explicitly designed to deal with identity diversity, and to reconcile the need to create authority while also incorporating constituents through some form of political participation. MENA's initially populist versions of authoritarianism typically adopted the "assimilationist" approach which seeks the "national integration" of social forces through ruling single parties, such as the Ba'th party, that recruited across sect and promoted assimilation into a common Arab identity while constraining overt sectarian competition. In Syria, the Ba'th party's secular Arab nationalist ideology had some success in integrating the Arabic-speaking minorities and in Iraq in bridging Sunni Shia gaps with Arabism. However, the subsequent decline of the party contracted political inclusion, potentially reviving sectarian grievances among the excluded.

The polar opposite model, consociational democracy, has been attempted in a minority of MENA societies where the authoritarian concentration of power was obstructed by highly mobilized sectarian communities sufficiently balanced in size that power sharing was the only viable state-building formula. This model not only accommodated identity diversity but also institutionalized sectarian differences. In the consociational governance prevailing in Lebanon and attempted in post-Saddam Iraq, political competition takes place along communal lines with elites mobilizing votes

through playing on fears of the 'Other' and privileging sectarian clients with patronage. Consociationalism's power sharing among confessional groups could produce a stable regime if elites refrain from mobilizing their sectarian constituencies against each other and from inviting kindred external networks to intervene in the internal power competition on their behalf. If the system constrains competition by guaranteeing quotas of office and patronage to each communal group, sectarianization may be muted but if quotas do not fairly represent the demographic weight of communal groups, they will themselves become the focus of conflict as in Lebanon where this precipitated sectarian civil war in the 1970s. If there is a sectarian majority and it becomes permanent, as in Iraq, minorities are excluded and will counter-mobilize also on sectarian lines.²⁸

Thus, neither model appears to be sectarianism-proof and a lot depends on the resources regimes can deploy. As noted, state formation in MENA followed a bell shaped curve, with economic crises and shrinking resources weakening states after the 1980s peak in state strength and debilitating their co-optative capacity. Thus, in the 2000s, the Syrian and Iraq regimes both became more exclusionary, despite their divergence between neo-patrimonial authoritarianism in Syria and nominal consociational democracy in Iraq. In Syria, Bashar al-Asad's concentration of power in the presidency and the Asad family at the expense of the cross-sectarian collective Ba'th party leadership; the neo-liberal policies that aggrandized crony capitalists at the expense of the regime's popular constituency, and the debilitation of the party and corporatist organization that penetrated and co-opted the regimes initial rural peasant power base – all made his regime more vulnerable to anti-regime mobilization. In Iraq the Shia politicians who took over power after the American invasion had dismantled the existing state, three-quarters of whom had been in exile and therefore lacked Iraqi constituencies, turned to anti-Sunni discourse, framed as anti-Ba'thism, as the only way to mobilize power bases. Nuri al-Maliki constructed a form of electoral neo-patrimonialism that concentrated power in the Shia parties, largely excluding or marginalizing Sunnis.²⁹

As regimes' institutional capacity declined they became more vulnerable to sectarian mobilization by opposition forces, dramatically in the Arab uprisings. Ruling elites in Syria, Bahrain and Iraq instrumentalized sectarianism to turn back this opposition. Yet, this tactic carries high risks for instability and, in extreme cases, civil war and this is especially so in "artificial" states lacking a state tradition and historical identity: there regime formation is almost inseparable from state formation, if the regime fails, so does the state. This provides favorable breeding grounds for sectarianism, as can be seen in the Levant where state collapse and

²⁸ Makdisi 1996; Salamy 2009; Salloukh 2015.

²⁹ Al-Qarawee 2014; Dodge 2014; Hinnebusch 2011.

anarchy generated a security dilemma polarizing populations along sectarian lines. Once sectarianism seeps down to grass roots, the elites that instrumentalized it will find it very hard to put the genie back in the bottle. If regimes survive, they tend to be reconfigured as more exclusionary and coercive forms of neo-patrimonialism often facing opposing charismatic jihadist movements, with both relying on one identity in order to exclude others via repression and demonization, as can be seen most clearly in Syria.

In cases of externally-imposed arbitrary borders, notably the post WWI “settlement” in the Levant, state failure opens new doors for irredentist movements seeking to re-draw them. Borders are more vulnerable where they divide compact minorities, such as the Kurds concentrated in the Turkey-Syria-Iraq interface or where, as between Syria and Iraq they cut across virtually indistinguishable populations. Thus, in Syria and Iraq, both the Kurdish PKK/PDY and ISIS mobilizing populations by ethno-sectarian ideologies are seeking to redraw the borders of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, to overthrow ‘Sykes-Picot,’ and to constitute new more communally homogeneous polities, a process that inevitably involves a certain “ethnic cleansing.” Whether they succeed depends not just on their relative strength compared to state elites and others committed to existing borders, but also regional and international permissiveness for border alterations.

The Impact of Sectarianism on Regime Type: Empowering Authoritarianism – Debilitating Democratization

There is a vast literature on the relation between multi-communal societies and governance. Early modernization theory expected that sub-state identities would, over time, be subsumed in broader national identities focused on the state; this, Rustow argued, was needed for democracy since, for people to disagree peacefully over issues, they had to share an underlying identity commonality.³⁰ In the religious sphere, modernization was thought to be accompanied by secularization that would facilitate democratization since de-politicization of religious beliefs and religion’s removal from the public sphere was necessary to prevent religious conflict in multi-confessional societies and the use of religion to legitimize authoritarianism.

Later, “Modernization revisionism,” reflecting the actual adaptation of tradition to modernity, argued that neither ethnicity nor religion were effaced by modernization.³¹ Rather, primordial identities could be modernized and become vehicles of modern political participation, e.g.

through communal based associations. Nevertheless, trans-national data is ambiguous on the impact of sub-state identities on governance. A study by Merkel and Weiffen finds failed democratizers having the highest communal fractionalization and polarization.³² However, if states survive, moderate levels of communal diversity do not necessarily obstruct democratization and indeed can facilitate democracy in that it provides opposition with a natural social base enabling it to overcome the collective action problem and balance ruling groups.

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MODERNIZATION REVISIONISM, REFLECTING THE ACTUAL ADAPTATION OF TRADITION TO MODERNITY, ARGUED THAT NEITHER ETHNICITY NOR RELIGION WERE EFFACED BY MODERNIZATION.

Religious differences are, however, harder to deal with: cross-national statistical studies show that religious heterogeneity increases the chance of civil war and decreases the chances of democracy (by 8%) because religion’s claims to a single truth are less able to be compromised than conflicts involving class and ethnicity.³³ Inter-religious sectarian divisions increase this tendency. But this anti-democratic effect is highly contingent on the kind of sectarianism. Everyday (banal) sectarianism is probably compatible with any form of governance and instrumentalized sectarianism is highly congruent with consociational democracy. This model, in dividing power among social forces, is a barrier to authoritarianism and where sectarian groups are politically mobilized and evenly balanced, hence must share power, it may be the only viable means of governance.³⁴ But militant versions of sectarianism, particularly the jihadism on the rise in the region cannot be accommodated by consociational compromises and are, hence, obstacles to making such a system work, as can be seen in Iraq where the rise of ISIS is both a reaction to the Sunnis’ effective marginalization in the consociational political system and an obstacle to Sunni incorporation into it. The aftermath of the Arab Uprising provides a new body of evidence on sectarianism and governance, although it is ambiguous. On the one hand, Lebanon’s relative immunity to spillover of the Syrian civil war suggests that consociational power sharing, insofar as a country has been immunized by a previous episode of sectarian civil war, gives majorities in each community sufficient security that they view the system as worth defending against the alternative – a return to civil war.

But the preponderance of evidence supports the argument that sectarianism is a deterrent to democratization and a support for hybrid

³⁰ Rustow 1970.

³¹ Gusfield 1967.

³² Merkel, Wieffen 2012.

³³ Gerring et al. 2016.

³⁴ Andeweg 2000; Kerr 2006: 27-28.

and authoritarian regimes. A whole range of techniques have enabled authoritarian regimes to use sectarianism to sustain their rule or helped ruling elites in hybrid regimes to keep limited electoral competition from leading to democratization. Sectarian recruitment of military/security forces are normal practices and when regimes are challenged sectarian paramilitary networks (e.g., Syrian shabiha and Shia militia in Iraq) have been used to repress democracy protests. Co-optation usually accompanies repression: thus, it is common for selective economic benefits to be accorded to loyal groups, usually the ruler's own sect (Bahrain, Syria). Common also are political practices that strengthen pro-regime sects against rivals such as gerrymandering and mal-apportionment in elections (Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain). Cross-sectarian democratic coalitions are deterred by coopting NGOs sharing the ruler's sect; cracking down on 'moderate' cross-sectarian NGOs (Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait) and banning political parties (which might incorporate cross-sectarian support).³⁵ Encouraging or tolerating inter-sectarian conflict facilitates divide and rule, as when the Saudi and Kuwaiti regimes turn a blind eye to anti-Shia rhetoric by Sunni-Islamist groups as a way of binding the majority to the regime and controlling the minority.³⁶ Regimes may rally sectarian support by posing as protector of minorities against majorities, e.g. Bashar al-Asad posed as the protector of minorities against Sunni takfiris; and the al-Khalifa regime claimed to protect Sunnis against the Shia majority. Another tactic is to delegitimize domestic opponents by painting them as tools of an external sectarian power (e.g. the Bahraini regime's framing of the protesters as an Iranian fifth column). An extreme form of sectarian politics is changing the sectarian demographic composition of society by giving citizenship to foreigners from the regime's sect and depriving members of opposition sects of citizenship, as, notoriously, in Bahrain.

There is, of course, considerable variation in the extent to which sectarianism has been deployed by non-democratic regimes. Yet, even in stable relatively liberal states such as Kuwait, the monarchy exploits the Sunni-Shia cleavage to head off challenges from parliament and society, thus, sustaining a hybrid regime against pressures for democratization.³⁷ In Iraq, despite the launch under US auspices of a new version of consociational democracy, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki consolidated electoral authoritarianism by playing on fears of a Sunni resurgence to create a permanent Shia majority bloc while also pursuing exclusionary practices against Sunnis and marginalizing cross-sectarian Iraqi nationalist alternatives, such as al-Iraqiyya.³⁸ Where regimes are facing outright insurgency, sectarian strategies are typically intensified. The monarchy in Bahrain and Syria's

35 Gengler 2013.

36 Louër 2013.

37 Wells 2016.

38 Al-Qarawee 2014; Dodge 2014.

Asad regime each used sectarianism to rally their sectarian bases against oppositions, enabling them to beat back democratization demands.

A number of analysts have argued that "authoritarian learning" has taught post-uprising authoritarian regimes the efficacy of sectarian divide and rule. The result has been the emergence of 'hard,' more exclusivist versions of authoritarianism than pre-uprising predecessors.³⁹ The old inclusive populist versions of authoritarianism that rested on cross-sectarian coalitions cannot be reconstructed once violent sectarianism takes hold; rather, uprising states experiencing civil war are spawning more exclusivist, perhaps more de-centralized forms of patrimonialism (in which sectarian militias govern in local areas, only loosely linked to the authoritarian center); on the opposition side, authoritarian charismatic movements whose sectarian ideologies demonize the 'Other' have proved the most effective at recruitment, combat and attracting funding. In Syria, indeed, the civil war has created a scenario of competitive authoritarian state formation in which a more coercive, exclusivist – if also more decentralized – neo-patrimonial Asad regime confronts charismatic jihadist movements (Ahrar ash-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS), squeezing out moderate more secular, inclusive and pluralist-friendly forces.

This tendency is reinforced by competitive interference by rival states inside states undergoing upheaval: thus in Syria and Iraq, the Sunni regional powers and Iran have each sponsored and empowered the most authoritarian and coercive sectarian movements, whether Hasht al-Shaabi in Iraq or Ahrar al-Sham in Syria. Indeed, both sides tend to support authoritarian oriented movements partly because these are more ideologically compatible with non-democratic GCC and Iranian governance.⁴⁰ Moreover, one study suggests that the more such external interference in post-Uprising states, the more identity conflict, and the less likely is democratization.⁴¹

SECTARIANISM AND THE REGIONAL POWER STRUGGLE: THE ARAB UPRISING, COMPETITIVE INTERFERENCE AND PROXY WARS

The Regional States System

The Middle East state system is defined by a multi-polar material balance of power among states embedded in and highly penetrated by a trans-state public space defined by identity in which there is an on-going struggle

39 Stacher 2015; Heydemann, Reinoud 2011; Heydemann 2013; Hashemi 2015.

40 Stein 2016.

41 Hinnebusch 2016b.

over norms, foreign policy roles and regime legitimacy. The multipolar character of the system generates rivalry among states for security and hegemony; location tends to shape perceptions of threat from neighbors, especially where there are territorial conflicts, encouraging construction of the 'Other' as a threat, and the identity of the self against the threatening other. States power balance against such security threats but the main threat to many states is less from armies than internal penetration and subversion in which identity is highly instrumentalized by rival powers challenging each other's legitimacy and the main instrument of balancing is also promotion of ideology or claims based on identity.⁴²

The power balance among rival states is a function of both their conventional power resources (size, population, wealth, armed forces) and levels of internal consolidation, which determines their relative vulnerability to subversion in legitimacy wars. Thus larger states combining resources such as wealth and large populations with cohesive and credible identities (from congruence between their borders and a hegemonic identity) tend to be stronger, less vulnerable to penetration, and more ambitious to assume regional hegemony by promoting claims to leadership of a supra-state identity community – historically Pan-Arabism or Pan-Islam. Periodic bids for hegemony have been made by Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.⁴³ Smaller, poorer and more identity fragmented states tend to be vulnerable to stronger ones and victims of power struggles, unless they can overcome (and even exploit) identity fragmentation in order to construct stable regimes, as Ba'thist Syria did for several decades.

Interstate Geopolitical Power Struggles: the Second Arab Cold War

The main watershed event that transformed the identity contests that have always been part of MENA inter-state politics into a sectarian war, was the outcome of the US invasion of Iraq: the destruction of Ba'thist Iraq as a major Arab nationalist power leaving a vacuum filled by Iran whose Shia Iraqi clients took power. This greatly alarmed the Arab Sunni Gulf monarchies, for whom Iran, contiguous, massive and Shiite, was certain to be seen as a threat but which had hitherto been balanced by Arab Iraq. The empowering of Iranian-linked Iraqi Shia movements in Iraq further deepened the felt threat from Iran among the Arab Gulf and other Arab Sunni powers which fought back by instrumentalizing sectarianism.⁴⁴ This resulted in what has been called the "New (or Second) Arab Cold War," which polarized the regional system in the 2000s between two rival camps – framed as the pro-Western Moderate Sunni bloc (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan) and the Resistance Axis (Iran, Syria, Hizbollah, Hamas), fighting

⁴² Rubin 2014.

⁴³ Hinnebusch 2013.

⁴⁴ Hashemi 2015; Byman 2014; Dodge 2014.

over sectarian-divided Lebanon and Iraq, and divided over the Israeli wars against Hizbollah and Gaza. The Moderate bloc sought to portray the issue as Shiite Iran's interference in the Arab world against Sunnis, but the Resistance axis won the war for public opinion in the Arab street through the 2000s, owing to its success in portraying itself as the bulwark against Israel and American threats to the Arabs and the Sunni powers as collaborators (which, in eroding the legitimacy of the Mubarak regime made it more vulnerable to the Uprising). The "Resistance Axis" kept the upper hand as long as it could overshadow sectarian framing with the resistance narrative.⁴⁵

The Conduct of the Third Arab Cold War: The Sectarianization of Trans-state Identity Wars

The second Arab Cold war was transformed, as a result of the Arab Uprisings, into a completely new – the third – struggle for the Middle East, waged along quite different lines than in previous decades: Leadership was now sought, not of the supra-state community (Arabism or Islam) but of only one of the sectarian sides, Sunni or Shia, and was conducted by sectarian discourse wars in which the 'Other' was widely demonized. When states are consolidated, sectarianism is tepid and largely an instrument of state rivalry; but what has also changed is that the many failed states issuing from the Arab uprising are now uniquely vulnerable, having lost control of their borders and/or wracked by civil wars, to a deep penetration of their populations by these sectarian identities and to intervention by rival outside powers instrumentalizing these identities.

Across the region, sectarian war is being waged by trans-state movements, networks and discourse crossing state boundaries, which have their own dynamic, autonomous of and "in between" inter-state competition and struggles for power inside states – even though rival states helped empower this trans-state sectarianism through hosting sectarian preachers and satellite TV and funding of sectarian movements. Trans-state sectarian discourse, notably the imagery of violence committed by the 'Other' inflames sectarian animosities which mobilizes activists and puts state elites under pressure to defend 'their' sect against violence from the 'Other,' notably via intervention in contested states.⁴⁶

The autonomy of the trans-state level is evidenced by the fact that sectarianization has increased even in states where there is no civil war, few sectarian minorities, and not much overt state intervention, driven

⁴⁵ Valbjorn, Bank: 2011.

⁴⁶ Alloul 2012; Dashti 2013; Lynch 2015.

by the trans-state links of sectarian networks and discourse.⁴⁷ In Egypt, where there are few Shiites and little state failure, trans-state links between Saudi clerics and Egyptian Salafists have mobilized anti-Shia animosity. Salafism, promoted by trans-state preachers, has grown even in relatively secular and homogeneous Tunisia where there are few Shia, and a stable government exists. That trans-state conflicts can mobilize people even in such societies is evidenced by the fact that the highest per-capita number of jihadists travelling to Syria have come from Tunisia, an indicator of how far the sectarian struggle has become a trans-state phenomenon, building on the spread of a Salafism easily mutated into jihadism, but somewhat disconnected from internal domestic conditions.

This is not to say that specific state contexts do not matter; rather, the still small total number of Salafists in Tunisia is a function of the country's unique power-sharing between secularists and mainstream Islamists (al-Nadha), and the confinement of jihadist recruitment in the most marginalized towns is indicative of the fact that the conditions for deep grassroots sectarianism, notably state failure, are lacking in Tunisia, the one country that has come out of the Arab spring with a working democratic system.

The Arab Uprising and the Regional Power Reshuffle

The Arab Uprising reshuffled the geo-political power balance among regional states. The unequal vulnerability of states to the uprising allowed some to see it as an opportunity to weaken their rivals. The Uprising led to state weakening, even failure, in several states (Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen) creating power vacuums inviting competitive external intervention by more identity cohesive and materially stronger states (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia), in which the latter sought to defend or bring to power in the Uprising states, clients sharing ideological and specifically, sectarian affinity. Syria, in particular became a battleground of rivalry between Iran and the Sunni powers, since it was perceived that the outcome of the "new Struggle for Syria" would tilt the power balance in favor of one or the other of the rival camps. Thus, in the post-Arab uprising period Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and Iran, all intervened with arms, fighters and financial aid to governments or insurgents in the identity fragmented and failing states in the Levant, Syria above all, but also in the Gulf (Yemen, Bahrain). Sectarianism was the main tool of these interventions, with each rival state favoring sectarian groups aligned with its own sectarian composition.

Instrumentalizing sectarianism is playing with fire but inside the more identity-homogeneous states it tended to reinforce domestic support and

enabled them, at acceptable risk, to stir up sectarianism in rival more divided states where the damage was concentrated. Thus, the al-Saud's alliance with the Wahhabi religious establishment and the solidarity of its Sunni base was reinforced by the identity war with Shiite Iran and the war in Yemen it launched in the name of containing the Shia threat. The Yemen intervention was also a way of deflecting the challenge to Saudi leadership of the Sunni world from ISIS.⁴⁸ The latter's attempt, in its attacks on Saudi Shia, to enflame sectarian tensions inside the kingdom suggests that the sectarianization of the region carries risks even for its main promoters.⁴⁹ However, inside identity-divided fragmented states, notably Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, the effect of sectarianization was far more damaging, deepening and prolonging civil wars and creating anarchy in which the security dilemma further divided populations along sectarian lines. Thus, in Yemen where sectarian differences hitherto meant little, the regional war launched by Saudi Arabia sectarianized the struggle, thereby creating an increasingly intractable conflict.⁵⁰

Each of the main powers in this "Third Arab Cold War" instrumentalized sectarianism but strategies differed: Saudi Arabia, newly assertive and assuming the leadership of Sunni sectarianism, had a stake in portraying Iran as Shia, heretical, non-Arab, hence unentitled to involvement in inter-Arab politics; thereby it would benefit from the demographic imbalance in the Arab world in favor of the Sunnis. Stirring up sectarianism helps Saudi Arabia isolate Iran in the Sunni world, particularly important in the GCC⁵¹ where several emirates have sought to avoid breaking long-standing ties with Iran. Iran, heading the minority Shia camp, and aware its soft power would be debilitated among Sunnis were it to be cast as a Shia power, sought to portray itself as the Pan-Islamic leader of a resistance axis against the US/Zionist imperialism; on the other hand, Iran had to make up for its demographic disadvantage by more mobilized unified Shia networks, and, paradoxically, its capacity to assert trans-Shia leadership was assisted by sectarian polarization which would push Shia minorities to it for protection. Iran also benefited from the greater divisions within the nominally Sunni camp (e.g. secularists vs. Islamists, Saudi-Qatari rivalry; Turkey vs. Egypt under al-Sisi).

The regional battle precipitated an unprecedented sectarian bi-polarization of state alignments, with all states under pressure to take sides on sectarian lines. Alliances formed partly on Sunni-Shia identity grounds, not because the contest was about religion, but because it was about ideational power. Rival states faced little salient military threat and the contest was chiefly waged by via discourse wars, but that made it no less central to their

⁴⁸ Matthiesen 2015a/b, 2016.

⁴⁹ Matthiesen 2016; Al-Rasheed 2011.

⁵⁰ Colgan 2016.

⁵¹ Gulf Cooperation Council (Editor's note – JvDB).

⁴⁷ Salloukh 2015.

vital interests. States sharing an identity and accompanying legitimizing principles aligned against the shared threat from the opposing camp in the struggle for regional influence. Not only were spheres of influence at stake in the battles over the uprising states, but domestic stability was also involved since legitimacy was reinforced when one's sectarian camp was seen to prevail regionally and at risk if the rival camp triumphed. It therefore matters which side "wins" in Syria or Yemen, not just for geopolitical gains and losses but also for legitimacy, hence stability, at home.⁵²

Bi-polarization has not, of course, wholly effaced other factors in alliance formation. For even though some states felt threatened by what they saw as Iran's bid for regional hegemony – notably Israel and Saudi Arabia and to a lesser degree, Egypt and Turkey – a solid anti-Iran bloc was prevented by variations in identity (between Turkey's modernist Islam and Saudi Wahhabism) and the different location of the main threats to each state (Egypt feared Sunni Islamists more than Iran, and Oman was reluctant to antagonize Iran). Nevertheless, there was enough anti-Iran balancing to check Tehran's ambitions – indeed Riyadh and Ankara's sponsorship of the anti-Asad uprising kept Iran on the defensive. As such, the two camps' counter-balancing preserved the balance of power.⁵³

Thus, as might be expected in a multi-polar system, no side was able to sweep the board, thereby prolonging civil wars. What had changed was that, as a result of the Arab Uprising, the participants in the power balance have been radically reshuffled as several once-key state players have been knocked out of the game by internal sectarian conflict and state failure. This has shifted power from the historically central Arab powers, the secular Arab nationalist republics of Egypt, Iraq and Syria, which used to dominate inter-Arab politics in the name of a more inclusive Pan-Arabism, to the standard bearers of religious sectarianism, the newly assertive monarchies of the Gulf periphery and the non-Arab states of Turkey, Iran (and, although on the sidelines, Israel).⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

What began as a variant of the struggle for regional hegemony between powers aligned with and against US intervention in Iraq, framed in familiar Arab-Islamic terms (resistance to imperialism), was transformed by the rival powers' instrumentalization of sectarianism and the state failures unleashed by the Arab uprising into an unprecedented sectarian bipolarization of the regional system. Sectarian bi-polarization in the inter-

state power struggle was paralleled by a shifting normative balance away from moderates within both Shia and Sunni Islam and by polarizations splitting several identity-fragmented Arab states apart.

Sectarian identities in the sectarian-diverse MENA societies were not created by these developments; but, hitherto, they remained banal or instrumental, not the militant version that excludes sectarian co-existence. As long as sectarian identities were cross-cut by class or subsumed by state and Pan-Arab identities, sectarianism was contained. As long as state-builders balanced their patrimonial instrumentalization of sects with more inclusive administrative and party bureaucracies, sectarianism actually assisted regime formation and state consolidation. However, once neo-patrimonial regimes became more patrimonialized and less inclusive, states were vulnerable to sectarian grievances and potential revolt. The destruction of the Iraqi state, setting off a wave of sectarian consciousness across the region and setting up the regional power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia, in which they instrumentalized sectarianism, further prepared the ground for sectarianization. Yet the limited resonance of their discourse on the Arab street throughout the 2000s and the remarkable durability and resilience of neo-patrimonial regimes – it took a US invasion to topple Saddam Hussein – make it unlikely sectarianism would have widely destabilized regimes or reached the grassroots without the power struggles unleashed by the Arab Uprisings.

Sectarianization was initiated by its instrumentalization in both the domestic power struggles unleashed in states experiencing uprisings and in the competitive interference in uprising states by rival regional powers, but the resonance of sectarian discourses at the grass roots level depended on state failure, escalation of violence, and the security dilemma in the Uprising states; in turn, this was reinforced by the support of external powers for the most radical sectarian fighters and their financing of a war economy that kept the violence going and deepened the security dilemma.

That the dominant identities used in the regional power struggle have changed from supra-state ones to sectarianism matters profoundly for the conduct of politics: thus, the dominance of Arabism had contributed to the integration of Arabic speaking minorities within states and enjoined the Arab states to cooperate at the regional level. Although competition for Arab leadership often led to conflict among them over the proper interpretation of Arabism, these could be more readily compromised than the current cleavages: indeed, the current version of radical sectarianism prescribes uncompromising jihad within the Islamic umma against heresy. It has split societies wide open, and helped created a slew of failed states in which jihadists find fertile ground to freely operate across borders, challenging the states system. The democratization impetus of the Arab uprising was stopped in its tracks and harder, more exclusionary sectarian-

⁵² Stein 2016; Gause 2016; Rubin 2014; Salloukh 2016.

⁵³ Gause 2016; Vakil 2016; POMED 2012; Lynch 2016a/b.

⁵⁴ Hinnebusch 2014; 2015a.

based versions of neo-patrimonial and charismatic jihadist movements were empowered. In this Sunni-Shia bi-polarization of the region all people and states are pushed to take sides. This intensified power struggle waged by sectarian discourse and proxy wars is plunging the Middle East into a new dark age.

What does the future hold? A cessation in the instrumentalization of sectarianism by rival regional powers and a ceasefire, hence increased security and a return to normal economy in states afflicted by civil war – Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya – could reverse the reproduction of grass roots sectarianization. An end to fighting in Syria, in some ways the epicenter of the sectarian war, could marginalize the militants and empower moderates; indeed, there was evidence of this in the first (Spring 2016) cease-fire in Syria when civil activists re-emerged and the jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra suffered a backlash against its hardline puritanism and takfirism. Were the flow of resources (provided as part of regional proxy war) to warring parties to be halted, warlords profiting from conflict would be weakened and those still hoping for victory if only their patrons would increase support for them would have to accept that a hurting stalemate had been reached that could only be resolved through compromise and power-sharing. Indeed, at the regional level, already some of the actors promoting jihadism in Syria, such as Qatar and to a degree Turkey, have been forced to bend to the backlash at both the regional and international levels.

Yet even were ceasefires to be reached, the sectarian animosity and distrust created by years of killing would likely be an intractable obstacle to the power-sharing needed to create enough stability to overcome the security dilemma in failed states. Whole new generations grown up under civil war have adopted sectarian identities and rival politicians would not be likely to resist the temptation to use sectarianism to mobilize support.⁵⁵ The settlement of the Lebanese civil war demonstrates that such obstacles can be overcome; but a condition in the Lebanese case – the existence of third parties (Syria and Saudi Arabia at Taif) sponsoring and imposing an end to the fighting – seems to be absent in the current Arab civil wars; only if the great powers combined to enforce an end to the fighting, would this have a chance of happening and even then it is questionable whether they have sufficient leverage over the regional and internal players. Moreover, the great powers themselves are starting to use MENA conflicts, notably in Syria, to fight their own proxy wars. The reality is that there are too many “spoilers” to make a settlement of the Arab civil wars easy or likely anytime soon. And without an end to these proxy wars, sectarianization cannot be reversed.

55 Lynch 2016a, 2016b

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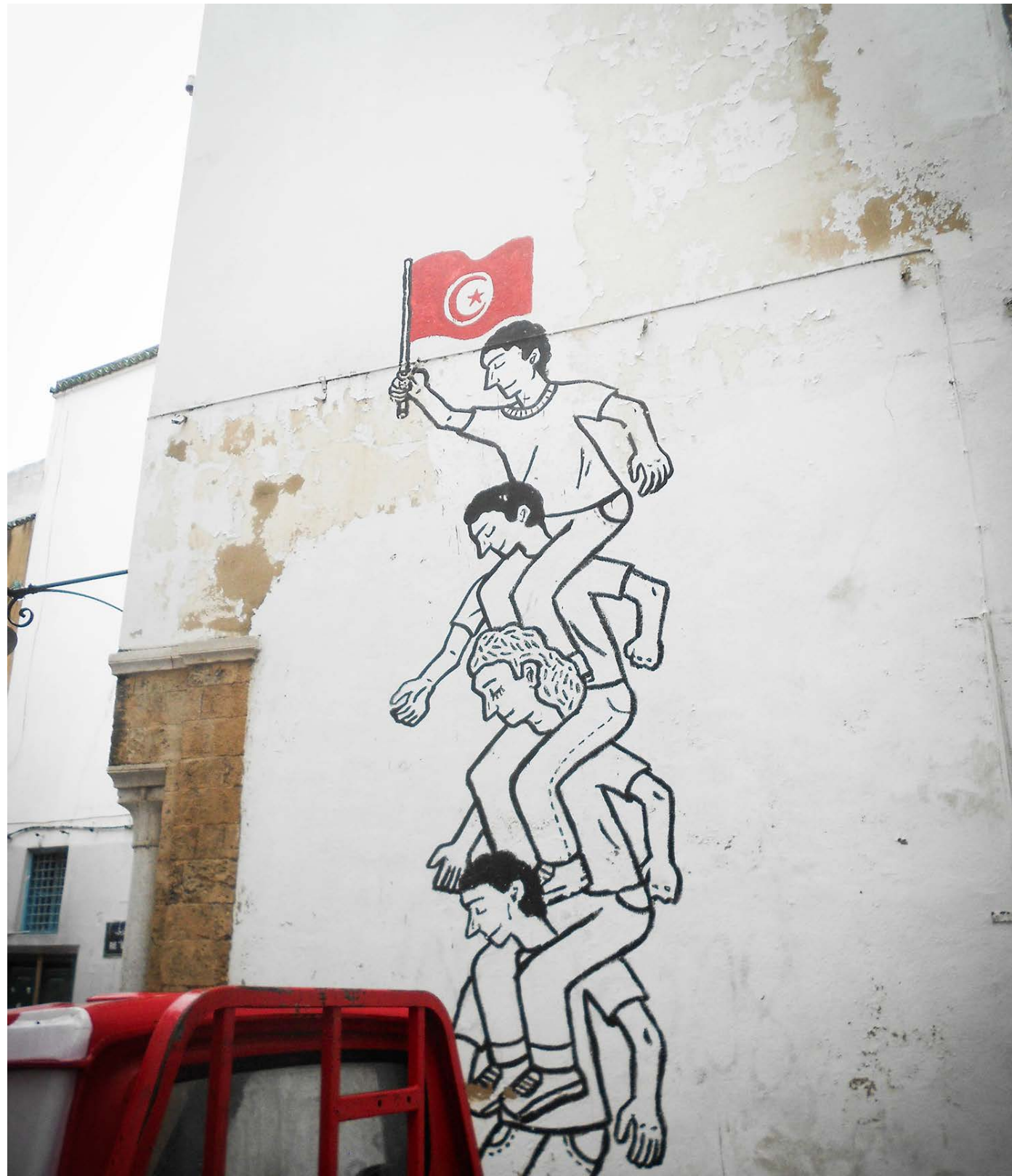
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by D. Bocquet



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THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN POST- REVOLUTION TUNISIA: CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL CONSOLIDATION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

FETHI MANSOURI
RICCARDO ARMILLEI

abstract

THE EVOLUTIONARY PROCESSES OF THE SO-CALLED 'ARAB SPRING' AND ITS ASSOCIATED POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS HAVE BEEN AND STILL REMAIN HIGHLY UNPREDICTABLE AND ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO SYSTEMATICALLY ACCOUNT FOR. THIS PAPER EXPLORES THE CONDITIONS THAT ALLOWED TUNISIA, THE BIRTH PLACE OF THE 'ARAB SPRING', TO ACHIEVE SUCCESSFUL DEMOCRATISING OUTCOMES IN COMPARISON TO ITS NEIGHBOURS ACROSS THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA) REGION. THE PAPER WILL ALSO OFFER SOME ANALYSIS OF FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS BASED ON CURRENT CONTEXT AND PROJECTED OUTLOOK. THIS PAPER ARGUES THAT ONE OF THE KEY INGREDIENTS THAT ALLOWED A RELATIVELY PEACEFUL 'POLITICAL TRANSITION' IN TUNISIA IS THE CONSTRUCTIVE APPROACH TO CONSENSUS POLITICS ADOPTED BY THE KEY POLITICAL ACTORS INCLUDING THE ISLAMIST PARTY ENNAHDA. CONSENSUS POLITICS CREATED WHAT CAN BE TERMED AN 'AUTHENTIC TUNISIAN

APPROACH', A COMBINATION OF POLITICAL PRAGMATISM, ACCEPTANCE OF POWER-SHARING AND A PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL POSITIONING IN KEY NATIONAL DEBATES.

TUNISIA, POLITICAL ISLAM, DEMOCRATISATION, 'POST-ARAB SPRING', ISLAMIST-SECULARIST COMPROMISE.

keywords

INTRODUCTION

Tunisia was the birthplace of the 'Arab Spring' and therefore became critically important as a case study of democratisation; not only for other Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries affected by the uprisings, but also as a testing ground to the assumption that Arab and Muslim societies are not able to democratise because of an inherent incompatibility between Islam and democratic progress.¹ This latter assumption is important given Huntington's² influential argument that while most previously undemocratic regions of the world (particularly, but not exclusively, in Latin America and Eastern Europe) had experienced a 'third wave of democratization' in the late twentieth century, the Arab world seemed resistant to political reform, an anomaly that became known as the 'Arab exceptionalism'.³ However, this assumption of a democratic deficit⁴ was fundamentally challenged early in 2011 by the repercussions of a young Tunisian man's self-immolation in the central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid. His death sparked violent protests which quickly led to mass mobilizations and authoritarian breakdowns across the region.⁵

Theorists of political system change, especially those working on 'transition' models were keen to understand the key causal factors behind the initial sudden collapse of authoritarian regimes which appeared to have been stable for decades⁶ and the extent to which these factors can engender or hinder the development of democratic governance and the rule of law in the post-revolution phase. With the exception of Tunisia, where a successful 'political transition' has thus far been achieved, democratic efforts in MENA countries have been faltering to differing degrees. The optimism that characterised the initial phase of the uprisings,⁷ quickly gave way to deep societal divisions along religious, tribal, ethnic and

1 Cevik 2011.

2 Huntington 1991.

3 Brynen et al. 2012.

4 Mansouri 2016.

5 Wafa 2013.

6 Beck, Hüser 2012: 12.

7 Moaddel 2013.

sectarian lines leading to outbursts of mass violence which compromised the delicate ‘transition’ processes.⁸ This fragmentation may be explained by the fact initial unity did ‘not appear to have originated from a shared understanding of the universal principle of democratic politics in order to transcend group differences.’⁹

However, and from a methodological point of view, the ‘Arab Spring’ should not be analysed as a homogeneous revolutionary process given the heterogeneity of affected states and, therefore, predictions remain rather difficult to articulate with any degree of conceptual clarity or precision.¹⁰ Whilst many agree that currently the ‘prospects for a more democratic Middle East seem worse than ever,’¹¹ some commentators have suggested that the region was in the throes of an ‘Arab/Islamist/Economic Winter.’¹² Perhaps, these events should not be considered “springs or winter (...) but a historical process that most Western democracies have gone through – most of them took a long time – and we’re still in the early stages of it.”¹³ This paper adopts the latter approach in its analysis of the Tunisian case study. Despite facing security and economic challenges, this article shares the view of many scholars and observers¹⁴ that Tunisia has laid the constitutional foundations necessary to build a functional political system based on democracy and the rule of law. While analysing pre- and post-revolutionary political achievements, this paper will examine the unique attributes of the Tunisian case study, paying particular attention to the relationship between Islamist and secularist parties.

Since its independence from France in 1956, Tunisia went through a process of state-led secular social reform to become at once one of the most socially-progressive and politically-authoritarian countries in the Arab world.¹⁵ Until the 2011 revolution, in fact, political and economic life in Tunisia has been dominated by two long-standing autocratic rulers; Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. During this period, Tunisia’s social modernisation was characterized by a ‘continued repression towards Islam in the political – as well as the public – sectors’ together with human rights abuses.¹⁶ It is in 1989, with Ben Ali’s rise to presidency, that we find the backbone of Ennahda’s party. At that time thousands of imprisoned ‘The Movement of Islamic Tendency’ activists were released. The party renamed itself as Ennahda (Arabic for ‘renaissance’) and toned

down its reference to Islam with the hope of gaining formal recognition by Ben Ali’s government. Yet, relations between Islamists and the ruling regime continued to regress.¹⁷ It was only following the 2011 uprising, that more than 100 political parties (most prominently the Islamist Ennahda movement) were legalized, resulting in the emergence of a civic and political pluralism unprecedented in recent Tunisian history.

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TUNISIA HAS LAID THE CONSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS NECESSARY TO BUILD A FUNCTIONAL POLITICAL SYSTEM BASED ON DEMOCRACY AND THE RULE OF LAW

Widespread popular enthusiasm enabled Tunisia to quickly establish “an interim government tasked with organising elections to form a national constituent assembly that would draft a new constitution.”¹⁸ But this task has been repeatedly delayed due to a lack of agreement over certain aspects of the new constitution’s content. Since the early stages of the uprising, a gulf of mistrust had characterized the relationship between Islamist and secularist political factions, with each side seeking “to manipulate the rules of politics to its advantage.”¹⁹ The level of mutual suspicions was particularly high in 2013 especially following a number of violent attacks perpetrated by the Salafist extremist group Ansar al-Shari’a (Supporters of Islamic Law), an illegal terrorist organization. A year earlier, a violent attack on the US embassy had pushed the Ennahda-led government to take a first clear stance against jihadi Salafists. Until then, in fact, Ennahda had supported the inclusion of Salafist parties into the political landscape believing that the new Tunisia should be inclusive of all ideologies, including conservative religious ones. But growing popular opposition and ensuing political impasses, pushed Ennahda to step down peacefully in favour of a caretaker technocrat government that would oversee the presidential and parliamentary elections.²⁰ These elections were eventually held late in 2014 with newly formed secular centrist Nidaa Tunis party winning both.

8 Behr, Siitonen 2013.

9 Moaddel 2013: 11.

10 Boose 2012.

11 Williamson, Abadeer 2014: para. 1.

12 Byman 2011; Totten 2012.

13 R. Khouri as quoted in: Schwartz 2014: para. 6.

14 Arieff, Humud 2015; Boose 2012; Ostry 2014.

15 Black 2010.

16 Loudén 2015: 8.

17 Loudén 2015.

18 Watanabe 2013: 1.

19 Arieff, Humud 2015: 1.

20 Loudén 2015.

Since March 2015, three new incidents of Islamist extremism (the Bardo and Sousse attacks²¹ first followed by the bus explosion killing presidential guards),²² led President Essebsi to declare a 'state of emergency' throughout the country. Despite these tragic events and serious economic discontent, neither the transitional process towards democracy, nor the relationship between Islamist and secularist parties in the governing coalition were affected. Indeed, as of August 2016 the incoming national unity government will most likely exhibit similar political arrangements as the initial post 2015 elections governing coalition. This paper argues a crucial reason for a relatively successful 'political transition' has been the role played by the Islamist Party, Ennahda, which mastered the art of 'consensus politics' across political and ideological divides. This approach, which ultimately led to a local adaptation of 'democratic transition,' involved three main features: (1) a pragmatic approach to everyday deliberative politics; (2) a strategic orientation towards power-sharing arrangements involving secular parties; and (3) an acceptance of progressive social agendas in key national debates in particular those relating to women's rights. The fact that recently Ennahda declared that it will separate the political from the religious (i.e. preaching) signals a reinforcement of the 'Tunisification' process of Ennahda as it continues to distance itself from the regional Muslim Brotherhood movement.²³

The next section will situate the Tunisian political process within broader debates on 'democratic transition' highlighting the contextual specificities that complicate the task of making accurate 'predictions' regarding democratic 'consolidation.'

THE CHALLENGE OF PREDICTING DEMOCRATIC 'CONSOLIDATION' IN THE MENA REGION

Theories of 'transition' elaborated in the 1970s postulated 'the possibility of linear transitions from authoritarianism to liberal democracy.'²⁴ This approach was applied to the 'transition' experience of many Eastern European countries, where protests brought communism down leading towards free market and political pluralism.²⁵ Interestingly, the 'Arab

21 Islamic State (IS) was said to be behind both deadly attacks targeting mainly foreign tourists with tourism representing Tunisia's largest source of foreign currency. It is worth noting that Tunisia has contributed the largest number of foreign fighters to IS in Syria and Iraq. In this context, conflict-racked Libya, together with the return of foreign fighters that have joined radical groups fighting in Iraq and Syria, have preoccupied Tunisian politics despite democratic advances (El-Ghobashy, Addala 2015).

22 Freeman, Squires 2015; Stephen 2015.

23 Mellor, Rinnawi 2016.

24 Guazzone, Pioppi 2009: 2.

25 Rahmetov 2012: 2.

Spring' has often been likened to the process of democratization in post-Communist, Eastern European regimes.²⁶ Although as Vallianatos²⁷ argues 'the former Communist bloc carries a significant experience of political transformation which could be of relevance to the Arab states,' the exact democratic process might not be replicable elsewhere. Beck & Hüser²⁸ provide three possible explanations (political, historical and economic), which would impede a comparison between the 1989 and 2011 waves of revolutions.

Firstly, unlike the Eastern European countries, Arab countries have lower 'external' incentives for democratization. For example, Arab countries do not have the same type of support and guidance provided by the EU.²⁹ Indeed, there is no regional equivalent to the EU as local efforts to create any kind of 'pan-Arab' or even 'pan-Maghreb' transnational unity have repeatedly failed over the last three decades.³⁰ The Arab League has been and remains too divided and weak to play such a constructive role. Interestingly, the most successful 'transitions,' particularly among the Eastern European countries, were greatly facilitated by assistance from the EU.³¹

The second critical factor to consider can be found in the differing historical trajectories of Eastern European countries and the Arab world:

It should be noted that the region's nationalist regimes (with some socialist paint), established in the 1950s, were an indigenous reaction to Western imperialism and colonialism, while socialism in Eastern Europe was externally imposed by the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Eastern European states were able to return to their economic and political heritage, which they shared with Western Europe, but the Arab world faces the challenge of having to redefine itself politically and economically.³²

And thirdly, there are economic factors which can affect the development

26 Beck, Hüser 2012; Ishay 2013.

27 Vallianatos 2013: 7.

28 Beck, Hüser 2012.

29 However, there have been numerous attempts by the EU to encourage good governance in some MENA countries. This is the case for Morocco - which has an 'advanced status' in European Neighbourhood Policy's Southern Dimension and Tunisia with 'privileged partnership' within the same policy. Both countries are also in different phases of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement - the agreement which is a leading tool for encouraging reforms, including democratic ones (Rey 2016).

30 Sawani 2012.

31 Ishay 2013.

32 Beck, Hüser 2012: 19-20.



‘PAN-ARAB’ OR EVEN ‘PAN-MAGHREB’
TRANSNATIONAL UNITY HAVE REPEATEDLY
FAILED OVER THE LAST THREE DECADES

and consolidation of democratic institutions. At the end of the Cold War, economic actors attracted by the prospect of substantial profits, invested in Eastern European countries, which were concurrently encouraged to advance certain reform processes, thus giving investors confidence. In comparison the political and social instability in post-revolution ‘Arab Spring’ countries deterred investors.

As these three factors demonstrate, ‘democratic transition’ is not an inevitable outcome. Indeed and in addition to the political, historical and economic challenges ‘if the post-revolutionary political platform is not compatible in substance with human rights norms’ this creates yet another structural hurdle.³³ Although a number of attitudinal studies pertaining to democracy in Arab and non-Arab Muslim states show democracy is gaining support,³⁴ the post-revolutionary phase in ‘Arab Spring’ countries has also been characterized by the emergence of anti-revolutionary and anti-democratic forces, mainly conservative and radical Islamist groups, which has the potential to jeopardize the prospects for ‘democratic consolidation.’³⁵

Recent polls (May 2016) in relation to Tunisian voters’ attitudes towards political parties reveal some worrying trends. Indeed, 72% of Tunisians have a negative perception of political parties; 67% state that political parties are not that close to them in terms of understanding their needs; and only 35% think that political parties make decisions in the best interest of citizens.³⁶ Whilst democracy is becoming more ubiquitous in the minds of Arab people in general,³⁷ no longer the preserve of intellectuals and politicians, the Arab world as a whole is still “charting a revolutionary path through an era of unfamiliar democratization, and there is no way to predict the outcome until it is over.”³⁸ A ‘Western-style democracy’ cannot simply be super-imposed on the Middle East as there are specific nuances

33 Ishay 2013: 7.

34 Ghosh 2013; Moaddel 2013; Sawani 2014.

35 Mansouri 2016.

36 Sigma Conseil 2016.

37 According to the 2015 Arab Opinion Index (AOI) “79% of Arabs believe that democracy is the most appropriate system of government for their home countries.” This study was based on 18,311 face-to-face interviews conducted in 12 different Arab countries including Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania, Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (Arab Center Washington DC 2016).

38 Boose 2012: 310.

of state-society relations that “need to be taken into consideration, because various strings of democratic ideas, values and practices are embedded in such relations.”³⁹

An “Arabian version of democracy,” Ghosh argues, contains “ideas on justice, authority, and political obligation – the way authority [has] been able to command loyalty from the subject-population since ancient times.”⁴⁰ It is thus important to acknowledge that due to contextual specificities as well as other cultural and historical differences, Western democratic systems cannot always be transposed onto other societies, where democratic governance can at times take a different form. Nor is this always desirable. In this context, the specific role of religious ideologies in politics cannot be curtailed or avoided altogether, as many Western countries and their Middle Eastern allies have openly tried to do.⁴¹ Yet, the role of religion in politics poses conceptual challenges for those who seek to analyse and understand the nature of ‘democratic transition’ in non-Western societies.

FROM ‘INDEPENDENCE’ AND NATION-BUILDING TO ‘AUTHORITARIAN’ RULE

The 2010 uprising marked an epochal shift in Tunisian history, as the North African state was characterized by a lack of deep-rooted procedural and institutional ‘democratic culture.’⁴² This section provides an historical overview of the development of an outright authoritarian agenda since liberation from French colonial rule. It illustrates the main characteristics of Bourguiba’s and Ben Ali’s regimes: a centrally controlled economic and political system; imprisonment of human rights activists; relegation of religious idioms to a secondary status. As a consequence, the initial euphoria regarding the prospects for political reform were also accompanied by fears that the process of developing resilient democratic institutions would fail in the longer term.

In the aftermath of Tunisia’s independence, a set of laws (also known as Code of Personal Status or CPS) were introduced allowing “women to avoid polygamy, repudiation, child marriages (with a minimum marriage age and consent of both spouses)” and permitting them to initiate divorce proceedings.⁴³ A year later women gained suffrage, and in 1959 were able to run for public office. Women’s equality was also enshrined in the Tunisian Constitution and a number of supplementary legal texts. The improvement

39 Ghosh 2013: 17-18.

40 Ghosh 2013: 18.

41 Loudon 2015.

42 Dennison et al. 2011.

43 Retta 2013: 36.

of women's legal status and social conditions, and a significant investment in national education, triggered a demographic transformation which changed the post-independence social landscape. As a result, "today women students constitute over half the university student body and women actively participate throughout society and politics."⁴⁴ It is the social emancipation of Tunisian women which ensured their prominent role during the uprising⁴⁵ and cementing the ensuing post-revolution prospects for developing and sustaining democracy in comparison to other MENA countries.⁴⁶

However, despite this social and educational reform, pre-revolution Tunisia remained lacking in political freedoms and human rights protections. Indeed, political opposition remained weak in Tunisia as the centralised government maintained near complete control over the political landscape⁴⁷ and the institutions that sustained it. Civil society was forced to adhere to the state's priorities in the name of fighting colonialist legacies, achieving national sovereignty, establishing a modern national state and advancing broader social and economic reforms.⁴⁸ During his presidency Bourguiba instituted what I. W. Zartman⁴⁹ termed 'position politics/patronage' in which "important posts [were given] to powerful individuals who could use their positions to service their own clienteles." In this context, even when forced underground, civil society provided few openings for external manipulation, creating an indirect connection with the elite in power and some room for political manoeuvre. The main aim of Bourguiba's politics was the maintenance of social cohesiveness and unity within an authoritarian framework, with religious idioms relegated to a secondary status.⁵⁰

Ben Ali replaced Bourguiba in 1987 in a bloodless coup d'état and his presidency was an example of what R. W. Bulliet⁵¹ terms 'Neo-Mamluk rule,' referring "to personalist dictatorships that were built by autocrats originating from the military/security services."⁵² Despite the introduction of a number of what appeared to be at the time as progressive measures,

44 Deane 2013: 14.

45 Retta 2013.

46 Boose 2012.

47 Naciri 2009: 16.

48 Chomiak, Entelis 2013.

49 As quoted in: Alexander 2013: 34.

50 Sadiki 2002.

51 As quoted in: Rahmetov 2012: 9.

52 A more recent study conducted that provides transition information for the 280 autocratic regimes (in 110 countries with more than a million population) in existence from 1946 to 2010, Tunisia was coded as 'dominant-party' rather than 'personalist' (Geddes et al. 2014). This category is defined as a regime where control over policy, leadership selection, and the security apparatus is in the hands of one party.

political participation, freedom of expression and religious activism remained harshly repressed.⁵³

Indeed, when Ben Ali succeeded Bourguiba, a "benign form of authoritarian rule" was replaced by a "form of manipulative democracy," with democratic rhetoric and institutions concealing a stronger version of authoritarianism.⁵⁴ Compared to his predecessor, Ben Ali was less willing to use 'position politics/patronage;' instead he tried to "break the tie between elite and popular politics that was so vital in the 1970s and 1980s" ensuring that civil society would remain "unavailable as a political weapon."⁵⁵ Motivated by a deep fear of a region-wide Islamist threat, which was heightened by the 1992 Algerian civil war,⁵⁶ Ben Ali's reign oversaw the imposition of authoritarian mechanisms to regulate civil society and curb its capacity for action. After the first two promising years, with Ben Ali allowing multi-party elections, granting amnesty to hundreds of political prisoners and adopting a liberal press code among the other things, his regime became a 'police state' for the next two decades repressing political opponents and any semblance of active civil society.⁵⁷ And no group felt this repression more severely than Islamist activists.

In fact, the Islamist political party, Ennahda, became the second most important force in Tunisian politics, leading the Ben Ali regime to increase state coercive forces and to 'emasculate' the Islamist movement.⁵⁸ Despite such repressive measures, civil society as a whole was able to survive thanks in particular to a well-established labour union tradition. While pushing the government to improve the conditions of workers in the country, the trade union movement contributed to creating an environment for social dialogue. Founded in 1924, the first labour union in the Arab world,⁵⁹ it played a strong role not only before, but also during the independence struggle, as well as in the post-independence nation-building process.⁶⁰ Subsequently, the number of civil society organizations increased from nearly 2,000 in 1988 to over 9,000 in 2009⁶¹ and to a record 18,000 in 2016.⁶² Despite their unorganized nature, the popular pressure exerted by these associations was fundamental in toppling the Ben Ali regime and later in ensuring a successful 'transitional phase.'⁶³ The Islamists, as part of

53 Arieff, Humud 2015.

54 Chomiak, Entelis 2013: 76.

55 Alexander 2013: 38.

56 Schulhofer-Wohl 2007.

57 King 2014.

58 King 2014.

59 International Labour Organization 2014.

60 Mansouri 2016.

61 C. M. Henry 2011 as quoted in: Mansouri 2016.

62 Barhoumi 2016.

63 Deane 2013.

a broader socio-political landscape, were influenced and pushed towards 'consensus politics' by an active and broadly secular civil society and, consequently played a constructive role in the post-revolution transitional democratic stage.

DEMOCRATIC 'TRANSITION' AND THE CHALLENGES OF POST-REVOLUTION 'CONSOLIDATION'

After a period of political uncertainty, the Tunisian 'transition' has been recently characterised as an "exceptional success story" by Freedom House.⁶⁴ This is notable in comparison to other Arab countries affected by the 'Arab Spring.' Indeed, across the region the score card is not all that positive: there is 'an army-backed authoritarian regime in Egypt, chaos and a disintegrating social and political fabric in Libya, an endless civil war in Syria, and political instability in Yemen.'⁶⁵ The success achieved in what is now being dubbed the 'Tunisian Spring' looks even more significant when democracy at the international level faced numerous challenges over the last few decades due to a decline of global political rights and civil liberties.⁶⁶ Five years ago, just prior to the uprising, Tunisia was rated as a 'Not Free' country and categorised as one of the most repressive regimes in the world.⁶⁷ While the rest of the MENA region continues to be plagued by instability, violence and civil wars, 2015 will be regarded as an historical year for the North African state, becoming the first Arab country to achieve a 'Free' country status on the Freedom House scale.⁶⁸

The presence of local NGOs, as well as international observers, overseeing the electoral processes contributed to the success and legitimacy of the elections. Annemie Neyts-Utterbroeck, of the observer mission of the EU, described the voting in Tunisia as "more than satisfactory."⁶⁹ The parliamentary elections were touted as the end of the 'transitional' period, signalling an important step towards the normalization of the new political system.⁷⁰ Yet, as Reidy⁷¹ has recently argued; "Tunisia's shining example is still a work in progress. Scratching at the surface of the 'democratic transition' reveals that the old system inherited from the era of dictatorship is still largely intact." Nidaa Tounes brings together a wide variety of ideological currents,

64 Freedom House 2015b.

65 Ben Mcharek 2015: para. 2.

66 Freedom House 2015b.

67 Freedom House 2015b.

68 Freedom House 2015b: 1.

69 The Tunis Times 2014: para. 4.

70 Yaşar 2014.

71 Reidy 2015.

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THE 'TUNISIAN SPRING' LOOKS EVEN MORE SIGNIFICANT WHEN DEMOCRACY AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL FACED NUMEROUS CHALLENGES OVER THE LAST FEW DECADES

from human rights advocates to members of the labour union, as well as leftists and some independents. Among the Party are also former members of Ben Ali's Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party who have not been implicated in corruption, but remain some of "the numerically and economically most powerful members of Nidaa Tounes."⁷² The presence of those with knowledge and experience of how to run a government might explain at least partially Tunisia's success story.

In any case, as Reidy suggests, Tunisia's 'transition' is still an ongoing process whose long-term sustainability will depend on the newly-elected government's ability to address a number of urgent issues (corruption, economic stagnation and terrorism), which have the capacity to compromise internal stability and revive political polarization.⁷³ According to the 2015 annual report on political rights and civil liberties issued by Freedom House,⁷⁴ corruption in Tunisia has been increasing in the last three years and 'a strong legal framework and systematic practices aimed at curbing corruption have yet to take shape.' Some politicians and members of the security forces are perceived to be among the most corrupt groups. The inconsistent application of the rule of law and ongoing regulatory inefficiency have weakened Tunisia's fragile economic framework, which remains stagnant with a high level of unemployment (17.5%). According to the '2015 Index of Economic Freedom,'⁷⁵ the persistence of a system characterized by privileges and cronyism is at the core of the country's deep-rooted socioeconomic deficiency.

In a poll of 8,045 young people in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen carried out by the Al Jazeera Center for Studies (AJCS)⁷⁶ rampant corruption and the deterioration of national economies were the most cited causes of the uprisings across the region, including Tunisia, where the fate of its new government is linked to its success in meeting Tunisians' high expectations for rapid economic and democratic development. What has clearly emerged from the analysis of a number of opinion polls conducted since the uprising is the economic performance of the country can directly affect Tunisians'

72 Wolf 2014: 15.

73 Reidy 2015.

74 Freedom House 2015a: Section C.

75 Heritage Foundation 2015.

76 AJCS 2013.

faith in the democratic system and their degree of political engagement and social connectedness.⁷⁷

More worryingly perhaps, is the significant challenge to ‘democratic consolidation’ that the spread of terrorist threats across North Africa poses. The presence of radical groups in and around Tunisia is growing and benefits from the political instability in neighbouring Libya.⁷⁸ The ‘Arab Spring’ itself, as Mullin and Rouabah⁷⁹ argue, was not merely a ‘liberal revolution’ but contained within it a conglomerate of radical pushes. Before the recent attack on the Bardo Museum and the Sousse beach resort, extremism and political violence had reached their climax in 2013 with the assassination of two members of the leftist Popular Front coalition. Today, despite the implementation of counter-terrorism strategies, religiously-motivated violence, chiefly committed by jihadi Salafist groups, remains a challenge⁸⁰ to the long-term viability of the only functional democracy across the region.

‘CONSENSUS POLITICS’ AS A KEY FOUNDATION FOR ‘DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION’

Given the economic and security challenges, the two dominant political forces of the post-2014 elections (Islamist Ennahda and secular centrist Nidaa) needed to engage in a new type of ‘real politics,’ thus avoiding the ideological polarization which characterized much of Tunisian political history.⁸¹ This strategic partnership was needed in order to overcome a crisis that jeopardised the many political achievements of the revolution. In this context, the lack of a clear majority for any party in parliament after the 2014 elections posed a real risk of fragmentation and volatility in an already fragile arrangement.⁸² The presidential elections re-emphasized the existence of ideological divisions, not just between Islamists and the more secular Nidaa Tounes or the leftist Popular Front groups, but also between the wealthier capital and coastal constituencies and the less developed interior towns.⁸³ The outcome of these elections, therefore, produced a new Tunisia characterized by a bipolar constellation that attracted almost 70% of the popular vote in the parliamentary elections: the centrist secular Nidaa Tounes on the one hand, and the moderate Islamist Ennahda on the other, as well as a number of smaller parties fighting to win the hearts and

77 International Republican Institute 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; Pew Research Center 2014; Sigma Conseil 2013 as quoted in: Yaros 2013; Sigma Conseil 2014, 2016.

78 Bohlander 2013.

79 Mullin, Rouabah 2014.

80 Wolf 2014: 17.

81 Hamid 2014.

82 Redissi, Ben Amar 2015: 2.

83 The New York Times 2014.

minds of Tunisian voters.

And yet despite a deep ideological divide, as well as the difficult economic and security situation, the new Tunisian political elite have overall “displayed unparalleled political maturity, with the challenge of continuing the process of political compromise and settlement.”⁸⁴ In a crucial stage of the ‘democratic consolidation,’ the constant dialogue between leaders of opposing parties is paving the way of stability for many years to come. For instance, back in 2013 and during a time of real crisis following the political assassinations of prominent opposition figures, and as Wolf put it, “the Islamist-led government did not cling to power by all means,”⁸⁵ a decision that proved critical in the Tunisian ‘democratic consolidation’ phase. Similarly, outgoing president Marzouki’s decision not to challenge the results of the country’s presidential election is a further sign of détente and political acumen.⁸⁶ This ‘pragmatism and moderation’ in the case of Tunisia can nurture hope in a wretched region.⁸⁷

The country is now governed (and will continue to be) through a broad political coalition and in accordance with international standards. Surely, as Mastic observed, Ennahda’s strategic choice of ‘consensus politics’ in Tunisia does not appear congruous with other events in North Africa.⁸⁸ In Egypt, for instance, a groundswell of protest ultimately led to President Muhammad Morsi’s ousting and “the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist candidates fared poorly in Libya’s House of Representatives elections.”⁸⁹ The faltering Egyptian scenario, in particular, emphasizes the extent of the successful political trajectory of Tunisia. As Solomon put it:

Unlike former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda’s leader, Rached Ghannouchi, an Islamist scholar who spent decades in exile in Britain, acted pragmatically when faced with overwhelming opposition. Instead of trying to force his party’s Islamist vision on much of the population that is less religious, Ghannouchi did not overstay his welcome, deciding to continue playing the political game, instead of seizing power in ways reminiscent of Morsi.⁹⁰

In this context, the successful national dialogue in Tunisia, which led to

84 Haffiz 2015: 7.

85 Wolf 2014: 3.

86 Anadolu Agency 2014.

87 Mullin, Rouabah 2014.

88 Mastic 2014.

89 Mastic 2014: para. 1.

90 Solomon 2014: para. 2-3.

an inclusive road map towards political stability, is a reminder that “just as Islamists could not establish a democracy by excluding others, the others cannot do so by excluding Islamists.”⁹¹ The civil society quartet was duly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 2015, a recognition of the critical role played in ensuring peaceful and democratic transformations were achieved in Tunisia.

Ideological divisions are a common aspect of political liberalism as democratic politics is based on “a pluralism of incompatible ideological doctrines that divide otherwise free and equal citizens by multiple, but often overlapping, class, ideological, religious, geographic or other cleavages.”⁹² Secularist and Islamists, as the Tunisian example shows, are not inherently incompatible. Indeed, “the two aren’t mutually exclusive and such dichotomy is reductionist and essentialist. [Besides], Islamists are not monolithic and most of them are committed to democratic principles.”⁹³

The Tunisian case is a reminder that political processes are more complex in the Arab world than elsewhere, particularly because of deep vertical divisions along sectarian and tribal lines.⁹⁴ As Hale suggests, “a ‘trajectory’ toward or away from ideal-type endpoints like democracy or autocracy”⁹⁵ cannot be precisely predicted. Political change can be cyclic, oscillating between democracy and dictatorship, rather than purely progressive or regressive.⁹⁶ Scholars, such as Carothers, discard the ‘transition paradigm’ tout court, arguing that the indistinct space “between full-fledged democracy and outright dictatorship is actually the most common political condition today of countries in the developing world and the post-communist world.”⁹⁷

The concept of ‘democratic consolidation’ can also be problematic as it refers to a process containing a multiplicity of meanings, context-dependent and perspective-dependent, which can produce a plurality of typologies⁹⁸ reflecting different degrees of regime ‘consolidation:’ semi-democracy, formal democracy, electoral democracy, façade democracy or pseudo-democracy to name a few.⁹⁹ The risk of using such categories, though, is to describe countries as suspended somewhere on a ‘democratization sequence.’¹⁰⁰ Yet, as Schedler suggests, making predictive inferences, might

91 Khan 2014: 84.

92 J. Rawls 2005 as quoted in: Pappas 2014: 3.

93 Daadaoui 2014: para. 2.

94 Z. Majed as quoted in: McAfee 2011.

95 Hale 2005: 134.

96 Mansouri 2016.

97 Carothers 2002: 18.

98 For example, Schedler 2001: 66-67.

99 G. O’Donnell 1996a, 1996b, as quoted in: Schedler 2001.

100 Carothers 2002.

allow us to assess if a democracy is secure from a possible ‘breakdown.’¹⁰¹ What emerges from such argument is that ‘democratic consolidation’ implies not just observation, but also prospective reasoning.

The assessment and discussion of the consolidation process may begin by formulating open-ended examinations of the political situation as a whole¹⁰² and by considering if the country has been developing what Morlino calls the ‘qualities’ of a ‘good’ democracy.¹⁰³ Democracy as some argue can be defined as “a stable institutional structure that realizes the liberty and equality of citizens through the legitimate and correct functioning of its institutions and mechanisms.”¹⁰⁴ Quality can then be measured in terms of ‘result’ (citizens are satisfied), ‘content’ (citizens enjoy moderate level of liberty and equality) or ‘procedure’ (citizens can check and evaluate if the government operates according to the rule of law). Rothstein corroborates this view by stressing the importance of ‘performance’ or ‘output’ measures (such as the control of corruption or government effectiveness) in explaining political legitimacy.¹⁰⁵

The prevailing view among scholars is that ‘democratic transitions’ can help to understand the type of democracy that will emerge and whether or not it is likely to ‘consolidate.’¹⁰⁶ For instance, while ‘smooth’ transitions generally associate with lower risks of war and higher levels of democracy during the post-transitional phase, ‘rocky’ (or violent) transitions associate with increases in war and are more likely to revert to authoritarian rule.¹⁰⁷ In the case of Tunisia, the critical factors that prevented political breakdown and post-revolutionary chaos were the proactive role of civil society; the ‘consensus politics’ that produced the new constitution, the successive credible political elections held since the overthrow of the Ben Ali dictatorship, together with the commitment of its major political parties to cooperation and compromise. The combination of these events represents a cornerstone of Tunisia’s ‘democratic transition,’ which equipped the country with the structural foundation for sustainable political reform.

It may still be too early to say if the state will ‘consolidate’ its democratic gains in the long term, given the current challenges on the economic and security fronts.¹⁰⁸ Yet, the very introduction of deliberative democracy and pluralist politics, with opposing forces primarily concerned with transitioning the state towards consolidating a working, stable democracy,

101 Schedler 2001.

102 Carothers 2002.

103 Morlino 2009.

104 Morlino 2009: 4.

105 Rothstein 2014.

106 Stradiotto, Guo 2010.

107 Ward, Gleditsch 1998, as quoted in: Stradiotto, Guo 2010.

108 Mansouri 2015; Cheibub 2014.

signals that ‘democratic transition’ has been achieved in Tunisia.¹⁰⁹ The institutionalization of democratic gains will ensure a stronger state and more robust political institutions.¹¹⁰ This will be especially the case if the major political partners in the new coalition government are able to manage their own internal fallouts democratically and peacefully.¹¹¹ Drawing upon Schedler’s¹¹² work on ‘democratic consolidation,’ we see this process as connected to the concept’s original concern with democratic survival. By avoiding democratic breakdown (authoritarian regression) and democratic erosion (gradual weakening of democracy), we argue that Tunisia is achieving a relatively successful ‘consolidated democracy’ that many observers expect to last well into the foreseeable future. Such a prognostic for Tunisia, which is based on robust determinants of democracy (chiefly primary schooling), would support positive predictions.

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THE COUNTRY HAS ACHIEVED NEAR
UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

Indeed, using a long-time frame (1870–2000 period), Murtin & Wacziarg found strong empirical support for Lipset’s modernization hypothesis, according to which improvements in economic standards would ultimately lead to democratization.¹¹³ By sustaining this theory Murtin & Wacziarg argue that is actually the level of primary schooling, and to a lesser extent income levels, to have a substantial impact on (broadly defined) democracy standards. Support to Lipset’s theory came also from Wucherpfennig & Deutsch. According to them, democracy is not a random process, but rather the results of certain “socio-economic conditions which create and maintain an environment for stable and enduring democracies.”¹¹⁴ ‘Democratic transition’ is thus not only a procedural matter at the level of constitutions and elections, but also pertains to the delivery of services in particular quality public schooling.

Two recent studies show that Tunisia’s progress is in line with Murtin & Wacziarg’s findings. According to the first study, conducted by Education Policy and Data Center (EPDC),¹¹⁵ the progress made by Tunisia towards universal primary education – which represents a key UN Sustainable Development Goal – suggests that “the country has achieved near universal primary education.” The second study, a report issued by the World Bank in

109 Stradiotto, Guo 2010.

110 Carbone, Memoli 2015.

111 Mansouri 2015.

112 Schedler 1998.

113 Murtin, Wacziarg 2014:178.

114 Wucherpfennig, Deutsch 2009.

115 EPDC 2014:2.

2015, also confirms that GDP per capita has been constantly growing in the last two decades, despite a slight decline in the last few years in conjunction with socio-political upheaval following the 2011 revolution. Although security and economic challenges persist, Tunisia appears “to be entering a steady recovery from a period of heightened volatility and uncertainty.”¹¹⁶

CONCLUSION

Tunisia was the first ‘Arab Spring’ country to embark on a transformative process away from authoritarian structures and towards democratic governance and accountable institutions. Tunisia’s political vicissitudes are assuming a strategic, even symbolic importance, not only for the Arab world in general, but also for theorists of democratic ‘transition’ and ‘consolidation.’ Yet as we explore the prospects of longer-term consolidation, the twin challenges of economic/unemployment instability, and the threat of radical Jihadist groups will test the capacity of the new democratically-elected governments to deliver tangible progress to internal constituencies and external stakeholders alike. A key condition, therefore, for sustained success is for Tunisia to be supported regionally and internationally in overcoming these challenges as well as in managing internal ideological polarization whilst continuing to operate within a democratic institutional framework.¹¹⁷ Sustaining Tunisia’s democratic gains, though, will send a significant signal to anti-democratic forces that thrive amid chaos and instability across the region. Post-revolution success in ensuring internal security, economic stability and political legitimacy means “Tunisia has been, and remains, the only credible story”¹¹⁸ in a region beset by failing states and rising terrorist activities. Tunisia’s success reflects an ‘authentic Tunisian approach’ that has been dubbed ‘the Tunisian exception,’ one that saw pragmatic ‘consensus politics’ trump narrow ideological doctrines in pursuit of genuine political reform. Our conceptualization is thus in line with Heffernan’s work, who defines such consensus not as an agreement or a settlement but as a political framework which “constrains the autonomy of governing elites, encouraging them to conform to an established policy agenda that defines the ‘mainstream’ wherein ‘the possible is the art of politics.’”¹¹⁹ In this context, the government becomes the instrument which should accomplish what needs to be done, even if this cuts across ideological doctrines. ‘Consensus politics’ is, therefore, best defined as a ‘constrained space’ within which politics is conducted and political actors may still differ but with the common goal

116 World Bank 2015:3.

117 Cheibub 2014.

118 Mansouri 2015: para. 13.

119 Heffernan 2002: 742.

of producing change while ensuring overall stability. A democratic Tunisia that is also stable and prosperous will offer a platform, if not a 'model,' for other MENA countries especially those currently struggling with complex and at times chaotic transitions.

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