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Focus:

Ten years after the Arab Spring



Francesco Cavatorta

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A citizens' perspective

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terribly wrong

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in post-Arab Spring Morocco

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Middle East futures: Decade(s) of defiance and dissent

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Editorial

Dear ORIENT readers,

Ten years after the Arabellion in the Near and Middle East there seem to be few reasons for optimism. In most countries authoritarian rule has prevailed, in a few there is chaos and violence, but the dream of the young generation for democracy and more freedom is still alive.

By the end of 2010, carrying over well into 2011 and the years to follow, protests and revolts had erupted in many states of the region. Now, ten years later, in this issue of ORIENT we would like to have a closer look at some of the developments. Tunisia appears to be the sole silver lining, and to a degree Algeria and Sudan have recently joined it. Tunisia is showcasing a somewhat resilient path – and also takes centre stage in some of the case-based analysis in this issue, complemented by contributions employing a macro perspective on specific topics.

First off, **Francesco Cavatorta** draws some general lessons from the Arab Spring. Subsequently, **Ragnar Weilandt** analyses the status of Tunisia’s transition, before **Zouhir Gabsi** zooms in on the situation of the country’s youth. **Kirstie Lynn Dobbs** then sheds light on the role civil society has played in shaping foreign policy and **Vincent Durac** reviews broader trends in the role of such groups. **Abdelmalek El Kadoussi, Bouziane Zaid and Mohammed Ibahrine** delve into the role of communication and digital media overall, and specifically in Morocco, before the issue is rounded off by **James Dorsey**, who ventures a look ahead.

I hope that the current issue provides you with valuable perspectives on some developments over the past ten years.

We hope that you and your loved ones stay healthy and wish you a happy new year.

Dr. Gunter Mulack
Director of the German Orient-Institute

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Francesco Cavatorta

Lessons from political transitions in the Arab world: A citizens' perspective

While the paradigm of authoritarian resilience dominated the literature on the Arab world during the 2000s, the Arab uprisings saw the resurgence of the democratisation literature to explain political developments in the region. Building on the theoretical assumptions of the democratisation paradigm, several studies appeared attempting to explain why some political transitions to democracy were successful and why others instead failed. When it became clear that many Arab regimes simply would not fall, the paradigm of authoritarian resilience was revived. The empirical reality escapes both paradigms though, and ten years after the beginning of the uprisings the main trends in Arab politics cannot be captured easily within the parameters of either paradigm. The article discusses what these trends are, who the main actors are and how they relate to both paradigms.

Francesco Cavatorta is Professor at the Department of Political Science of the Université Laval. His research interests include political transformations, Salafism and the moderation of Islamist parties in the Middle East and North Africa.

Ragnar Weilandt

Tunisia is a beacon of hope, but things can still go terribly wrong

Even before Tunisia kick-started the 2011 uprisings across the Arab world and emerged as the only state in which they led to lasting positive change, the North African republic was considered a bit of an Arab exception. It went further in embracing liberal and secular values and had a well-educated middle class, a strong civil society, a comparably moderate Islamist party as well as a military that remained fairly absent from domestic politics. This article takes stock of how these factors helped to set the country on a trajectory different from that of many of its neighbours. At the same time, it warns that the Tunisian transition is far from secured. The post-2011 political system has so far failed to meet the high expectations that it had raised within the population and the political forces that would like to return to the old ways are on the rise. Tunisia might need – and it certainly deserves – more external support to overcome its domestic socio-economic challenges. Europe in particular should make a more substantial effort. Doing so is in its own interest: less than 70 kilometres separate Italy from Tunisia. Should the transition fail, Tunisia's problems could quickly become Europe's problems.

Ragnar Weilandt is a postdoc at KU Leuven and an adjunct professor at the Vrije Universiteit Brussels. His research focusses on EU democracy promotion in the Arab world, with a special focus on the EU's support for and interaction with Arab civil society. More generally, he is studying and teaching EU external action, Euro-Mediterranean relations as well as the politics and international relations of West Asia and North Africa.

Zouhir Gabsi

Tunisian youth: Demands for dignity in the context of challenging socio-political and economic upheaval

Tunisian youths form a significant constituent of the Tunisian society. They represent Tunisia's ultimate chance for progress. However, ten years after the revolution, the Tunisian youth have been pushed even further into the margins of society and towards idleness, catalysing a culture of resentment and apathy. Political infighting and corruption have undermined the youth's role as the torchbearers of progress. This article analyses the Tunisian youth constituency and reflects on the Arab Spring's impact on youths in the context of political and socio-cultural change.

Zouhir Gabsi is a senior lecturer in Arabic and Islamic studies. He has wide research interests in youth studies, Islamophobia, post-Arab Spring Tunisia, and language and Discourse.

Kirstie Lynn Dobbs

Civil society as revolutionary diplomats?: Foreign policy after the Arab Spring

This article examines civil society's evolving role in the development of foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa, a near-decade after the Arab Spring. By focusing on four sets of civil society actors: youth, women's, labour and human rights groups, I argue that civil society initially flourished in its ability to impact foreign policy after 2011. However, this initial optimism faded in 2013 as organisations grappled with increasing authoritarian backlash.

Kirstie Lynn Dobbs is a full-time lecturer in the Department of Political Science and Public Policy at Merrimack College in North Andover, United States. Her research focuses on political behaviour in transitioning and established democracies, with a particular emphasis on elections, public opinion and youth in the Middle East and North Africa.

Vincent Durac

Civil society, social mobilisation and the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring uprisings drew attention once more to the potential role that civil society might play in promoting political change in the Middle East and North Africa. This article will critically appraise the relationship between civil society and the state in the region from the end of the Cold War to the aftermath of the Arab Spring. In doing so, it will assess the implications of recent events for our understanding of the ways in which civil society functions in the MENA region.

Vincent Durac is Associate Professor in Middle East Politics at University College Dublin, Ireland. He is co-author of *Politics and Governance in the Middle East* (Palgrave) and of *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World* (Routledge).

Abdelmalek El Kadoussi, Bouziane Zaid and Mohammed Ibahrine

Traditional media, digital platforms and social protests in post-Arab Spring Morocco

The Arab Spring protests in Morocco, which started on 20 February 2011, have left a significant impact on political configurations and practices as well as on political culture and civil society activism. Moroccan citizens have taken to the streets and squares and to the virtual spaces more often in the last ten years than ever before. This paper discusses the role that offline and online media played in different social protest events. It demonstrates how online media managed to create a public space for free political expression, which led to a series of mass protests, and how the state has clamped down on Internet freedom through the use of a variety of repressive mechanisms. The Moroccan experience proves that the role of digital media is ponderable rather than deterministic in promoting social activism.

Abdelmalek El Kadoussi is Assistant Professor of Media and Communication at Ibn Toufail University, Kenitra, Morocco. Over the last 15 years, he has conducted research on different layers of media scholarship, including but not confined to media and democratisation, media political economy and others. He has presented papers in national and international congresses and published in national and international journals.

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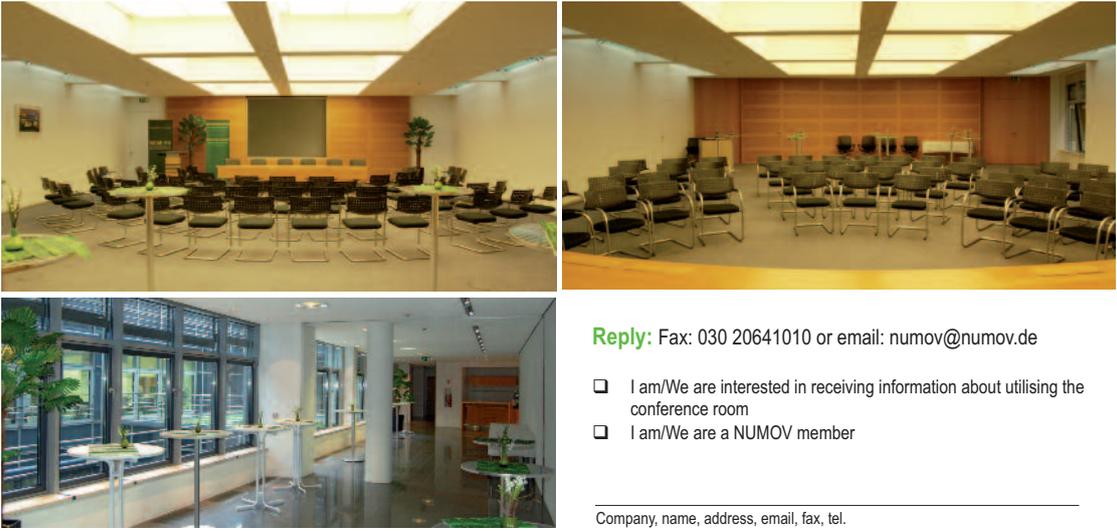
James M. Dorsey

Middle East futures: Decade(s) of defiance and dissent

If the 2010s were a decade of defiance and dissent, the 2020s promise to make mass anti-government protests a fixture of the greater Middle East's political landscape. Protests in the coming decade are likely to be fuelled by the challenges Middle Eastern states face in enacting economic and social reforms as well as reducing their dependence on energy exports against the backdrop of a global economic crisis and depressed oil prices and energy markets. Complicating the challenges is the fact that the youth, which often constitutes a majority of the population, has lost or is losing confidence in government and religious establishments at a time in which social contracts are being unilaterally rewritten by political elites. Pressure on the Middle East's autocratic rulers is likely to increase with the departure of US President Donald J. Trump, a staunch supporter of strongman rule, and the coming to office of President-elect Joe Biden. In contrast to Trump, Biden has suggested that he would emphasise democratic values and freedoms. In doing so, Biden could contribute to renewed public manifestations of widespread discontent and demands for greater transparency and accountability in the Middle East and North Africa.

James M. Dorsey is an award-winning journalist, senior fellow at Nanyang Technological University's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore and the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute, and the author of the syndicated column and blog, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer.

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Francesco Cavatorta

Lessons from political transitions in the Arab world: A citizens' perspective

I. Introduction

In January 2014, the Tunisian Constituent Assembly finally approved the country's new constitutional text, putting to rest the legacy of its authoritarian past and embarking on the consolidation of democracy. The picture of President Marzouki holding the text up with a broad smile on his face symbolised the success of the transition. Six months earlier, in July 2013, the Egyptian military had intervened in the political life of its country to terminate the democratic experiment that had begun with the fall of Mubarak. The Egyptian military coup and the picture of a general wearing dark sunglasses explaining how the coup was for the good of the country symbolised the failure of the Egyptian democratisation process and a return to authoritarianism.

In their own contrasting ways, the two events exemplify the way in which many scholars and policymakers have employed the traditional tools of democratisation since 2011 to explain how such developments in the two countries, and more broadly across the region, could occur. Thus the guiding research question was, and in many cases still is, about the factors that account for the success of Tunisia and the failure of Egypt – along with many other Arab countries – in transiting to democracy, particularly when overwhelming empirical evidence shows that Arab citizens, much like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, have consistently supported the adoption of a democratic

system for decades.¹ While a number of scholars focused on the tools of democratisation to make sense of post-2011 Arab politics, several others insisted that the paradigm of authoritarian resilience was in reality better suited to explain political developments in the Arab world because no genuine transition had actually begun, barring the Tunisian exception. Such scholars argued that many regimes in place had both the ability and the support of key constituencies to withstand demands for radical political change.²

The argument in this article is that both paradigms have an important contribution to make to the debate about Arab politics ten years after the Tunisian uprising, but both also fail to take into account important dimensions and lessons that cut across paradigms and render them problematic if not obsolete in identifying new trends and learning lessons from the experiences of the last decade. In particular, the excessive focus on institutional arrangements rather than citizens' changing attitudes, values and preferences demonstrates the rigidity of both theoretical frameworks.

II. Democratisation versus authoritarian resilience

There are three specific aspects both paradigms are ill-suited to deal with in light of what the events over the last decade across the Arab world have shown. These deficiencies do not necessarily invalidate many of the insights of democratisation and authoritarian

¹ Tessler and Gao, *Gauging Arab support for democracy*, 2005; Jamal, Tessler and Robbins, *New Findings on Arabs and Democracy*, 2012; Bréchon, *Les opinions publiques arabes. Entre attachement à l'Islam et à la démocratie*, 2018.

² Anderson, *Demystifying the Arab Spring: Parsing the Differences Between Tunisia, Egypt and Libya*, 2011; Yom and Gause, *Resilient royals: how monarchies hang on*, 2012; Hill, *Authoritarian resilience and regime cohesion in Morocco after the Arab spring*, 2019.

resilience. Studies of transitions to democracy have contributed significantly to explaining how processes of regime change begin, how they develop and how they end.³ Research on authoritarian resilience for its part has often been able to explain how authoritarian systems adapt and how they survive.⁴ As all paradigms, though, they suffer from a number of rigidities.

II.1 The timeline

The first problem the two paradigms encounter, which has been exposed during the Arab uprisings and their aftermath, has to do with the finite nature of the timeline they implicitly subscribe to. When it comes to the democratisation paradigm, there is a tendency to think about 'waves' – some analysts have argued that the Arab uprisings are part of a fourth wave of democratisation⁵ – and 'endpoints'. In short, democratisations are political transitions or processes of regime change that begin at a specific Point A (authoritarian regime in place) and then arrive at Point B (liberal democracy) after a more or less tortuous path. When Point B is not reached, the process goes back to the initial Point A. There is a set of different factors and conditions scholars point to that can be used to explain failure or success. For its part, the authoritarian resilience paradigm does not conceive of political systems ever really departing from Point A. In fact, what changes are the underlying structures of Point A, as authoritarianism can adapt and renew, but there is no genuine movement towards Point B.

As the empirical reality demonstrates, both conceptions are not quite accurate and do not fully capture the flux, changing nature and trends that characterise Arab politics even

when, as in the case of Tunisia, they might have actually reached Point B rather quickly and successfully. Carothers had already recognised some of the weaknesses of the democratisation paradigm,⁶ which is teleological and incapable of explaining the variety of institutional outcomes that might be put in place once Point A is abandoned. The plethora of institutional outcomes in Arab countries following the initial protests in late 2010 confirms the inability of the democratisation paradigm to capture arrangements that might not be simply temporary. Countries might be moving, but they might not be moving towards Point B in a linear fashion, or might not be moving towards it at all. Furthermore, when they reach point B they might not resemble the expected outcome, namely a Western-style liberal-democracy.

Conversely, this does not mean that they remain authoritarian to the degree the resilience paradigm expects. The authoritarian resilience paradigm is thus not quite accurate insofar as it fails to account, for example, for radical change (the Tunisian example) or for institutional arrangements that might combine aspects of authoritarianism and democracy, as the existence of democratic enclaves in authoritarian settings suggests.⁷ Post-2011 authoritarian Arab regimes are not adaptations of an old model; they are new models entirely. They present a variety and combinations of changes and continuities, making them difficult to categorise neatly.⁸ In short, the first lesson to be learned is that the complexity of the region and its politics cannot be reduced to the dichotomy of democracy versus authoritarianism. Furthermore, this dichotomy is unhelpful in gauging what citizens believe in and expect of the political systems they live in.

¹ Tessler and Gao, *Gauging Arab support for democracy*, 2005; Jamal, Tessler and Robbins, *New Findings on Arabs and Democracy*, 2012; Bréchon, *Les opinions publiques arabes. Entre attachement à l'Islam et à la démocratie*, 2018.

² Anderson, *Demystifying the Arab Spring: Parsing the Differences Between Tunisia, Egypt and Libya*, 2011; Yom and Gause, *Resilient royals: how monarchies hang on*, 2012; Hill, *Authoritarian resilience and regime cohesion in Morocco after the Arab spring*, 2019.

³ O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule. Tentative Conclusions*, 1986.

II.2 Normativity

The second problem both paradigms face is the normativity – implicit and explicit – they project. Democratisation is based on the premise that the arrival at Point B equates with the adoption of a Western-style liberal democracy as the best possible form of government and that all good things will eventually stem from that. This liberal democracy, despite the essentially contested meaning that democracy has, coincides with a minimal procedural version of democracy, whereby processes and mechanisms are the defining features, to the detriment of a more substantive understanding and practice of it. In fact, as Di Palma suggested decades ago, a process of democratisation should not include negotiations over or radical changes to socioeconomic demands, because this would undermine the whole process.⁹ For Di Palma, it is therefore imperative, for elites negotiating a transition, to remain focused on procedural rules and institutions, postponing socioeconomic change until after democratic consolidation. This theoretical and policy straitjacket prevents discussions over the type and quality of democracy one gets after reaching Point B.

For its part, the authoritarian resilience paradigm is premised on the normative assumption that authoritarian institutions are inevitably detrimental to ordinary citizens, lack the efficiency to perform economically and do not produce socioeconomic progress. The focus of this criticism is almost invariably the outsized role of the state in every aspect of life. While it is difficult to disagree with the normativity of both paradigms, it can be pointed out that they fail to take into account how individual citizens across the Arab world think about democracy, democratisation, authoritarianism and the role of the state.

When one examines post-uprising politics from the perspective of ordinary Arab citizens, three points emerge clearly to challenge the way in which one thinks about normativity. First of all, the causes of the uprisings are clearly rooted in socioeconomic distress and therefore the demands for political change are inevitably bound up with that. Recent empirical research¹⁰ clearly demonstrates that democratic mechanisms of governance and the extension of political rights were not central to citizens' demands. In fact, addressing the socioeconomic crisis and tackling corruption were the top two reasons for taking to the streets and were also the priorities citizens believed that governments should have.

This is not to suggest that democracy and its mechanisms are simply viewed as instrumental. The findings though tell us quite clearly that for the majority of citizens the conception of democracy cannot be reduced to rules and procedures, but should have a tangible redistributive dimension and a strong component of socioeconomic progress. This is not what the democratisation paradigm is necessarily concerned with, because its Western bias has moved away from a thicker conceptualisation of democracy. It also explains why there is such widespread disaffection with democratic and semi-democratic systems. Tunisia, despite the consolidation of its democracy and the efficiency of its democratic mechanisms and procedures, is still experiencing waves of social protests and growing popular disenchantment.¹¹ The demands for profound changes in the political systems in both Iraq and Lebanon also do not necessarily stem from the deficiencies of sectarian democratic consociationalism, but from its neoliberal version, which rewards a parasitic political and economic class to the detriment of the vast majority of the population, including, crucially, an increasingly impoverished middle class.¹²

⁴ Heydemann, *Upgrading authoritarianism in the Arab world*, 2007.

⁵ Abushouk, *The Arab Spring: a fourth wave of democratization?*, 2016.

⁶ Carothers, *The end of the transition paradigm*, 2002.

⁷ Gilley, *Democratic enclaves in authoritarian regimes*, 2010.

The implication for the resilience paradigm is that authoritarian structures might indeed survive and even be somewhat legitimate if they can deliver on the priorities of citizens and it is on this that the monarchs of the Gulf have gambled successfully to remain in power. However, when authoritarianism cannot deliver, as was demonstrated before the uprisings, it is subjected to contestation and demands for change. In all of this, it does not much matter to Arab citizens whether the historical record shows that socioeconomic progress and the reduction of corruption are more strongly correlated with democracy than with authoritarianism and that authoritarian efficiency is only a myth.¹³ This also explains why movements demanding change have continued across the region in authoritarian countries despite the violence the state has visited or might visit on those who mobilise, as the cases of Algeria and Sudan have recently highlighted. Paradoxically, it is precisely in countries that have not experienced genuine liberalisation that 'democracy' is still appealing as the institutional solution to socioeconomic decline and inequality.¹⁴

The second aspect related to the problematisation of normativity has to do with the role of the state. The democratisation paradigm assumes that inherent to establishment of a liberal-democratic system is the reduction of the functions and interference of the state in the life of citizens. The very conception of the liberal state is intimately linked with this assumption. Citizens in a liberal democracy progressively promote the extension of individual freedoms and rights that the state then guarantees but, again, does not interfere with. The current state of the Arab world, though, presents a dilemma in this respect. There is in fact a conflict between what citizens desire when it comes to procedures and institutional arrangements and what their actual policy preferences are. Although Arab

citizens agree that democracy is the best system of government and that it is the one which could deliver on the promise of socioeconomic progress and greater equality, they also support clearly illiberal policies when it comes to individual rights, notably when it comes to women, religious and sexual minorities. Thus, if the post-uprising democratic state is unable to deliver socioeconomic goods and also unable to introduce legislation the majority of citizens supports, its legitimacy is compromised. The bizarre twist is that the more liberal sectors of society end up decrying democratic procedures because they might lead to potentially illiberal outcomes. Conversely, the more conservative individuals fear that democratic mechanisms might be employed to push a liberal agenda that the majority of citizens do not support.

For its part, the authoritarian resilience paradigm takes the normative position that one of the key reasons for the durability of authoritarianism is the outsized role of the state in the lives of citizens, who are strictly controlled, overly policed and economically dependent on it. Again, all this might be true, but post-2011 Arab politics provide a different perspective on the role of the state when citizens and their attitudes, values and policy preferences are taken into account. Arab citizens, contrary to what one might assume, actually want more state involvement rather than less.¹⁵ Contrary to what the authoritarian resilience paradigm holds, it is not the general overbearing nature of the state that is necessarily a problem, but what the state actually does in practice. The traditional complaint before 2011 was that the state employed violence and oppression through its security services and/or tolerated and encouraged corruption through its bureaucracy. This state was to be resisted and changed because it was no longer able to hold up its part of the social contract. In short,

⁸ Rivetti, *Continuity and change before and after the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco: Regime reconfiguration and policymaking in North Africa*, 2015.

⁹ Di Palma, *To craft democracies: an essay on democratic transitions*, 1990.

the state was fierce and oppressive and, at the same time, too inefficient or unwilling to provide services and create the conditions for socioeconomic progress. The crucial demand of citizens in 2011 and again in the current protests across the region is that the state ceases to be fierce and begins to be effective. As Brixi et al. demonstrated, citizens have high expectations about what the state should deliver in terms of services, but are often extremely disappointed with it.¹⁶ Citizens want a different type of state involvement to the one that they have experienced thus far. The calls to dismantle regimes should therefore not be confused with calls to diminish the role of the state and its reach; it is the performance that matters most and, if anything, its reach should be expanded, notably when it comes to the management of the economy and delivery of public services. This aspect in particular runs contrary to the conventional wisdom about the creation of wealth or the drag that oversized bureaucracy and public employment are to sustainable economic development, but it is what most citizens demand.

If the roots of the uprisings are in socioeconomic distress, it is plausible that the state should be seen as the ultimate authority to rely on to change course by taking on economic responsibilities. Popular criticism was directed at the authoritarian state because it was overbearing in the 'wrong' domains. Paradoxically, the same criticism is currently laid at the doors of the state in democracies and semi-democracies in the region, which are also perceived to be inefficient in dealing with the socioeconomic crisis. In conclusion, the attitudes and policy preferences of citizens towards the role of the state problematise the notion that liberal democracy, particularly in its neoliberal form, should coincide with the retreat of the state.

Similarly, it problematises the negative normative attitudes surrounding authoritarianism, because a desire for a strong state remains widespread.

11.3 The international dimension

The third aspect that challenges the normativity of both paradigms is the question of physical security and how it links with the international dimension of political change, or lack thereof. While physical security might be taken for granted in many other contexts, allowing citizens to focus on other matters, the last decade has seen a significant degradation of it across the region. While during the 2000s this seemed confined to Iraq and to short-lived conflicts across the region, the post-2011 Arab world is witnessing three destructive civil wars (Yemen, Syria and Libya), external military interventions and a significant rise in political violence. Amidst the chaos and the surging tensions between regional rivals, it is not surprising to find that citizens' desire for radical political change has waned. This has powerful implications for the two paradigms.

Despite the almost exclusive focus on domestic actors and factors when it comes to if and how political change actually occurs, the Arab uprisings and their aftermath have illustrated clearly how important the international dimension is. Although the roots of the uprisings might be domestic, they quickly took on a transnational dimension due to the commonalities that countries in the region share and the penetrated nature of the regional system, where rivalries abound and where specific social factors – confessional loyalties for instance – can be mobilised from the outside to support or undermine efforts of political change.¹⁷ From the traditional links Western powers built with longstanding Arab

¹⁰ Teti, Abbott and Cavatorta, *Do Arabs really want democracy? Evidence from four countries*, 2019.

¹¹ Brumberg and Ben Salem, *Tunisia's endless transition*, 2020.

¹² Baumann, *The causes, nature and effect of the current crisis on Lebanese capitalism*, 2019.

¹³ Maravall, *The Myth of Authoritarian Advantage*, 2007.

dictators to interregional rivalries and from the interference of the world's leading authoritarian regimes to the power imbalances inherent among Arab countries, the regional system has experienced a considerable degree of instability. It follows that physical security becomes a central preoccupation for citizens and fear of chaos informs attitudes to and perceptions of change. In a recent study, Cammett et al. demonstrate that "a preference for democracy and political trust are not fixed cultural features of populations but rather can shift rapidly in the face of perceived insecurity."¹⁸

These findings suggest on the one hand that democratisation does not only respond to domestic inputs, as insecurity can lead citizens to withdraw from mobilisation when immediate examples of chaos following regime change can be clearly pointed at. The way in which Syria and Libya quickly descended into brutal civil wars has been a powerful warning to those seeking change in their respective countries, stifling their enthusiasm. On the other hand, the findings suggest that authoritarian resilience might be more the product of fear of chaos than of the policies ruling elites put in place. As the cases of the 2019 revolts and protests in Iraq, Algeria, Lebanon and Sudan remind us, though, the fear of repeating the civil war scenario might not be that durable.

III. Agency

The broader discussion of the two paradigms and their shortcomings in fully explaining events across the region over the last decade should not obscure the role of agency and how it shaped outcomes and institutional arrangements. Both paradigms offer a considerable role to specific actors in making or breaking transition and adapting authoritarianism to changed circumstances. Three sets of actors have had a significant role

to play in either determining the course of political change.

The first are political parties. Although they have never had a prominent place in studies of the Arab world because power has been exercised outside of them and through informal channels, parties suddenly acquired significance when placed in charge of negotiating transitions to democracy. Parties are the only institutions capable of channelling views and organising consensus, but they broadly failed to live up to expectations. In most countries where the dictators left – in 2011 as in 2019 – they were unable to seize the moment and successfully negotiate a transition towards a democratic system with clear rules and a shared outlook for the future. From Egypt to Yemen and from Algeria to Sudan and Lebanon, parties have failed to strike the necessary compromises to avoid the trap of a return to authoritarian practices or prevent the descent into civil war. Ideological differences, mutual suspicions, personal rivalries, poor anchoring in society and low organisational capacities explain such failure. Even in Tunisia, where parties were able to guide the country to a new political system, they have lost much of the trust they had – not high to begin with – and now face the rise of populist independents. Without strong and institutionalised parties committed to negotiating in good faith, it is difficult to see how a new political system can be set up.

Second are the security apparatuses. While they might have initially been surprised by the strength and intensity of the demonstrations, they quickly reasserted their control. In some instances they sacrificed the dictator – in Egypt in 2011 and in Algeria in 2019 – without relinquishing their grip on power, demonstrating that it is these opaque networks in which security agencies play a dominant role that actually run the country. In other instances they did not even pretend

¹⁴ Spierings, *Democratic disillusionment? Desire for Democracy after the Uprisings*, 2020.

to be on the side of demonstrators and defended their material privileges and their role as protectors of the country by employing violence, as the cases of Syria and Bahrain demonstrate. In other cases they signalled that no real change would be tolerated and sided with the rulers in place, as in Morocco, Jordan and the Gulf countries. In the case of Tunisia, the military refrained from saving the Ben Ali regime and the security apparatus quickly withdrew to allow for the transition to democracy to take place, but over time it has become clear that the latter still has significant influence on policy-making. Broadly speaking, it is difficult to conceive of genuine liberal-democratic change when the 'men with the guns' run the show. Citizens' fears have also strengthened the hand of militaries and security services, perceived as the only barrier standing between citizens and chaos.

Third are economic elites. While the uprisings often saw an alliance between middle classes and working classes,¹⁹ this alliance did not last long, as their respective interests quickly diverged. In part this is due to the realisation that the – limited – economic success of the middle class is highly dependent on the corrupt patronage networks with powerful economic interests that rulers had established, which did not accept the disruption that large-scale political change would have entailed. Economic actors thrive when there is political stability, and the chaos the uprisings generated did not sit well with them.

IV. Conclusion

The profound malaise that affected Arab societies exploded in 2011 and has continued unabated since, with almost every country in the region experiencing mass protest movements and demands for radical change. While chaos, violence and instability seemed for a time to prevent citizens from protesting

further, this did not last and by 2019 the intensity of the challenge to established political systems was again in full swing in four Arab countries. The problem is that no matter what the institutional arrangements of different countries are, they all inevitably come under pressure at one moment or another because citizens are profoundly dissatisfied with the status quo. Although there are variations both between and within countries in how satisfied citizens are with their governments,²⁰ empirical evidence mostly points to dissatisfaction, low trust in public institutions and desire for change. This makes regimes and the region inherently unstable. While monarchies have been able to better withstand the challenge from below, this does not mean that they do not experience demands for change and that their rule is legitimate. One has to simply look at the protests in the Rif in Morocco in 2016/17 for confirmation. Whether they have an authoritarian, democratic or consociational political system, countries in the region are unable to respond to the priorities of their citizens, notably socioeconomic progress, greater social equality and the end of corruption.

Although the region might seem particularly unstable when compared with the rest of the world, these priorities are felt across the globe and across political systems, including established Western democracies, where dissatisfaction with the political system has been on the rise for some time. In this respect the difference between the Middle East and North Africa and other regions of the world might be in the degree of intensity rather than in the nature of the struggle between the many have-nots and the few privileged haves, and in the quest for a system that might address this crucial problem. The clear dichotomy between authoritarianism and democracy is confounded in the Arab world, and possibly elsewhere too.

¹⁵ Teti, Abbott and Cavatorta, *Do Arabs really want democracy? Evidence from four countries*, 2019.

¹⁶ Brixi, Lust and Woolcock, *Trust, Voice and Incentives. Learning from Local Success Stories in Service Delivery in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2015.

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Ragnar Weilandt

Tunisia is a beacon of hope, but things can still go terribly wrong

I. Introduction

On 17 December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire outside a municipal office in the central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid. It was an act of desperation in protest against what the young street vendor saw as unfair and humiliating treatment by the authorities, who had confiscated his unlicensed vegetable cart and his goods. According to a friend, he shouted “how do you expect me to make a living?”¹ before dousing himself in petrol and lighting a match. Bouazizi survived initially, but died of his injuries on 4 January 2011. Although his act was neither the first nor the last self-immolation in Tunisia, it proved to be a catalyst. Within hours there were protests in Sidi Bouzid, within days these protests spread across the country and within a month the 23-year rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and 53 years of autocracy in independent Tunisia came to an end. On 14 January 2011, Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia. Over the following weeks and months, the protests spread across the Arab world, ultimately leading to the demise of long-ruling autocrats in Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

Hopes for a regional transformation were quickly disappointed, though. The political transitions in Libya and Yemen evolved into civil wars. Following the 2013 military coup, Egypt became far more repressive than it had been before the uprisings. In fact, almost all Arab countries have become less free over the past decade.² In stark contrast, Tunisia succeeded in electing a constituent assembly, drafting a new constitution as well as holding

free and fair democratic legislative and presidential elections in 2014 and 2019. While major challenges remain, Tunisia is a rare source of hope in the region.

It was not by accident that the country took a different path. The small North African republic was a bit of an Arab exception even before it kick-started the 2011 uprisings. Tunisia went further in embracing liberal and secular values and had a well-educated middle class, a strong civil society, a comparably moderate Islamist party as well as a military that remained fairly absent from domestic politics. This article takes stock of how these factors helped to set Tunisia on a different trajectory. It starts by tracing the story of the Tunisian transition and exploring its historical context. On that basis, it discusses the factors and actors that shaped the country over the past decade. It concludes by laying out some of the economic, political and social challenges that remain – and, despite all justified optimism about Tunisia’s future, should be taken very seriously.

II. A brief history of the Tunisian transition

The origins of modern Tunisia are closely linked to the establishment of the French protectorate in 1881. France’s rule may have been relatively brief, but it left a lasting imprint on Tunisia’s public administration and education system as well as its infrastructure, industry and public health sector. In contrast to the brutal war France fought in neighbouring Algeria, Tunisian independence in 1956 came about in a rather peaceful way.

¹ CBS News, *How a slap sparked Tunisia's revolution*, 2011.

² Bertelsmann Transformation Index, *Transformation Atlas*, 2020.

This was mainly due to different interests on the French side – Algeria’s coastal regions were considered to be part of metropolitan France whereas Tunisia was only a protectorate. However, the Tunisian nationalist movement also took a more conciliatory approach. Led by Habib Bourguiba, who would later assume the Tunisian presidency, the nationalist movement pursued a strategy of gradual independence and promised France amicable relations once Tunisians were granted their own state. Despite some efforts to “Arabise” the country’s education and administration, post-independence Tunisia largely kept the state structures that France had imposed upon it and remained closely allied to its former coloniser in political, economic and cultural terms.

Bourguiba remained in power until 1987, when he was removed and replaced by his prime minister Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in a bloodless “constitutional coup”³ that was justified on medical grounds. Ben Ali started his presidency with a brief period of liberalisation, but quickly became even more repressive than his predecessor. His police apparatus cracked down even more relentlessly on opposition activists, especially those trying to expose the ruling elites’ increasingly shameless graft.⁴ While the regime remained committed to secular and liberal values that made it look progressive in the eyes of many Western observers, the country became more authoritarian, corrupt and inefficient.⁵ In the 2000s, a dysfunctional economy combined with demographic changes created major hardships for an ever-growing number of Tunisians. The country’s interior regions were hit particularly hard and the desperation of

workers in the phosphate mines in the Gafsa region led to a revolt in 2008. It was the biggest challenge to the Tunisian regime in more than two decades, but failed to gather broader support within the country.

While many Tunisians were frustrated with the system and its inefficiency and brutality, major misgivings were directed at the extended ruling family. Particular scorn was reserved for Ben Ali’s wife Leïla Ben Ali, née Trabelsi, and her family, which had managed to gain control over a substantial part of the Tunisian economy.⁶ The atmosphere became increasingly explosive in the late 2000s and Tunisian anger was further fuelled by the leak of a large number of US diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks in 2010. While Western attention was focused on other aspects of “Cablegate,” the leaked diplomatic telegrams’ detailed description of the extent and audacity of Tunisia’s ruling families’ corruption and nepotism touched a nerve within the country. Much of what the cables said was suspected or even common knowledge, but seeing it documented in black and white increased public anger. Tunisian cyber-activists fuelled this anger by translating the most relevant cables and publishing them on the internet as “TuniLeaks.”⁷

Online activism was not a new phenomenon. In the 2000s, a new generation of dissidents had started to use blogs and other social media platforms to express their opinions. Nawaat, the platform on which the TuniLeaks were published, was created in 2004. Lina Ben Mhenni, who rose to prominence in Tunisia and beyond during the uprising, started her blog “A Tunisian Girl”⁸ in 2007. As

³ Ware, *Constitutional Coup*, 1988, 587.

⁴ Alexander, *Democratic Brink*, 1997, 34; Jebnoun, *Dystopian State*, 2013, 101.

⁵ Beau and Tuquoi, *Notre Ami Ben Ali*, 2011.

⁶ Beau and Graciet, *La Régente de Carthage*, 2009.

⁷ Nawaat, *TuniLeaks*, 2010.

⁸ Lina Ben Mhenni died in January 2020 at the age of 36, following a long battle with an auto-immune disease. Her blog remains available at <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com>.

internet use only gradually spread in Tunisia and was limited by severe government censorship, such activism only reached small, rather elitist and often foreign audiences in the beginning. However, towards the end of the 2000s, internet access had become less exclusive and social media use became more common – both to access and to disseminate information. Moreover, internet-savvy activists started to use online tools to organise offline protests. In May 2010, they used social media to call upon people to wear white clothes in downtown Tunis to protest against internet censorship. While this “Tunisia in White” protest was not a major success, it illustrated how social media could be utilised for campaigns and protests. It proved to be a valuable experience for what was about to come.

In the context of economic hardship and outrage over the regime’s corruption, Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation proved to be the final straw. Unlike two years earlier, the protests in central Tunisia that followed did receive support across the country. This was not least due to the new generation of activists who reported and documented the unfolding protests – and the authorities’ violence against protesters. They blogged first-hand accounts and published photos and videos to make sure both Tunisians and the rest of the world saw what was happening. This further fuelled the uprising, as did the imprisonment of individual activists and artists, such as the rapper Hamada Ben Amor, known as “El Général,” whose song “Rais Lebied” (which translates as “head of state”) openly attacked the Ben Ali regime and became one of the hymns of the uprising.

What started in Sidi Bouzid in December 2010 led to a nationwide uprising that ended Ben Ali’s rule within less than a month. In October 2011, Tunisians elected a National Constituent Assembly, which was charged with rewriting Tunisia’s constitution. This first democratic election was won by the pre-

viously banned Islamist Ennahda party, which managed to get 41 percent of the total vote and entered a coalition with two secular social-democratic parties. This so-called Troika alliance formed a government led by Ennahda’s Secretary General Hamadi Jebali. Moncef Marzouki, a human rights activist turned politician, was elected interim President of Tunisia in December 2011. The process of drafting a new Tunisian constitution began in February 2012 and was supposed to be completed within a year.

However, only limited progress had been made by the time this deadline had passed. Frustrated by this lack of progress and a more general sentiment that the government was not delivering, Tunisians became increasingly disenchanted with the Troika and with Ennahda in particular. Secularists were spooked by the party’s proposal of constitutional provisions codifying Islam as the official religion of the state and considering women as ‘complementary’ rather than equal to men. Tensions also arose over concerns that the Islamists might be hiding their true agenda and allegations that they were not sufficiently dealing with increasing extremist threats. The assassination of two high-profile secular far-left politicians by what seemed to be Jihadist perpetrators added to such fears and led to major protests. These developments coincided with a major crisis in Egypt, where a grassroots campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood-led government that was secretly supported, if not instigated, by army and security forces, led to major public protests. On 3 July 2013, army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi used these protests as a pretext for a military coup that ended Egypt’s brief democratic experiment.

Tunisia took a different path. In August 2013, four major civil society organisations started to mediate between government and opposition – and both sides were ultimately willing to compromise and to end the political

stalemate. This so-called “National Dialogue” led to the establishment of a technocratic government and bipartisan negotiations on a new constitution. This new constitution was ratified in January 2014 with 200 votes in favour, twelve votes against and four abstentions. It divides the executive power between president and prime minister and provides for a decentralised government committed to transparency, gender equality and freedom of belief. In October 2014, parliamentary elections for the newly created Assembly of the Representatives of the People were won by Nidaa Tounes, a newly created secular party bringing together various political ideas and ideologies that was kept together by their reaction of political Islam. The party was founded by Béji Caïd Essebsi, who had served as foreign minister under Habib Bourguiba. Essebsi became Tunisia’s first directly and democratically elected president on 21 December 2014 at the age of 88. He remained in office until his death on 25 July 2019 and was succeeded by dark-horse candidate Kais Saied, an independent constitutional law expert who won the 2019 presidential elections.

III. The Tunisian exception

Even before it inspired the 2011 wave of protests across the Arab world and became the only state in which they succeeded, Tunisia and Tunisian society were considered as something of an “Arab anomaly.”⁹ The country has been and remains one of the most progressive states in the Arab world. Most prominently, Bourguiba’s 1957 Code of Personal Status advanced formal women’s rights to an extent that made the country’s

legislation not only far more progressive than the rest of the Arab world,¹⁰ but also, at least on paper, than various Western countries. There remained and remains a gap between formal law and its acceptance and application by society, particularly in the interior regions, which tend to be more socially conservative than the urban coastal areas.¹¹ And yet, overall Tunisia is more progressive than much of the rest of the Arab world, a tendency rooted in the country’s “remarkable culture of reform, which dates back to the nineteenth century and is rooted in a progressive and adaptive brand of Islam.”¹² France’s occupation may have left a mark on the country’s evolution, but Tunisian exceptionalism predates it. Independent Tunisia’s first president Habib Bourguiba built on both legacies. He often found harsh words for and took harsh action against what he perceived as religious backwardness, for example when referring to the hijab as an “odious rag”¹³ and banning it from public offices, schools and universities. And yet he also made an effort to legitimise his reform agenda by drawing upon liberal Tunisian interpretations of the Koran from the 19th century and empowering moderate and progressive members of Tunisia’s Islamic establishment.¹⁴

Although Ennahda sought to revoke some of Tunisia’s liberal laws, its political line tends to be much less conservative than that of other major Islamist movements, such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood or the Palestinian Hamas.¹⁵ Its spiritual leader Rashid Ghannouchi even expressed public support for the Code of Personal Status while exiled in London before the 2011 uprisings.¹⁶ After the uprising, Ennahda began to embrace

⁹ Masri, *Arab Anomaly*, 2017.

¹⁰ Tobich, *Les Statuts Personnels*, 2008, 89ff.

¹¹ Salem, *Women’s Rights*, 2010.

¹² Masri, *Arab Anomaly*, 2017, XXVII.

¹³ Boulby, *Islamic Challenge*, 1988, 593.

¹⁴ Perkins, *Modern Tunisia*, 2014, 140f.

¹⁵ Cavatorta and Merone, *La Tunisianite*, 2015, 24.

¹⁶ Wolf, *History of Ennahda*, 2017, 98.

an even more moderate agenda and made major concessions, such as supporting the non-inclusion of a reference to Sharia law in the new constitution.¹⁷ In addition, Ennahda has been far more willing to compromise than other Islamist parties and went further to accommodate those concerned about its electoral success. For example, despite obtaining more votes than the next eight parties combined in the first free election and its continuing success at the polls since, Ennahda refrained from running its own candidates in the first two presidential elections. Moreover, in maintaining a grand coalition with Nidaa Tounes, Ennahda politicians and activists proved willing to work with some of the same political forces that were either directly involved in or at least in favour of its previous prosecution.

A further characteristic that makes Tunisia stand out is its well-educated population. While France left its imprint on post-colonial Tunisia's education system, it was also shaped by Bourguiba's personal priorities. Other North African post-independence leaders, such as Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser or Algeria's Houari Boumédiène, had had rather limited exposure to academic education and were formed by religious training or military schools and experiences instead. In contrast, Bourguiba went through a secular and civilian education and attended the most prestigious academic institutions that Tunisia and France had to offer. Whereas other Arab leaders focused on strengthening their armed forces, Bourguiba sustained very high levels of education spending during his tenure. Although Ben Ali presided over a decline of schools and universities, the Tunisian education system remained good by regional standards.¹⁸

In contrast to many other countries in the region, Tunisia's military has not played a major role in the country's politics, society and economy, either. This was partly due to Bourguiba's aversion to "the militarization of society that has occurred in most other Arab states."¹⁹ Under Ben Ali, whose mistrust and fear of the armed forces bordered on paranoia, the military was sidelined even further and increasingly balanced by a substantially upgraded security apparatus. Ben Ali's police state was key to his regime's repression of any form of dissent. However, the balance and competition between security apparatus and military also meant that neither was able to hijack the democratic transition. In contrast to Egypt, where an almighty military controls not only the country's politics but also its economy and large parts of its media,²⁰ neither police nor military were sufficiently powerful to shape post-2011 developments without compromising. Neither was any other actor. Even more importantly, all political forces were actually willing to compromise.

Finally, Tunisia stands out due to its strong civil society. This includes most prominently the Tunisian General Trade Union (UGTT), which has been playing an active role in Tunisian politics since the struggle for independence. Notably, it teamed up with the Tunisian employers' organisation, the Tunisian Human Rights League and the National Order of Tunisian Advocates to initiate the National Dialogue, and thus played a key role in safeguarding Tunisia's transition at one of its most critical junctures. Meanwhile, the Tunisian Human Rights League is widely considered to be the oldest independent human rights organisation in the Arab world.²¹ With the Tunisian Women's Association for Democracy (ATFD) and the

¹⁷ Ibid. 139.

¹⁸ Masri, *Arab Anomaly*, 2017, 244ff.

¹⁹ Wright, *Next Friend*, 1982, 22.

²⁰ Springborg, *Military Rule in Egypt*, 2017, 478.

²¹ Alexander, *From Stability to Revolution*, 1997, 43.

Tunisian Women's Association for Research on Development (AFTURD) having been among the strongest independent associations before 2011, Tunisian civil society also features a strong feminist component. In December 2015, civil society's role in the Tunisian transition was acknowledged with the Nobel Peace Prize for the National Dialogue Quartet, which was awarded for enabling an "alternative, peaceful political process at a time when the country was on the brink of civil war."

IV. Challenges to the Tunisian transition

Pointing to these various actors and factors that have helped Tunisia to succeed so far is not to say that post-2010 Tunisia did not and does not face major obstacles. The country may have the most democratic and liberal political system in the region now,²² but its political transition remains a highly fragile process. Notably, crucial parts of the new constitution, such as the creation of a constitutional court, have yet to be implemented. Although police violence was a major factor driving the Tunisian uprising, abusive behaviour from the security services ranging from harassment to torture is having a comeback. The rise of insufficiently regulated police unions pressuring judges and politicians prevents the sanctioning of those responsible and obstructs more serious security sector reform.²³

Meanwhile, Tunisian parties tend to be weak, lack formal structures and face questions about their internal democratic processes. Elections have produced a fragmented party spectrum, a trend that continued in 2019, when 20 parties entered parliament along with 12 independents. Ennahda, the biggest party, won less than 20 percent of the vote. Moreover, none of the slightly more established parties' candidates made it to the

second round of the 2019 presidential elections. They lost to Kais Saied, who ran as an independent and went on to win the second round in a landslide, and Nabil Karoui, a media tycoon whose party had been created just months before.

Tunisians' frustration with the existing political class is a consequence of the political gridlock during much of the past decade. When the current prime minister Hichem Mechichi formed a new government dominated by technocrats in September 2020, it was the third one within one year and the ninth since the fall of Ben Ali. The incapacity to form and maintain stable governments has undermined efforts to tackle the most pressing challenges the Tunisian transition is facing. The transition to democracy has raised high expectations within the population, but so far it has not only failed to satisfy peoples' hopes for improved living standards, but presided over their further decline. Unemployment has risen, public services from garbage collection to transportation have deteriorated and going out at night has become more dangerous.

Tunisians' discontent with their socio-economic conditions and the new democratic system's perceived inability to deliver is a fundamental threat to democracy. Since 2011, various protests – and indeed self-immolations reminiscent of the one that triggered the original uprising – have shaken the country. And all existing problems have been further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the economic downturn it has caused.

Today, a sizable part of the population feels that things were better before 2011. The share of the population that feels the country is moving in the wrong direction is growing.²⁴ Even though the Ben Ali regime is largely

²² Freedom House, *Democracy in Crisis*, 2018.

²³ Grewal, *Tunisia's Police Unions*, 2018.

²⁴ International Republican Institute, *Public Opinion Survey of Tunisians*, 2017.

discredited, an increasing number of Tunisians perceive it to be a lesser evil compared to the current system. Others think that the problems before 2011 were not so much due to the system of governance but rather the massive corruption of the Ben Ali regime. Following this logic, it would have been sufficient to remove the top of the system, whereas changing the system itself was less crucial. Such notions encourage and help those who prefer more authoritarian leadership.

These political forces are on the rise again. This is most notably illustrated by the career of Abir Moussi, a former senior official of Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally party. She has consistently defended the pre-2011 order, pursues an anti-liberal agenda and advocates changes to the constitution that would undermine Tunisia's democratic institutions. She also seeks to ban Ennahda, a move that would provoke a major backlash from conservative Muslims and undermine the very basis of the Tunisian transition – the culture of cooperation and compromise between a comparably moderate strand of Islamism and both progressive and conservative secular political forces. And while Moussi's Free Destourian Party only has 17 out of 217 seats in parliament for the time being, she has been leading in the polls quite consistently in 2020, reaching 36 percent in September 2020.²⁵

V. EU support for the Tunisian transition

In spite of their rhetorical commitment to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law, the EU and its member states entertained rather cordial relations with Ben Ali and other autocrats in the region. Accordingly, their initial reactions to the Arab uprisings were hesitant at best. However, in

their aftermath the EU pledged to “show humility about the past”²⁶ and to more substantially support democratisation processes in its Southern neighbourhood. As other countries in the region backslid into authoritarian rule or descended into conflict, the EU devoted more and more attention and financial assistance to Tunisia, making it the biggest recipient of European support per capita in the world.²⁷

In 2015, the EU also started to negotiate a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Tunisia that would go far beyond existing trade arrangements. This initiative is not uncontroversial within the country though. Scepticism was and continues to be driven by both ideological opposition and a self-preservation drive of economic elites seeking to maintain a status quo that is favourable to their interests. However, it is also informed by pragmatic concerns in parts of the business community, the trade unions and civil society. They fear that their economy is not ready for further trade liberalisation with the EU and that entire business sectors are at risk of being pushed out of business by EU competitors should they get easier access to the Tunisian market. At the same time, the lack of freedom of movement for Tunisians potentially impedes on their businesses' ability to offer goods and services on EU markets.

The DCFTA is supposed to protect the Tunisian economy as it is going to be asymmetric and progressive. The idea is that the EU will open its own market immediately while Tunisia does so progressively and will have the right to secure exceptions in sensitive and fragile sectors. However, the subsidies for European farmers in the context of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) distort the level playing field in sectors in which Tunisian

²⁵ Realites, *Le PDL passe de 28% à 36%, 2020*.

²⁶ Füle, *Recent Events in North Africa*, 2011.

²⁷ Bobin, *Turbulences régionales*, 2019.

businesses could be competitive on European markets. The EU's limited ability to make meaningful concessions on agriculture was illustrated by its plan to unilaterally increase quotas for tariff-free olive oil imports from Tunisia in 2015. The plan was met with major opposition in Southern EU member states who are Tunisia's main competitor in this sector. As a result, this unilateral liberalisation remained limited in scope, putting the EU's ability and willingness to genuinely liberalise trade in agricultural products with Tunisia in question. On top of that, Tunisian trust in European intentions is limited as a result of previous experiences, for example the Ben Ali regime having granted major tax breaks to European corporations or having sold concessions for the extraction of raw materials substantially under value.

Rebuilding trust is a key challenge. Europe and the EU tend to have a better reputation than other global actors, but many Tunisians think the Europeans should be doing more to support them and feel the promises made in 2011 were not met. At the same time, resentment to the conditions that the EU and other external actors attach to their assistance is on the rise. Notably, the demand to downsize Tunisia's public sector is feared to increase social hardships in the short to medium term, especially if such reforms are not combined with major public and private investments

and the improvement of basic public health, education and welfare services. However, Tunisia lacks the means for such action. Moreover, the very principle of policies being imposed from abroad is increasingly contested as well. Meanwhile the EU is taking issue with Tunisia's slow implementation of structural reforms. It also fears that additional financial assistance may not be used effectively due to a limited "absorption capacity" on the Tunisian side.²⁸

V. Conclusion

Tunisia has the potential to become an affluent and well-governed democratic state and a lot has been achieved over the past decade. However, major challenges remain and things can still go terribly wrong. The post-2011 political system has so far failed to meet the high expectations that it had raised within the population, and the political forces that would like to return to the old ways are on the rise. Tunisia might need – and it certainly deserves – more external support, especially when it comes to overcoming its domestic socio-economic challenges. Europe is already doing a lot, but it might have to rethink its approach and should make an even more substantial effort. Doing so is in its own interest: Less than 70 kilometres separate Italy from Tunisia. Tunisia's problems could quickly become Europe's problems should the transition fail.

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²⁸ Debuysere, *Should the EU do more*, 2019.

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Zouhir Gabsi

Tunisian youth: Demands for dignity in the context of challenging socio-political and economic upheaval

I. Introduction

Tunisian youths are a significant component of the Tunisian society. Demographically, youth in the age bracket of 15-30 years represents 30 percent of the total population.¹ This high number, or 'youth bulge,' puts pressure on the Tunisian government to cater for youths' needs and aspirations. The Arab Spring, which was ignited in 2010 by a youth named Mohamed Bouazizi, was an opportunity for Tunisians, mostly the young, to breathe the air of freedom after the two draconian regimes of Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

However, apart from the well-appreciated freedom of expression and association, the Arab Spring's anticipated promises were unmet, and the youth were among the losers. The sudden political thirst for democracy made Tunisia an arena for political infighting and corruption. Despite the youth's early engagement with politics, this led them to distrust partisan politics and made many, especially the uneducated, attempt clandestine migration in a desperate attempt to flee from unemployment and its attendant poverty and harsh conditions. But they end up, sadly, washed away on the shores of the little Italian island of Lampedusa. It is estimated that 56 percent of those in the 18-29 age bracket have considered emigrating.²

Such a dramatic state of affairs exposes the years of Tunisia's economic mismanagement and marginalisation of youth. Under Ben

Ali's regime, Tunisia was considered a nation with an emerging robust economy, mainly by outside commentators. However, it was the regime's insidious manipulation of economic figures and data, especially youth unemployment figures, that presented a glossy image of the country.³ Ultimately, Ben Ali's regime is not solely accountable for such conditions. It was the neoliberal model of the economy that had been imposed on Tunisia since the 1980s that left few opportunities for Tunisia to compete with the international 'free' market global economy making Tunisia – with its colossal debts – acquiescent to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank's policies.

Today, about ten years since the December 2010 revolution, the country's debts have not been utilised to benefit ordinary Tunisians. The infrastructure of Tunisia has worsened, and instances of corruption scandals have been reported daily on private television networks, coupled with many instances of violence and petty crime against vulnerable people, such as young women. Young people did not benefit from the Arab Spring, as one third of graduates are still unemployed where 40.8 percent are female graduates.⁴ This has had a negative socio-cultural impact on the youth as the age at which to start a family has been delayed to their early forties. They wait for employment or under-employment opportunities that enable them to have a dignified existence. This period of waiting is referred to, ironically, as the "waithood" stage.⁵

¹ Gabsi, *Tunisia's Youth: Awakened Identity and Challenges post-Arab Spring*, 2017.

² Arab Barometer V, *Tunisia Country Report*, 2019.

³ Masri, *Tunisia: An Arab Anomaly*, 2017, 35.

⁴ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Tunisia Country Report 2016*, 2016.

⁵ Dhillon and Yousef, *Generation in Waiting: The Unfulfilled Promise of Young People in the Middle East*, 2009.

Tunisian youths' living standard expectations have changed with time, especially with the influence of globalisation. The needs and wants of a young Tunisian growing up in the 80s were vastly different from those of today's youth. Peer pressure to dress well, physical appearance and having the latest gadgets in the social context of a disappearing middle class and globalisation have put unbearable financial pressure on individuals and families. The division between the haves and the have-nots has never been greater, especially in the marginalised northern and western regions of the country. Most inhabitants of these forgotten regions suffer from unspeakable poverty and poor housing and infrastructure. There is an almost daily unfolding tragedy about people's experience and suffering. One such recent example is the death of a ten-year-old girl, who fell through an uncovered ground hole while collecting plastic bottles to help her mother earn an income.⁶ The local council and the Ministry of Equipment, Housing and Infrastructure have blamed each other for the incident.

Before endeavouring to examine the Tunisian youth constituency, one needs to define what one means by 'youth'; is it merely a stage in one's life defined solely by age, or is it a social construction? The answer to that question lies with Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist and public intellectual, who sees youth as a social construct, since depicting youth with a broad stroke solely based on age is not only dangerous because it excludes other youths, but it does not account for the individualisation and social generations of youth. The latter are defined not by age, but by shared social, economic and political experience.⁷ Young people's experiences are also determined according to gender, age, race and class; but the social generation

perspective sees youth across the globe as experiencing different but similar outcomes. According to Woodman and Wyn, the social generation perspective helps to follow how opportunities have been formulated and confirmed through time.⁸

Hence, the Tunisian youth constituency, as in many parts of the world, is not homogenous. In sociological terms, there is a continuum with its specific variables such as class, the underclass, religiosity, urban or rural location and the significance of cultural capital in shaping the youth's upbringing and prospects. In terms of religiosity, there are youths who are non-practising, secular, fundamentalist, Sufi and Salafist. Therefore, one needs to consider all of these variables in discussing youth so that the analysis can be more encompassing and inclusive. This article aims to discuss the factors affecting the socio-political makeup of Tunisian youth and whether, a decade since the revolution; the Tunisian youth have reaped the fruit of the revolution. It will address Tunisia's economic and political situation, which is directly linked to the youth's political identity. The article also discusses the youth's hybrid identity, resulting from the impact of the "glocal" culture facilitated by the "Facebookisation" of Tunisia, where youth have been drawn to social media platforms for political dissent and escapism.

II. Tunisia, liberal democracy and neo-liberalism

Tunisia has attempted to embrace the ethos of liberal democracy with limited success. Although positive outcomes have been achieved through the Western style of liberal democracy, such as a low rate of poverty in Tunisia, which has dropped from 20.1 percent

⁶ Barakat, *ḥādītha suqūṭ ṭīflah bi-qanāt lil ṣarfa al ṣiḥḥi taṣghul al ra'y al'ām bi-Tūnis (The Accident of a Child Falling into a Sewage Canal Occupies Public Opinion in Tunisia)*, 2020.

⁷ Pruitt, *Youth, Politics, Participation in a Changing World*, 2017.

⁸ Woodman and Wyn, *Youth and Generation: Rethinking Change and Inequality in the Lives of Young People*, 2015.

⁹ The World Bank, *Tunisia Poverty Assessment 2015*, 2016.

in the 1980s to 4.1 percent in 2000,⁹ the real growth has benefited mainly the country's more urbanised cities.¹⁰ The neoliberal model of economy imposed on Tunisia in the 1980s has had devastating sociological and economic effects. However, it is not the sole reason for the disengagement of youth. According to Francis Fukuyama, "contemporary liberal democracies have not solved the problems with thymos (soul) – the part of the soul that craves recognition of dignity."¹¹ The demand for dignity was one of the main drivers of the Arab Spring. Bouazizi's self-immolation in December 2010 after the confiscation of his cart by the local police was a desperate plea for recognition. The authorities' refusal to account for the seizure of his vegetable cart was interpreted by Bouazzi as the annulment of his identity as a human. He felt insignificant, a feeling that fuelled and mobilised protests and sit-ins, not just in Tunisia, but also in other Arab countries.

The title of an article published in *The Guardian*, "Neoliberals, not Islamists, are the real threat to Tunisia," also identified the neoliberal model as the cause of the worsening of Tunisia's economic situation.¹² This view has been adopted by many Arab Spring commentators.¹³ However, as stressed earlier, neoliberalism cannot bear sole responsibility for Tunisia's dysfunctional economy. The extent and gravity of the corruption of politicians and Tunisian institutions is undeniable. When young people experience corruption and nepotism, mostly as unemployed graduates, the feeling of resentment increases. They are further alienated from the state, which "was supposed to

uphold the social contract with its citizenry but instead allowed the plundering of the country's riches by a small clique."¹⁴ The youth's sense of disengagement was shown in the spring of 2013, when almost half of the unemployed youth had given up seeking work and 94 percent were registered with their local employment office.¹⁵ The high number of unemployed youth is often attributed to the term 'youth bulge,' a term that has been 'twisted' to serve the ideological purposes of the US Central Intelligence Agency to ensure that implementing measures such as birth control in the MENA region works in favour of Western powers.¹⁶ Youth apathy towards the political situation in Tunisia heralds socio-cultural and political realities.

III. Tunisian youth: Politics and socio-cultural realities

Youth protests have gone through two phases; the 2010-2011 protests differ from those occurring post-2011. In the former, the youth demanded recognition and dignity, while in the latter they demanded answers to general socio-economic grievances. This is echoed in the new slogans: "the people are tired, the new Trabelsi are here," "the people want a new revolution," "*dégage!*" (go away!), "the revolution has been stolen, where is the revolution?"¹⁷ In Hamid Dabashi's words, "the Arab Spring has altered the very DNA of the region's geopolitics".¹⁸ The Tunisian youth realised in 2011 that an ageing parliament and a coalition of Nidaa Tunis and al-Nahdha had hijacked their revolution. With these two in power, the youth were driven back into the margins of society despite attempts

¹⁰ Gabsi, *Tunisia's Youth: Awakened Identity and Challenges post-Arab Spring*, 2017.

¹¹ Ibid. 5.

¹² Kennard, *Neoliberals, not Islamists, are the Real Threat to Tunisia*, 2012.

¹³ Temimi, *Symposium on Youth*, 2012; Kaboub, *The End of Neoliberalism? An Institutional Analysis of the Arab Uprisings*, 2013; Kalaycioglu, *The European Union and Neoliberal Governmentality: Twinning in Tunisia and Egypt*, 2015; Gabsi, *Tunisia's Youth: Awakened Identity and Challenges post-Arab Spring*, 2017.

¹⁴ Honwana, *Youth and Revolution in Tunisia*, 2013.

¹⁵ Ben Hafaiedh William, *Tunisia: Beyond the Ideological Cleavage: Something Else*, 2015.

¹⁶ Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of The Arab Uprising*, 2013.

¹⁷ Santinti, *Limited Statehood in Postrevolutionary Tunisia Citizenship, Economy and Security*, 2018, 48.

¹⁸ Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, 2012, 228.

by civil society organisations (CSOs) to woo them back to the political arena through incentives such as participation in international conferences, which somewhat reduced their marginalisation. The CSOs' activities "revolve around democratisation and focus on ideas and practices of citizenship as a set of social, political, and economic rights and duties."¹⁹ These civil societies, through external funding and tutelage, encourage and foster the youth's ability to be potential business people and ingrain in them Western values of democracy and pluralism.²⁰

Youth engagement with international bodies hinges on economic concerns for three reasons.²¹ The first reason is apparent, as youths need this international exposure to seek funding to support their entrepreneurial projects. The second reason deals with their lack of faith in the state, where decision-making is still in the hands of economic giants who have excluded young people in the past. The third reason concerns the feeling of abandonment, intensified by a debilitated economy and socio-economic inequality. The state's response to address the disengagement of these youths is through policing; this encourages youths to adopt the extreme rhetoric of the Islamic State, which "is not necessarily gaining ground as an alternative religious imagination but as what may feel like the only chance for integration into a collective."²² Despite the CSOs' attempts to alleviate the plight of the Tunisian youth, their efforts fall short of helping the majority of youths still chained to the NEET acronym (Not in Education, Employment or Training). CSOs'

motto of youth capacity-building has been proven to be uninclusive, as "it focuses primarily on selected urban youths who claim to speak on behalf of the majority, including the uneducated, under-class, and rural youths."²³

Changes in youth attitudes to politicisation reflect a new consciousness elicited and influenced by globalisation. Due to its inherent openness, globalisation has helped Tunisian youths to share views and new political realities. However, the homogeneity of globalisation has also contributed to the creation of new identities detached from local communities.²⁴ A nation's most important components, in terms of political identity, are found in language and culture.²⁵ It is sharing common human history, culture and language that defines the formation of identities.²⁶ However, research into Tunisia's youth identity constituency has received uneven attention. While some researchers have focused on Salafism in Tunisia, with a plethora of studies on the subject, only a few studies have concentrated on youth identity and exclusion. Most of this research emanates from projects by Carolina Viviana Zuccotti et al. (Food and Culture Association), and others funded by some European institutes.²⁷ These reports offer solutions to encourage Tunisian youths' active citizenship and meet demands for more inclusive policies. However, the World Bank, along with the EU, IMF, US and the UN, ironically promote the neoliberal agenda, and are "strong supporters and financers of neoliberal policies and economic adjustment programs implemented by the Tunisian and

¹⁹ Boutieri, *Jihadists and activists: Tunisian youth five years later*, 2015, para.12.

²⁰ Ibid. para. 29.

²¹ Aydogan and Yildirim, *The Economic and Political Dissatisfaction behind Tunisia's Protests*, 2018.

²² Ibid. para. 39.

²³ Gabsi, *Tunisian Youth as Drivers of Socio-Cultural and Political Changes: Glocality and Effacement of Cultural Memory?*, 2020.

²⁴ Woodward, *Identity and Difference*, 1997.

²⁵ Herder, *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, 1969.

²⁶ Poole, *Nation and Identity*, 1999.

²⁷ Zuccotti et al., *Rural Migration in Tunisia: Drivers and Patterns of Rural Youth Migration and its Impact on Food Security and Rural Livelihoods in Tunisia*, 2018; Kamel and Seli, *Realizing Youth Potential in the Mediterranean Unlocking Opportunities*, 2018.

Egyptian governments since the 1980s.”²⁸ These economic programmes do not take account of certain realities and are therefore oblivious to problems such as corruption, to which Tunisia loses an annual USD 3bn.²⁹

With a frail economy worsened by political infighting and corruption, young Tunisians have searched for ways to escape these harsh realities, and have turned *en masse* to social media platforms such as Facebook to express their political dissidence and recourse for space and escapism. They have acquired a culture of their own, a hybrid culture, which is considered one of the new manifestations of the Tunisian youth.

IV. Tunisian youth and cultural hybridity

In attempting to understand Tunisian youth, early studies fail to consider the youth's identity, intergenerational conflict and the psychological pressures that result from globalisation and a changing world. I have explored previously how Tunisian youths have experienced a political awakening enhanced by the freedom of expression and association.³⁰ This awakening was short-lived and subdued by political infighting, and did not fulfil the promises of the revolution. Some informants have expressed their frustration and dismay with the revolution, stating that Tunisia, for them, is only a “geographical place,” and that on each day “one wakes up with a good dream that dies by sunset.”³¹ The youth's daily challenges range from the absence of essential commodities such as public transport, and the diminishing purchasing power. However, my research has surveyed mainly university

students, representing one small constituent; the unskilled, the uneducated and those belonging to the under-class are left voiceless.

The urban and rural youth divide in social, economic, and political terms became more apparent in post-Arab Spring Tunisia. Tunisia's north-western and southern regions have endured unfair distribution of the country's resources and infrastructure, and have suffered marginalisation and social exclusion. The old regime and current government still favour the urban, the northern and eastern sides of the country and remain oblivious to the rest of the country. This divide became the topic of rap music; for instance, Balti, a Tunisian rapper, sang about rural migration to the capital city Tunis and stated that “when I was young, I thought, we don't exist on the map [of Tunisia]”.³² Most rural youths, mainly men, had no choice but to migrate to major cities to seek work and to further their studies. This migration not only creates a disequilibrium in the male-to-female ratio, which negatively affects marriage prospects, but they also often face harsh economic and social discrimination, mainly due to their accent and place of origin.³³

Political commentators who claim that the Tunisian youth are disinterested in partisan politics are overstating the case. Although their views do not translate into electoral results, they are expressed mainly in social circles like the family, friends, social media and cafés. The lack of having or being given a voice parallels the frustrations expressed by Bou Azizi and others, that they are not treated like humans in what is perceived as a patriarchal society where children cannot

²⁸ İşleyen, *The European Union and Neoliberal Governmentality: Twinning in Tunisia and Egypt*, 2015, 674.

²⁹ Al-Hamidi, *Tunis: 3 Milyaraat dollar khasair sanawiyah bisabab al-fasaad (Tunisia: \$ 3 billion in annual losses due Corruption)*, 2020.

³⁰ Gabsi, *Tunisia's Youth: Awakened Identity and Challenges post-Arab Spring*, 2017.

³¹ Ibid. 14.

³² Gabsi, *The Language of Hip Hop and Rap in Tunisia: Sociocultural Mirror, Authenticity Tool, and Herald of Change*, 2020.

³³ In my fieldwork visits to the southern region, especially the remote Berber towns of Chninni and Douiret, many of the young women in the late 30s and early 40s expressed their desire to get married and have a family, but opportunities for finding prospective partners are rare due to the migration of men to the major cities.

express themselves or participate in discussions in the presence of adults. This perception needs to be qualified with further research into the structure of the Tunisian family unit. The Tunisian educational system, especially at the secondary level, does not foster critical thinking in the same way as it is practised in the West.

Religiously, Tunisian youths show interesting and wide variations in Islamic practices, attitudes and knowledge of the foundations of the Islamic faith. On the spectrum of belief, there are youths who consider themselves as Muslims by culture, moderates, fundamentalists and Salafists. Salafism is the most studied form of religiosity. It has been described as “a tidal wave that crashed into Tunisia from the Wahhabi Gulf without warning”.³⁴ A Tunisian Salafi in Tunisia adopts a radical way of life and interpretation of post-seventh century Islam, shunning other *madhāheb* (legal schools) to be connected directly with the *al-salaf al-sālah* (the righteous or pious ancestors).³⁵ The Tunisian Salafi is often depicted as someone who wears a *thawb* (robe), uses the Islamic greeting and is apathetic towards politics.

Most Salafists reside in impoverished areas, such as Bab al Khadhra, Sidi Bouzid, Kairouan, Sajnan and Menzel Bourguiba. The marginalisation of youth is not solely linked to poverty and lack of formal education, as many Salafists are educated and belong to the upper-middle class.³⁶ Jihadi Salafists found a niche among disenfranchised youths because the latter were frustrated with the state’s hypocrisy, “centralized state power,

and an older generation of political leaders perceived as largely incompetent and neglectful.”³⁷ By rejecting even the Muslim party, they are creating their own subculture, which “represents an almost anarchist haven for youths who wish to stand out from the pack, quickly circumvent institutionalized obstacles and upend longstanding hierarchies”.³⁸

Culturally, combining the local with the global relies heavily on technology in the media environment. However, technology itself does not account for youth behaviour. Numerous past scholars have treated media content as a type of injection or as a cultivation tool, used to explain behaviour.³⁹ The cultivation concept explains how media content creates its own mythology on various topics, such as women or crime, which forms people’s views and reactions to their own social circumstances.⁴⁰ Globalisation supports international markets, which contribute to a borderless world but can be detrimental to state power.⁴¹ According to Hasan Kosebalaban, there is often a lack of discussion on the effect of globalisation on social relations and social identities.⁴² Globalisation becomes a process in which social relations become “less tied to territorial frameworks,”⁴³ and “territorial distance and territorial borders hold limited significance in these circumstances: the globe becomes a single ‘place’ in its own right”.⁴⁴

Hence, globalisation moves the existing relations between states to a different level, where the societal forces within every state communicate with each other on a global scale.⁴⁵ Aided by globalisation, national politics can spill out to the international arena,

³⁴ Marks, *Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism: Understanding the Jihadi Current*, 2013, 107.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 108.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 110.

³⁷ Marks, *Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism: Understanding the Jihadi Current*, 2013, 111.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 111.

³⁹ Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*, 1985, 15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 15.

⁴¹ Kosebalaban, *The Impact of Globalization on Islamic Political Identity: The Case of Turkey*, 2005, 28.

⁴² *Ibid.* 28.

⁴³ Scholte, *Global Capitalism and the State*, 1997, 431.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 431.

⁴⁵ Kosebalaban, *The Impact of Globalization on Islamic Political Identity: The Case of Turkey*, 2005, 28.

which may “infect international politics.”⁴⁶ That is to say, identity may be shaped positively or negatively by globalisation. On the one hand, it may expand an individual’s consciousness to become part of the global village, or it may work conversely by expanding political boundaries and enhancing political conflicts and regional instabilities.⁴⁷

V. Youth politics in comparative perspective

Youth disengagement and apathy towards politics has been observed and well researched in various countries, such as the UK, US and Australia.⁴⁸ In the US, a considerable study involving 4,000 high school students, conducted by Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox, reveals that most young people were disinterested in politics because of their lack of trust in public officials.⁴⁹ However, this lack of interest in politics does not help them to achieve social change, which occurs through electoral politics, which helps them to have a future.⁵⁰ The students blamed politicians for their selfish and corrupt behaviour. In the Australian context, young people’s disengagement is affected by the high degree of polarisation in politics and by politicians’ behaviour.⁵¹ Additionally, young people are averse to expressing political positions as a consequence of the digital age, where digital fingerprints cannot be easily removed, and because of the lack of privacy. Both

Mats Ekström and Lawless and Fox concur that young people find social media such as Facebook an unsafe environment to post controversial statements for fear of face-to-face confrontations.⁵²

Youth democratic engagement is also viewed through the lens of political talk, which is linked to the youth’s civic commitment.⁵³ Political talk takes different trajectories and contexts when occurring in families, online and on social media such as Facebook. It is worth emphasising that political talk is “understood as a social achievement, related to the exploration, disclosure, and management of self-identities in various social settings and relationships.”⁵⁴ However, even though political talk is a realisation of democracy, it is still clouded by apprehension and fear of losing social values, especially in public settings.⁵⁵ That fear is reduced drastically when youths are engaged in political discussions with their peers and family, because they develop new roles and political self-identities and self-reflections not found when involved with other political organisations.⁵⁶ The youth find that the political discussions on social media platforms threaten rather than confirm their self-identity.⁵⁷ This is mainly evident when expressing controversial opinions that can be easily manipulated and misinterpreted, and misunderstanding becomes difficult to amend.⁵⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid. 28.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 28.

⁴⁸ Bennett, Wells and Rank, *Young Citizens and Civic Learning: Two Paradigms of Citizenship in the Digital Age*, 2009; Vromen, *Constructing Australian Youth Online*, 2011; Chou, *Democracy’s Not for Me: The Lowy Institute Polls on Gen Y and Democracy*, 2013; Collin, *Young Citizens and Political Participation in a Digital Society: Addressing the Democratic Disconnect*, 2015; Lawless and Fox, *Running from Office: Why Young Americans Are Turned Off to Politics*, 2015; Ekström, *Young People’s Everyday Political Talk: A Social Achievement of Democratic Engagement*, 2016; Pruitt, *Youth, Politics, Participation in a Changing World*, 2017.

⁴⁹ Lawless and Fox, *Running from Office: Why Young Americans Are Turned Off to Politics*, 2015.

⁵⁰ Pruitt, *Youth, Politics, Participation in a Changing World*, 2017, 511.

⁵¹ Oliver, *Lowy Poll on Gen Y and Democracy: What’s Going On?*, 2013.

⁵² Ekström, *Young People’s Everyday Political Talk: A Social Achievement of Democratic Engagement*, 2016; Lawless and Fox, *Running from Office: Why Young Americans Are Turned Off to Politics*, 2015.

⁵³ Ekström, *Young People’s Everyday Political Talk: A Social Achievement of Democratic Engagement*, 2016, 1.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 3.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Authors have different approaches to fostering youth engagement, reducing the youth's apathy towards politics and increasing their active citizenship and role in society. For instance, Philippa Collin suggests that youth participation policies need to expand based on multiplicity and pluralism, changes to political institutions and more youth advocacy.⁵⁹ Other authors provide futile quick-fix solutions, such as creating phone applications like "PlayStation for politics" and a "GoRun" to encourage young voters.⁶⁰ Without recourse to these quick fixes, the Tunisian youth could become more involved in politics if they experience government transparency and trust; only then can the youth feel propelled to be involved in formal politics. As stated by Lesley Pruitt, "[y]oung people are not lazy, apathetic, or disconnected from social change. Rather, many youth aspire to leadership and making positive changes to their communities and the world".⁶¹

VI. Conclusion

This article is a short critique of the achievements and trials of Tunisia's youth in post-Arab Spring Tunisia. Almost a decade since the beginning of the 2010 Arab Spring, the Tunisian youth have appreciated the freedom of expression brought by the revolution. However, the revolution did not deliver on its promises to the Tunisian people to offer

dignified living standards and create employment opportunities for Tunisia's biggest human asset – its young constituency. Instead, Tunisia's political and socio-cultural situation has been worsened by the political infighting, corruption and increase in violence, which have obstructed Tunisia's vision to improve the livelihoods of its people.

This article demonstrates that most youth – based on empirical surveys – have expressed a grim outlook on Tunisia's current socio-economic situation, and express a neutral attitude towards partisan politics; their shunning of political participation is mirrored in their lack of support for political campaigns, and ultimately in the voting process. If Tunisia wants to extricate itself from the problems it is facing today, it needs to reengage with its young population. Failure to do this will further drive the youth into the margins of the society, towards idleness and the concomitant violence and despair. Once the government integrates youth into its operational planning, young Tunisians – with their thirst for progress and success – could be the driving force behind a robust economy, unfettered from the reigns of the neoliberal model, and from the weight of international debt. Tunisia needs to reflect inwardly, refocus its vision on its natural and human assets, and utilise these to benefit the country.

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⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Pruitt, *Youth, Politics, Participation in a Changing World*, 2017, 512.

⁶¹ Ibid. 511.

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Kirstie Lynn Dobbs

Civil society as revolutionary diplomats?: Foreign policy after the Arab Spring

I. Introduction

Before the Arab Spring, authoritarian regimes would subvert pressures to democratise by allowing certain civil society groups to organise. This allowance demonstrated a commitment to human rights and political openness. However, governments severely repressed any organisation that was not exclusively organised by pro-regime leaders. Nonetheless, due to institutional changes brought about by the Arab Spring, civil society inserted itself as a significant player in opening up authoritarian regimes – similar to what occurred in Eastern Europe in 1989. This article examines civil society's evolving role in the development of foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a near-decade after the Arab Spring. By focusing on four sets of civil society actors: youth, women's, labour and human rights groups, I argue that civil society initially flourished in its ability to impact foreign policy after 2011. However, this initial optimism faded in 2013 as organisations grappled with increasing authoritarian backlash.

II. Evolution of associational and organisational life after the Arab Spring

Civil society often plays a critical role in the liberalisation of authoritarian regimes by pressuring authorities to cede power and control over public life.¹ Receding power and control opens up space for civil society to flourish. With the increased presence and power of these organisations, these groups should exert more influence over policies, domestic and foreign. However, what we

witness with the aftermath of the Arab Spring was a "civil society choke-out" as regimes across the MENA region slapped tighter restrictions on funding and increased the red tape for groups that were critical of the government.²

Table 1 demonstrates the initial period of openness followed by an increasing stronghold on associational and organisational life. This table displays Freedom House's civil society rights score, which ranges from 0 (low level of civil society rights) to 12 (high level of civil society rights). In the five years preceding the Arab Spring, the average score for all countries in the MENA region was a low score of 3 out of 12. After the Arab Spring in 2011, scores increased in Egypt, Libya, Jordan and Tunisia, leading to an overall MENA regional increase of +1. Optimism was initially rooted in North Africa, where the regional score moved from a 3.2 in 2010 to a 5.4 in 2011 and 6 in 2012. Observers did not witness this same dramatic jump in the Middle East, where the civil rights score declined from 2.25 in 2010 to 2 in 2011. However, starting in 2013, civil society across both North Africa and the Middle East witnessed an authoritarian backlash, resulting in a decline to 3.8 in North Africa by 2020 and 1.75 in the Middle East.

These Freedom House scores reflect the relative impact civil society has had on foreign policy in the MENA region. Civil society groups have been more successful in North Africa, especially in Tunisia. Yet, even in Tunisia, civil society faced a backlash starting in 2014, moving from an almost near-perfect

¹ Cavatorta and Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World*, 2011.

² Roth, *The Great Civil Society Choke-Out*, 2016.

Table 1. Civil society rights in the MENA Region (2005-20)

Year	Algeria	Bahrain	Egypt	Libya	Morocco	Jordan	Syria	Tunisia	Yemen	Average in North Africa	Average in the Middle East	Total MENA average
2005	6	–	3	0	6	–	–	2	–	3	–	3
2006	6	5	2	0	6	5	0	2	3	3	3	3
2007	6	3	2	0	6	5	0	2	3	3	3	3
2008	6	3	2	0	6	5	0	2	4	3	3	3
2009	6	3	2	0	6	4	0	2	4	3	3	3
2010	6	3	2	0	6	3	0	2	3	3	2	3
2011	5	2	5	3	6	3	0	8	3	5	2	4
2012	5	2	5	6	6	4	0	8	2	6	2	4
2013	5	2	4	5	6	3	0	9	3	6	2	4
2014	4	1	4	3	6	3	0	10	3	5	2	4
2015	5	1	4	3	5	4	0	9	3	5	2	4
2016	5	1	4	2	6	4	0	9	3	5	2	4
2017	5	1	2	2	5	4	0	9	3	5	2	3
2018	5	1	2	2	5	3	0	9	3	5	2	3
2019	4	1	1	2	5	3	0	7	3	4	2	3
2020	4	1	1	2	5	3	0	7	3	4	2	3
Average	5	2	3	2	6	4	0	6	3	–	–	–

Scale: 0–12 = Range of civil society rights. 0 = Low level of civil society rights (i.e. low level of associational and organisational rights). 12 = High level of civil society rights (i.e. high level of associational and organisational rights). Source: Freedom House. 2020. Associational and organisational rights variable (0–12 points) of the Freedom in the World Index.

score of 10 in 2014 to 7 by 2019. Furthermore, not every type of civil society organisation has had the same level of influence. Youth groups remain the least impactful on foreign policy despite their active involvement in the Arab Spring protests. Women's groups, labour groups and human rights organisations have had more success influencing policy, but only regarding specific issues. And although human rights groups were emerging as major players in the foreign policy arena, these groups suffered the most during the authoritarian backlash on civil society starting in 2013.

III. Youth groups

Youth groups have been involved at the international level, typically in response to governments pursuing a commitment to an international youth programme. For example, under the dictatorship of Zine Abidine Ben Ali

in Tunisia, the government played a vital role in the passing of the United Nations' "International Year of Youth Resolution." The signatories of this resolution were cementing their commitment to invest in youth through partnerships, increasing participation and increasing cross-cultural understanding. Despite Ben Ali serving as one of the leaders in the construction of this youth-oriented foreign policy, youth were largely ignored and reduced from political processes. Across the MENA region, youth groups have been largely suppressed in the name of maintaining national security and stability.³

Given that youth played a notable role during the Arab Spring protests, there was initial optimism that this demographic would play a key role in policy development. However, this assumption was unfounded, as youth started to return to "normal" participation levels in traditional politics. However, it is not just

³ Hibou, *La Force de l'Obéissance*, 2006.

youth apathy at the ballot box that inhibits youth groups from impacting foreign policy; it is also their lack of a cohesive political agenda. For example, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems in Morocco found that youth groups in the country's southern and interior regions focus on economic development, whereas youth groups in elite coastal areas concentrate on human rights.

Youth efforts have also been sporadic, like in the case of I WATCH in Tunisia, which officially filed a lawsuit against former foreign minister Khemaies Jhinaoui for "ignoring access demand requirements sent by the organization".⁴ I WATCH views the case as a step towards demanding greater transparency and anti-corruption within the foreign ministry. In Egypt, the April 6 Movement attempted to influence the government to block shipments of natural gas from Israel to protest the mistreatment of Palestinians. The Egyptian government halted these natural gas shipments. However, it did not attribute this foreign policy move to pressures exerted by youth groups. This policy was instead a response to Israel violating contractual obligations.⁵ Despite their lack of influence on foreign policy, youth groups are very international. They have capitalised on their ability to communicate and connect via technology transnationally with other youth groups, notably "Otpor!" in Serbia and "Pora!" in Ukraine. Youth groups in North Africa have also sought assistance from international organisations like the Euro-Med Youth Program IV, which aids youth groups in contributing to the development of society and democracy.⁶

IV. Women's groups

Women's groups were active transnationally before the Arab Spring. For example, the Center of Arab Women for Training and

Research (CAWTAR) was created in 1993 to promote transnational ties with women's organisations across the MENA region and within the international community.⁷ Authoritarian contexts also implemented gender reforms to foster majority support. Still, women's groups in general were tightly monitored and controlled. Feminist groups anticipated that the Arab Spring would bring about a liberalisation of women's rights, which would lead to more female-driven influence on foreign policy. However, as with youth, the impact of women's groups on foreign policy has been sporadic, with most of their influence tied to the domestic sphere.

The most successful women's groups have formed transnational ties with groups across the MENA region. For example, the Libyan Women's Platform for Peace (LWPP) developed relations with a coalition of Libyan NGOs, led by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights (CIHR). This civil society coalition was critically outspoken regarding the travel ban of Libyan women under 60 from travelling without a male guardian because it violated international laws and conventions. In 2017, the government in eastern Libya created a travel ban that included women from 18 to 45 years of age from travelling abroad in order to impede women from joining terrorist networks abroad. Due to pressures from eastern Libya's civil society commission, the government temporarily froze this travel ban and agreed to review the law to ensure that it did not violate rights and freedoms. The director of this civil society commission, Abir Mneina, stated that "...if it is not canceled, we are already preparing a legal statement that will be taken to court."⁸

Where women's groups have achieved the most foreign policy success has been in women's rights at the international level.

⁴ Hana, *Tunisia-I Watch to Sue Khemaies Jhinaoui and Tunisia Ambassador to Malta*, 2020

⁵ CNN Wire Staff, *Egyptian Companies Abruptly Halt Gas Shipments to Israel*, 2012

⁶ Churchill, *Youth Work in Tunisia After the Revolution*, 2013,

⁷ Moghadam, *Globalization and Feminism*, 1997.

⁸ BBC, *Libya's Eastern Authority Freezes Women's Travel Ban*, 2017.

Women's groups across the region heavily involved themselves in urging their states to withdraw some of their existing reservations concerning the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). After the Arab Spring, women's groups in Tunisia held sit-ins that led to Tunisia withdrawing its reservations about CEDAW – the first country in the region to do so. In Morocco, women's groups pressured the monarchy to drop two of their reservations. In Egypt, women's groups pressured the government to drop reservations on Article 9. Reservations regarding CEDAW still exist in Bahrain; however, Bahraini women activists increasingly serve a diplomatic role following the Arab Spring. In March 2014, women activists met at the United Nations headquarters in New York to convene on the Millennium Development Goals for Women and Girls. Overall, these efforts show that women have emerged as foreign policy players targetting specific international conventions or treaties.

V. Labour

Labour groups across the MENA region are familiar with being involved in contentious politics, starting with the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s. Some authoritarian regimes would authorise one national labour group. Examples of these state-legitimated groups are the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), Moroccan Workers' Union (UMT), Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), Libya's National Trade Union Federation (NTUF) and the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU), which were all established before the Arab Spring. Many of these groups criticised foreign economic policy before 2011, such as structural adjustment programmes imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the international economic

community. They continued criticisms of these types of policies after the Arab Spring.

Labour groups were highly involved in the Arab Spring protests, which they saw as an opportunity to progress workers' rights.⁹ Issues arising out of the Arab Spring, such as increased migration, have also centred labour groups in discussions surrounding the entry of foreign migrants into the domestic labour market. For example, Syrians seeking work and refuge in Jordan have brought new challenges: increasing employment, ensuring decent working conditions and incorporating Syrian workers into the labour market.¹⁰ Many Jordanian labour NGOs and trade unions worked with the International Labour Organization on a study that provided recommendations for addressing the three challenges mentioned above, which included foreign policy issues such as enhancing controls on migrant workers entering Jordan.

Since 2011, labour groups have coordinated across transnational boundaries in pursuit of a common goal. For example, the Arab Democratic Trade Union Forum (ADTUF) was formed in September 2011 on behalf of 15 independent trade unions from 10 Middle Eastern countries. The ADTUF sought to strengthen independent trade unionism across the region. However, beginning in 2013, independent labour organisations have found it increasingly difficult to apply for official status, especially in military-dominant regimes like Algeria and Egypt. Labour unions were further repressed in 2016 when authoritarian regimes throughout the region sought to strengthen their control of civil society. For example, Mohammed VI in Morocco suppressed strikes organised by the Moroccan Workers' Union and refused to engage in dialogue. This response countered the regime's initial allowance of the labour strikes in 2011.¹¹ In Algeria, the Arab Trade Union

⁹ Hartshorn, *Labor's Role in the Arab Uprisings and Beyond*, 2016.

¹⁰ Razzaz, *Jordanian Workers, Migrant Workers and Refugees*, 2017.

¹¹ Connel, *Workers Wage Successful Nationwide Strike*, 2016.

Confederation (ATUC) was blocked from entering the country while travelling to Western Sahara. This blockade was puzzling given that Algeria was supportive of Western Sahara's self-determination movement, which was being mediated by the ATUC.

The UGTT in Tunisia emerges as the only labour union that has successfully influenced domestic and foreign policy. Intriguingly, the UGTT has well-defined foreign policy interests. A spokesman for the UGTT, Kheireddine Bouslah, commented on the Libyan Civil War and Western intervention in 2011 by stating "we support the decisions of the Arab League and the UN Security Council to impose a no-fly zone."¹² Still, the UGTT did oppose the dispatch of foreign troops into Libya. The UGTT also supplied relief efforts to Libyan refugees at the border. More recently, the union made a formal statement criticising President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Specifically, the UGTT stated that this recognition on behalf of the United States was a declaration of war. The Tunisian foreign ministry responded in a separate statement that Trump's decision "seriously threatens to undermine the foundations of the (Israeli-Palestinian) peace process."¹³

The UGTT also called on political parties to develop a law that criminalises normalisation with Israel,¹⁴ further exercising its voice in foreign policy matters in 2020 with the US military's announcement that it is considering deploying the US Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFAB) to Tunisia to stabilise possible fallout from the Libyan conflict. The UGTT not only issued a statement that was vehemently opposed to the deployment of SFAB in Tunisia. It also called on legislators to write a new initiative that would halt

any efforts that sought to drag "Tunisia into any alliances as all such alliances do not serve the interests of the country."¹⁵ The UGTT also stated that it would work with "patriotic forces to oppose by all means the use of our country as a springboard for US, Turkish or other types of interventions in Libya."¹⁶ Many political parties in Tunisia echo the sentiments of the UGTT.

VI. Human rights

Human rights organisations developed later than other civil society organisations across the MENA region. The repression of human rights groups has also been more severe than of youth, women's and labour organisations given their focus on civil and political rights. As a result, authoritarian leaders severely hampered human rights groups' foreign policy influence prior to the Arab Spring, but the Arab Spring brought new opportunities for human rights groups to exert influence. Human rights organisations formed new cross-national alliances with groups in neighbouring countries to accomplish this goal. For example, "The Platform" was created in Libya, consisting of 16 organisations, including the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies. Transnational groups such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the American Bar Association opened or expanded their offices across the region,¹⁷ and the United Nations opened its first human rights office in Tunisia.

Human rights groups exert the most foreign policy influence in countries that overthrew authoritarian regimes due to the Arab Spring. For example, the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) worked directly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to include human rights in Tunisia's new foreign policy agenda.

¹² Toensing, *Tunisian Labour Unions Reflect Upon Revolt*, 2011.

¹³ Reuters, *Tunisian Labour Union Says Jerusalem Decision a 'Declaration of War'*, 2017.

¹⁴ Tunis Afrique Presse, *Tunisia: Tunisia Lifts All Reservations on CEDAW, Maintains General Declaration*, 2019

¹⁵ The Arab Weekly, *Tunisian Politicians*, 2020.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Harrelson-Stephens and Callaway, *You Say You Want a Revolution*, 2014.

This collaboration led to the transitional government ratifying international treaties such as the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearances and the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court. Human rights groups were also very vocal regarding Tunisia's counter-terrorism law passed in 2015, stating that this was particularly repressive and did not allow suspects adequate access to a lawyer during the first 48 hours of custody. This law has since come under review.

Human rights groups suffered the most from the authoritarian backlash that started a mere ten months after the revolution in Egypt. Security forces raided the offices of international human rights groups such as the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute. Egyptian authorities also shut down Freedom House in 2013. In Algeria, the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights remains an "unofficial" organisation after the government implemented a new 2012 law that requires all associations to re-apply for legal status, and visits by international human rights groups continue to be restricted. In Morocco, human rights groups faced a crackdown in 2014 in which the government harassed human rights groups on the premise that they were obstructing the government's counter-terrorism agenda, and the government expelled Amnesty International from the country. In Libya, the government currently requires human rights groups to report to the government their participation in any meetings or conferences outside of the country, which shows that even in the most unstable contexts, the government tries to curtail the international influence of human rights groups.

In other countries, the impact of human rights groups has fluctuated based on evolving crises. For example, the Jordanian government has worked with the UN High

Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in improving the quality of life for Syrian and Palestinian refugees. However, efforts of the UNRWA were curtailed in 2019 when the organisation faced budget cuts due to a lack of US funding. Due to the strain on Jordan's economy, the government also prevented the UNHCR from registering Syrians as asylum seekers. It also halted aid deliveries to Syrians at an unorganised camp on the border between Jordan and Syria.

VII. Conclusion

This article demonstrates that civil society initially flourished after the Arab Spring but has faced a severe backlash throughout most of the region. This trend has resulted in varying foreign policy impacts, with youth groups emerging as the least impactful. Women's, labour and human rights organisations exert a more substantial yet still limited influence on foreign policy. In many cases, the Arab Spring motivated civil society groups to form transnational ties with like-minded groups to pursue a foreign policy agenda. These coalitions would often focus on specific foreign policy issues, like reservations over CEDAW, unfair structural adjustment policies and the adoption of internationally recognised human rights standards.

There are notable exceptions, such as the UGTT in Tunisia, which has seemingly increased its involvement in foreign policy-related issues. Overall, civil society groups in Tunisia have had the most success in impacting foreign policy, given that Tunisia is the only country to have sustained its democratic transition. Tunisia's LTDH emerged as the strongest human rights group across the region. Understanding the impact of Tunisia's successful transition on civil society mobilisation and its influence across the region merits more attention.

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Civil society, social mobilisation and the Arab Spring

I. Introduction¹

The popular uprisings that broke out in late 2010 and early 2011 across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) upended many pre-conceptions regarding popular mobilisation and civil society in the region. Before the uprisings, the role of civil society was viewed in very different terms by different observers. The end of the Cold War had witnessed the renewal and expansion of civil society organisations across the region, which were seen by many external actors as key to democratic political reform in a region long characterised by autocratic rule and the repression of dissent. But no such democratic transformation took place in the decades that followed, which prompted the emergence of much more critical perspectives on Middle Eastern civil society, focusing on its penetration and co-option by authoritarian states, and its paradoxical potential to underpin rather than to challenge those regimes. The Arab Spring appeared to change all of this as popular mobilisation, in thoroughly unexpected fashion, helped to bring about the end of four long-established regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, while threatening to do the same in a number of other countries. The subsequent return to the authoritarian norm of the pre-2011 era across the region has occasioned a revisiting once more of the role of civil society in the MENA region. This article will review these developments in three parts. It will begin with an overview of the expansion of civil society in the post-Cold War region, focusing on its asserted potential to contribute to political reform and democratisation, followed by a more critical set of views on civil society and

the state in the post-Cold War MENA region. The article will then turn to the events of the Arab Spring and will critically review the role of civil society. Finally, it will examine the apparent renewed vigour of civil society in the post-2011 region and will attempt to assess the significance of recent events and their implications for our understanding of the ways in which civil society functions in the region.

II. Civil society in the MENA before 2011

The end of the Cold War saw the emergence of a trend towards political liberalisation across much of the MENA region. This was accompanied by a remarkable growth in civil society activism. According to Sean Yom, the numbers of civil society organisations (CSOs) increased from just 20,000 to 70,000 by the mid-1990s.¹ For many observers, the growth in the scale and scope of civil society was viewed as a positive development with clear democratising potential. The assumption that civil society has a role to play in promoting democratic reform emerged from an understanding of the experience of transition from authoritarian to democratic rule in Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 1980s and early 1990s. From this perspective, an array of voluntary organisations – civic movements, trade unions, religious associations and student groups – came together to put pressure for change on narrowly based authoritarian groups, achieving considerable success. As a result, civil society, defined by Amy Hawthorne as the zone of voluntary associative life beyond family and clan affiliations but separate from the state and the market, became the subject of substantial academic literature, as well as one of the focal

¹ Yom, *Civil Society and Democratization*, 1995, 18.

points of policy-making for international actors.² In particular, the belief that civil society plays a crucial role in the process of democratisation became widespread.

Thus, civil society was seen as a possible remedy for political stagnation. Women's organisations, human rights groups and organisations supporting media freedoms were seen as central to efforts to demands for greater democracy and freedom. The positive understanding of the potential role of civil society as an agent of democratisation in the MENA region filtered into policy-making. The 1995 Euro-Med Partnership initiative of the EU, which had the objective of achieving security in the Mediterranean through political engagement with Arab regimes, prioritised support for civil society activism. The attacks of 11th September 2001 prompted the EU and the US to place even greater priority on the need to promote democratisation in the Arab world. The specific objective of the 2006 European Instrument for Democratisation and Human Rights (EIDHR) was "to strengthen the role of civil society in the promotion of human rights, political pluralism and democratic participation and representation". In 2002, the US established the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) with the promotion of civil society as one of its key objectives.

This optimism was reinforced by the seeming inexorable growth in the number of CSOs across the region. By 2019, there were 90,000 registered associations in Algeria, Egypt had 47,000 and Tunisia had 21,000.³ However, over time it became clear that this growth had not, for the most part, been followed by any substantial change to the underlying authoritarian character of the politics of the region. It also became clear that this was due to key limitations on civil society, which operated on two levels. The first of

these had to do with the social and political environment within which CSOs operated. The second related to the character of CSOs in the region.

The first set of limitations stemmed from the relationship between civil society and the state in most of the Arab world. In the ideal-type model, the state is conceived as a neutral, if not benign, actor overseeing civil society, providing a framework for its operation and resolving any difficulties that flow from this, but otherwise refraining from interference in the affairs of civil society.⁴ Thus, governments set limits on the authority of CSOs over their members and provide a legal framework within which civil society actors can operate. The role of the state is that of impartial arbiter, and no more. However, in the context of the modern Middle East, it is clear that no such role for the state can, or should, be assumed. Rather, the record shows that Middle Eastern states seek to control and co-opt civil society for their own purposes and benefit. This, in turn, has to do with the way in which the space occupied by civil society in the Arab world came into being. Elsewhere, for example in Latin America and Eastern Europe, civil society emerged from below to challenge autocratic and authoritarian regimes. In the MENA region, the growth of civil society typically followed regime-led political liberalisation. Top-down processes of political liberalisation saw the emergence of space for civil society actors to operate. In this way, from the beginning, political elites have shaped and managed the process in order to maximise their own control.⁵

The range of permitted activity varies considerably. Some states outlaw civil society activity altogether. Others permit it under severe restrictions. These may include

² Hawthorne, *Middle Eastern Democracy*, 2004, 3.

³ Durac, *Civil Society*, 2020, 168.

⁴ Rosenblum and Post, *Introduction*, 2002, 9.

⁵ Wiktorowicz, *Civil Society as Social Control*, 2000, 46-47.

permitting NGOs to engage only in social welfare or cultural work, excluding political activities. Intimidation, co-optation, the use of emergency laws, harassment and arrest of those who cross the line into unacceptable political activity are other tactics employed by regimes. Legal codes and what has been described as “administrative repression” create an atmosphere of self-censorship such that CSOs engage only very tentatively with overtly political issues. For example, in Algeria organisations whose objectives are deemed ‘detrimental’ to the struggle for national liberation can be denied authorisation to operate. Even after authorisation, CSOs are carefully monitored, particularly if involved in issues deemed sensitive or controversial, and the government can require the courts to disband an organisation said to be breaking the law. There is no appeal against this process. Morocco has a more permissive legislative provision but when the authorities refuse recognition to a CSO there is no obligation to explain why. In Jordan, on the other hand, the Ministry for Social Development has extensive powers of control over civil society.⁶

However, the limited impact of Arab civil society in influencing the direction of political life is not solely the consequence of regime attempts to control the sector. State penetration and control of civil society is one part of the picture, but it is also important to examine the nature of civil society. In almost every state in the region, CSOs lack autonomy from the state. The degree of state penetration of the sector is underlined by the creation of government-controlled organisations – through which a potentially independent space is “colonised” by the regime. In Yemen before the 2011 uprising, some of the most efficient CSOs had close links to the incumbent regime. In Jordan, it was estimated that up to 60% of civil society consisted of

organisations sponsored by members of the royal family.⁷ Arab regimes sought to contain and co-opt civil society actors all the more because they enjoyed access to scarce foreign funds. Governments knew that defining institutions as NGOs “helps attract dollars”.⁸ Indeed, in an extreme version of this approach to civil society, regimes created “shadow” CSOs that took the name of established organisations both to thwart them and to divert international funding away from them.

Very many of the most active CSOs were and are engaged in different forms of service provision. For the most part, these organisations act not in competition with the regimes in place, but as an extension of them, filling a space vacated by the state due to financial or capacity constraints. Other civil society actors, such as labour unions, chambers of commerce and professional associations, rely on the state to promote their economic interests. These intertwining relationships between state and civil society are also characteristic of the Islamic sector. In many contexts, Islamic CSOs were supported by governments as counterweights to secular opposition forces. In others they originated in conservative religious organisations that had little interest in challenging established governments. In both cases, they act more like partners with the government than challengers to its control. Finally, CSOs have been critiqued as undemocratic in terms of their own structures and procedures as well as their lacking tolerance of competing points of view.

Finally, the expectation that Arab civil society would play a key role in promoting democratic reforms quite often operated on the basis of an implicit or explicit set of assumptions regarding the potential of more “political” CSOs to contribute to the process of

⁶ Durac, *Civil Society*, 2019.

⁷ Cavatorta and Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization*, 2010.

⁸ Carapico, *NGOs, INGOs*, 2000, 14.

democratisation. Groups concerned with the promotion of human rights and the rule of law were, and are, often seen as having a particular role in this regard. However, the assumption that such groups will play this role is flawed on a number of levels. Firstly, as noted above, it is precisely the most political CSOs which have been most closely monitored and controlled by regimes. Strict limitations are placed on what groups may or may not do in the form of explicit legislation and implicit “red lines” that may not be crossed. More overtly, political groups are also vulnerable due to their financial dependency in what are typically poor societies. If they accept support from the regime, it is difficult for them to challenge their patrons. If they accept financial support from international organisations or governments, they are easily depicted as agents of foreign actors pursuing an alien agenda. In this way, they can easily be marginalised. However, liberal or secular CSOs are also quite often caught in an ambivalent stance regarding incumbent regimes. They, like many outside actors, fear the possible effects of significant political reform if it brings to power political forces within their own societies that might then pursue agendas opposed to their own.

This increasingly sceptical view of the democratising role of civil society in the MENA led some commentators to go further and to suggest that, far from challenging entrenched authoritarian regimes, civil society could, paradoxically, operate as a supporting structure for those regimes. For instance, Quintan Wiktorowicz argued that many regimes initiated political liberalisation in the post-Cold War period to enhance legitimacy in a context of prolonged economic crisis. Rather than risk uncontrollable popular protest and collective action that could destabilise the political system, regimes such as those in Egypt,

Morocco, Algeria (before 1992), and Jordan instead offered new, though often limited, opportunities for the creation of civil society organisations. He concluded that civil society was never autonomous from the state, it merely had degrees of independence. Paradoxically, state co-option and control of the civil society space could act as a function of regime power by enabling the emergence of CSOs that could be carefully monitored and managed such that civil society acted not as a conduit for freedom but rather extended control over its citizens.⁹

Vickie Langohr argued that the “Herculean” task of replacing authoritarian regimes was simply too much for CSOs. She suggested that the focus on the democratic potential of civil society diverted attention away from institutions such as political parties which are better suited to challenge such regimes.¹⁰ Hawthorne also observed that optimism regarding the potential of civil society to effect political change was misplaced. Rather, she argued, democratisation in authoritarian contexts could not occur without real politics or without conflict.¹¹

III. Civil society and the Arab Spring

Critical perspectives on the potentially democratising role of civil society in the MENA region appeared to be challenged by the popular mobilisations that swept across the region in late 2010 and early 2011. However, it quickly became apparent that the role of established civil society actors in the anti-regime protest movements was secondary at best. In almost every setting, popular uprisings were led not by civil society groups but instead by youths and activists, who generally were not members of formal parties, entities or networks that had planned the event for years. Rather, the initiative was taken by

⁹ Wiktorowicz, *Civil Society as Social Control*, 2000, 43.

¹⁰ Langohr, *Too Much Civil Society*, 2004, 200.

¹¹ Hawthorne, *Middle Eastern Democracy*, 2004, 19.

ordinary citizens, often mobilising online or through informal channels. These youth-led movements often drew on the support of civil society organisations, but it was the former and not the latter that drove the uprisings.

What was noticeable about the uprisings, which forced the departure of long-standing autocratic leaders in four Arab states and appeared to threaten regime change in several others, was the fact that established civil society groups, including Islamists, were absent from anti-regime mobilisations, particularly in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria. Indeed, such organisations were as surprised as the regime leaders by the initial protests. In Egypt, when members of the Muslim Brotherhood belatedly joined the anti-regime protest movement, they did so having initially adopted a cautious stance, and even then only under pressure from younger members. In Tunisia, the involvement of civil society in the anti-Ben Ali mobilisation was limited at first. While members of CSOs, particularly the labour movement, did participate, they did so in an individual capacity and not as official members of the association to which they belonged.¹² Elsewhere, CSOs were involved in attempts to stabilise new governments in Libya and Yemen, while there was civil society involvement in protests in Morocco and Jordan. However, the driving force behind the uprising came from what Yom refers to as “the realm of informality” – everyday citizens who, linked by technology and united by common norms, managed to challenge dictatorial regimes to the extent that civil society alone had rarely achieved.¹³ In addition, only in Tunisia did the uprisings have a clearly democratic outcome. Indeed, in the case of Egypt, the *Tamarod* movement of 2013 had the opposite effect, calling in the aid of military intervention to overthrow a democratically elected, if deeply unpopular,

Islamist president, with devastating effects on prospects for democracy in that country.

IV. Civil society after the Arab Spring

In the post-uprising setting, with the success of counter-revolutionary forces, civil society has come under attack in several states in the region, further undermining its capacity to mount a challenge to autocratic regimes. The June 2013 “foreign funding” case in Egypt is illustrative of this trend. Some 43 local and foreign staff from international NGOs were sentenced to between one and five years’ imprisonment for a number of infringements, including “managing unlicensed branches” of their organisations, “conducting research, political training, surveys and workshops without licenses,” “training political parties” and “illegally receiving foreign funding”. As H.A. Hellyer notes, this case also perfectly illustrates the consistent hostility of successive Egyptian regimes to civil society – the aid workers were first arrested under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which took power after Mubarak’s resignation; the verdict was issued under Mohammed Morsi’s presidency; and it was upheld in July 2013 following the overthrow of the Islamist president by the military.¹⁴

Subsequent changes to the law in Egypt have tightened restrictions on civil society. The 2015 law on terrorism systematically conflates “crimes committed by violent groups with citizens” and NGO activities when their use of freedom of expression and association collide with official policies. This was followed by the adoption of new legislation in 2017 which introduced draconian restrictions. The new law banned domestic and foreign groups from engaging in human rights work or anything that might harm national security, public order, public morals or public health. The law

¹² Cavatorta, *Arab Spring*, 2012, 77.

¹³ Yom, *Arab Civil Society*, 2015.

¹⁴ Hellyer, *Civil Society*, 2015, 139-140.

established a new state regulatory authority for civil society and a requirement that CSOs secure approval that their work is in line with the government's development and social welfare plans. In Algeria, a new law on associations created additional restrictions on freedom of association, giving the government broad discretion to refuse to register associations and denying them an adequate remedy to repeal any such rejection. The law also gives the government the power to suspend an association's activities or dissolve it on vague grounds, places restrictions on the founders of associations, making it difficult for associations to receive foreign funding, and imposes heavy fines and criminal penalties for members or leaders of informal associations.¹⁵ Turkey witnessed a significant expansion in the scale and scope of civil society after the accession to power of the Islamist AKP in 2002, with a 50 percent increase in the number of associations. However, this has been accompanied by the same strategies of repression and appropriation seen across the MENA region. Between 2016 and 2018, the government confiscated the property of many organisations and shut down 1,600 CSOs, targeting organisations engaged in sensitive political work, such as the rule of law, human rights and minority rights. In addition to overt repression, the government has adopted a policy of co-optation of some elements of civil society, either through the creation of new, government-dependent organisations or close engagement with existing ones.¹⁶

In Yemen and Syria, violent conflict has placed civil society activists at risk to the extent that some groups have ceased to function. In Yemen, those that have continued to operate since the war began in 2015 do so under enormous pressure due to the absence of functioning state institutions. Parties to the conflict have created organisations that are

loyal to them, while many pre-existing organisations have links to particular parties. Pro-peace CSOs are accused of working for the enemy, while the notion of civil society as separate from the state and accountable to local constituencies simply does not apply.¹⁷

This is not to say, however, that popular mobilisation and civil society activism have ceased in the region post-2011. In Iraq, Algeria, Lebanon and elsewhere, mass protest movements, in many ways reminiscent of those of the Arab Spring, have emerged in recent years, demanding the reform or removal of incompetent and repressive regimes. Mass protests broke out in February 2019 in Algeria in response to the announcement by the 82-year-old president Abdelaziz Bouteflika of his candidacy for a fifth term in an office he had already held for twenty years. The movement, known as the *Hirak*, saw millions of predominantly young people march every Friday for several months in a manifestation of discontent that went largely unnoticed by the outside world. Within two months, the *Hirak* had grown so strong that it prompted the chief of staff and deputy minister of defence, Ahmed Gaïd Salah, to demand Bouteflika's resignation. Over the course of the weeks that followed, the protesters secured the arrest of more than 100 senior government officials, as well as businessmen who were close to them, and the postponement of the presidential election on two separate occasions. On 12 December 2019, the voting finally went ahead, with Abdelmadjid Tebboune emerging as the winner.¹⁸

Lebanon, too, witnessed the eruption of massive and sustained popular protests against corrupt and inefficient governance in October 2019. The announcement of new tax measures prompted the mobilisation of

¹⁵ Durac, *Civil Society*, 2020, 173.

¹⁶ Yabanci, *Turkey's tamed*, 2019, 291.

¹⁷ Elayah and Verkoren, *Civil Society During War*, 2019, 496.

¹⁸ ICG, *Algeria: Easing the Lockdown*, 2020.

hundreds of thousands of people from different religious and class backgrounds. The protesters accused the country's political elites of corruption and called for social and economic reforms.¹⁹ As in Iraq, there have been calls for an end to a political system in which power is apportioned along sectarian lines as well as demands for a technocratic government to deal with Lebanon's deepening financial crisis and to address problems in the provision of basic services such as electricity and water. On 29 October 2019, the prime minister, Saad Hariri, resigned.

In Iraq a series of protests swept the country at the beginning of October 2019 in response to government corruption, unemployment and the limited provision of basic services despite the country's enormous oil wealth. As tens of thousands of people took to the streets, the protesters began to call for more far-reaching change – the resignation of the prime minister, new electoral laws and reform of a political system founded on sectarianism. Traditional civil society groups were not at the forefront of the protests. Instead, the protests saw the emergence of new mass movements and activists.²⁰ The protesters secured the resignation of the prime minister following an intervention by the leading Shia cleric in the country, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, in which he criticised the government. The protests were nonetheless suppressed by the use of violence with over 300 people killed and 8,000 injured.

However, as with the protest movements of 2011, the scale and character of the protest movements has limited their effectiveness in securing lasting political reform rather than cosmetic changes at the top. Protest movements in Iraq and Algeria eschewed formal structures and centralised leadership. The Algerian protest movement had a horizontal structure, refusing all forms of hierarchy, and had no official spokespeople, while – as noted by Marsin Alshamry – Iraqi activists 'bemoaned' the absence of clear leadership and unified demands.²¹

V. Conclusion

Civic activism and popular mobilisation in the face of authoritarian rule continue to be an intrinsic component of political life in the MENA region despite persistent regime strategies of containment, co-option and repression. However, assumptions frequently made from outside that such activism and mobilisation are positively correlated with the likelihood of democratic reform misread the underlying realities of the region, as the history of civil society both before and after the Arab Spring reveals. In order to reflect those realities more accurately, it is necessary to discard the normative assumptions associated with the concept of civil society in the MENA region in recognition of the fact that civic activism in the region is not limited to formal organisations and structures, and that civil society, in Carmen Geha's phrase, is best understood as "a space for people to meet, interact and voice their priorities".²²

¹⁹ BBC, *Lebanon Protests*, 2019.

²⁰ Alshamry, *Protestors and Civil Society*, 2020, 13.

²¹ *Ibid.* 15.

²² Geha, *Understanding Libya's Civil Society*, 2016.

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Traditional media, digital platforms and social protests in post-Arab Spring Morocco

I. Introduction

The first wave of the so-called Arab Spring caught everyone by surprise. The ousting of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes within the span of a few weeks gave high hopes for Arab citizens who aspired after democracy and socially responsible governance. The enormity and scope of the events that unfolded gave birth to an abounding plethora of scholarship on Arab revolts. One of the unsubstantiated assertions of first-wave revolts scholarship was that the Internet and social media had a deterministic role in the ignition and momentum of Arab revolts across the MENA region.

In line with Howard Rheingold's thesis, Mohammed Ibahrine argued that the Internet and mobile communication have become remarkably effective channels for political communication due to their flexibility and accessibility. They pose serious threats to the existing Arab authoritarian regimes, where dissent and information flow are strictly controlled.¹ Jeffrey Ghannam traced the development of Internet use in Arab societies leading to the events of 2011.² For him, Internet use in the Arab world led to arguably the most dramatic and unprecedented improvement in freedom of expression, association and access to information in contemporary Arab history. He added that the Internet – through citizen journalism – undermined the powers of the state media, which

had until then controlled much of the news and entertainment content. Rasha Abdulla stated that the Internet offered possibilities for a more democratic life and more citizen participation for Egyptian youth.³ She argued further that social media did not just facilitate political organisation and mobilisation, but it also provided a model for democracy through its inclusive nature, its openness and its egalitarianism. The recent use of social media by Moroccan activists and dissidents triggered a revival of the watchdog function of the media and paved the way for it to act as a *fifth estate* in monitoring political abuses by the regime.⁴ For diverse scholars and commentators, the Arab revolutions were “Facebook” and “Twitter” revolutions.

However, more recent literature on social movements has cast doubt on such arguments, asserting that human agency and wit, not technologies, make revolutions and oust dictators. Pew Research Center, Carnegie Endowment and the United States Institute of Peace, for instance, agree that the role of social media in Arab dissent was more of communication and diffusion than of instigation and execution.⁵ The role of communication technologies in social movements is undeniable. These technologies amplify power, and power can be used in support of democracy or against it. Bouziane Zaid argues that following the Arab Spring, Arab authoritarian regimes became committed to limiting the democratising potential of the

¹ Ibahrine, *Mobile Communication and Sociopolitical Change in the Arab World*, 2008.

² Ghannam, *Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011*, 2011.

³ Abdulla, *The revolution will be tweeted*, 2011.

⁴ Ibahrine, *Social Media and Soft Socio-political Change in Morocco*, 2013.

⁵ Loch and Burkhard, *Online and Traditional Forms of Protest Mobilization: Morocco's Rif Protests and Beyond*, 2017

Internet to control this networked public space and to prevent the Internet from serving as a tool for self-organisation and self-mobilisation of society.⁶ He argues that an era of digital pessimism emerged when governments started using a number of mechanisms of repression enabled by the same technologies that empowered the Arab Spring. The mechanisms include surveillance, blocking, the filtering of cyber attacks against regime critics, new laws and arrests of online activists, paid pro-government commentators manipulating online discussions, takedown requests and the forced deletion of content, blanket blocking of social media and other information and communications technology platforms (e.g. VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol)), holding intermediaries liable (ISPs, site hosts, webmasters, forum moderators, etc.), and the throttling (slowing down of the Internet) or shutting down of Internet and mobile services.

On 20 February 2011, 25 days after Hosni Mubarak of Egypt had been toppled, thousands of dissidents took to the streets of most Moroccan urban and semi-urban regions to demand democratic reforms, economic equity and social justice. This was the birth of what has since been dubbed as the February 20 Movement (20 FM). On 9 March 2011, less than 20 days later, King Mohamed VI gave a live televised speech promising important constitutional, political as well as socio-economic reforms. The speech managed to absorb some of the 20 FM zeal, but it did not put an end to social protests, which continued for the next decade.

This article critically examines ten years of social dynamics and digital activism in Morocco. It addresses the protest events since the Arab Spring by discussing the role that Moroccan media – old and new – played

in these events. In light of our discussion of the media and social movements of the last ten years in Morocco, we argue that while traditional media acted in favour of political economic structures, because of censorship and self-censorship the blogosphere and social media were primordial to the efficacy of Moroccan activism at many stations, just as they were crucial for the authorities in their attempts to suppress activists.

II. A decade of social movements in Morocco

The promises made in the 9 March speech were not delivered on 17 June 2011 when the contents of the new constitution were made public. A study of the new constitution found that the king remains “at the centre of political and constitutional life” and that, in contradiction to the 9 March speech, which insisted on the notion of accountability, the king maintains executive powers without accountability to the Moroccan public.

The speech aimed to serve two main purposes. The first was to alleviate tensions in the streets and convince protesters to go home, which quickly happened, especially with systematic mediatisation of the failed uprisings in Libya, Syria and Yemen. The second was to extol to the world an image of Morocco as an exceptional model of political wit and social stability in a time of utter mayhem ravaging the MENA region.

The 20 FM invigorated a dynamic culture of protest which took diverse forms and served as a model for the protests that took place for the remainder of the decade. Never has social protest been as recurrent in Morocco as it has been throughout the last decade. It is officially estimated that nearly 17,000 protests have taken place on a yearly basis in different regions.⁷ Almost every year – with

⁶ Zaid, *Internet and Democracy in Morocco: A Force for Change and an Instrument for Repression*, 2016; Zaid, *The Authoritarian Trap in State/Media Structures in Morocco's Political Transition*, 2017.

⁷ Minister of Human Rights in a press conference in 2017.

the exception of the current year 2020 due to months-long quarantine and imposed physical distancing measures – at least one protest event had nationwide scope and lasted for months. The most important protest stations after 20 FM 2011 were:

- Protest following the suicide of Amina Filali in 2012: The protest aimed to change Article 475 of the penal code, which allows rapists to escape jail if they agree to marry their victim.
- Protests following Galvan Gate in 2013: Massive protests were organised in most Moroccan cities by advocacy and rights groups after *Lakoum* news website released a leak about the release of a sixty-year-old Spanish paedophile, Daniel Galvan, from prison by a royal pardon. The pardon caused outrage among most Moroccans and put the royal institution in an unprecedentedly embarrassing situation.
- Zagoura protests in 2017: Thousands of protesters took to the streets against deplorable social conditions, poverty, unemployment and poor infrastructure.
- Jerada protests in 2017: After two miners died in a desperate attempt to get some coal from an abandoned coal mine, inhabitants and rights activists marched in massive demonstrations for many weeks against poverty and marginalisation.
- Rif protests from October 2016 through almost all 2017: The second biggest social outcry (after the 20 FM) in the northern

region against historical systematic marginalisation.

- Consumer boycott in 2018: Anonymously instigated online, the call to boycott three specific companies and their products received an enthusiastic response. This boycott constituted one of the most original, effective and successful instances of digital activism and social movements in the last decade.
- Students' and contractual teachers' protests in 2019: For several consecutive months, students and contractual teachers organised protests, went on strike and conducted sit-ins against government policies which they perceived as detrimental to them.

The scope of success of social protests is measured with respect to the level of responsiveness of political institutions to activists' demands and to the general impacts of social dissent on political and economic structures. Among the aforementioned social dynamics, local protests had limited success while at least four regional and nationwide protests yielded a genuine "political seism" within political and economic structures. The 20 FM in 2011, for example, brought about unprecedented constitutional amendments and power reconfigurations. The 2012 protests pushed for a change in penal law and restored justice to the victims of rape. Likewise, *Hirak Rif* in 2017 managed to put a marginalised region on the spot and compelled the state to start important initiatives to uplift the region and carry out impactful development projects for the population. In 2018, the consumer boycott held the political elites and vested economic interests to account and brought about important readjustments.

III. Traditional media, digital platforms and activism in Morocco

The Moroccan media landscape is relatively diverse and competitive but overall stifled by strict administrative mechanisms of control and regulation, which render the margins of press freedom explicitly defined and strictly narrow.⁸ Traditional media operates under strict government control. Broadcast media, the most influential media given the low rate of literacy and the problems of access to print and online media, is controlled either through a pseudo public service system or by private owners close to the power structure.⁹ For print media, the government uses financial pressure and a harsh legal system to push the most outspoken print media publications into closure or bankruptcy. Broadcast media is, in its totality, under the direct auspices of the state and is comprised of sovereign vehicles of blunt protocol information and institutional public relations. Print media, on the other hand, despite its non-partisan affiliation in its majority (95%), is facing two concomitant survival challenges: extremely precarious business models and normalised self-censorship.¹⁰

Freedom House classified Internet use in Morocco as “Partly Free” in its annual reports from 2013 to 2020.¹¹ It is true that, since its introduction in the mid-1990s, the Internet has escaped the harsh measures used in other authoritarian countries, such as the blocking of digital content and social media platforms. What was previously unimaginable is now ubiquitous. The exponential upsurge in citizen journalism and the meteoric mushrooming of social networking sites have not only kept Moroccans informed and connected, but also

provided them with a pass to take part in news content production and circulation.

Since 2011, news websites have been on a steady rise in Morocco. From only 262 in 2015, 1,016 new licenses had been granted to create news websites by September 2020.¹² The Moroccan Minister of Culture, Youth and Sport has also pointed out that print media is in sharp decline, from 252 papers in 2018 to 105 in 2020.¹³ Print readership also dwindled from 450,000 copy per day in 2016 to 150,000 in 2018.¹⁴ After the lockdown imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, newspaper readership became even smaller. Survivors among traditional print media have either hybridised their content by adding an online edition to the newspaper or completely converted to online publishing.

Meanwhile, Internet and social media penetration is also on a steady rise. Internet access is estimated at over 69 percent while social media penetration is heading towards 90 percent among the internet-connected. The most widely used social media in Morocco are WhatsApp (73%), Facebook (67%), YouTube (64%), Instagram (51%) and Facebook Messenger (42%).¹⁵ As for mobile and smart phone penetration rates, these have reached 118 percent and 87 percent respectively.

Moroccans have, more than ever, become hooked on their smartphones, laptops and tablets. User-generated content, viral video streaming and rapid news-sharing, whose trails are not easily traceable, have encouraged Moroccan youths to co-create an important virtual public space in which they debate serious social issues, divulge

⁸ Zaid, El Kadoussi, and Ibahrine, *The Moroccan Press: Challenges and Development*, 2020.

⁹ Zaid, *Audience reception analysis of Moroccan public service broadcasting*, 2015.

¹⁰ El Kadoussi, *The Perception of Self-censorship among Moroccan Journalists*, 2020.

¹¹ Previous reports can be accessed at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net>.

¹² Ibahrine, *The Emergence of a News Website Ecosystem: An Exploratory Study of Hespresse*, 2020.

¹³ Minister of Youth, *Culture and Sports press conference*, November 2020.

¹⁴ The data from OJD Maroc can be accessed at <https://www.ojd.ma/Chiffres>.

¹⁵ Digital Morocco can be accessed at <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-morocco>.

official corruption, report abuse of power and political misdemeanours and, above all, disseminate stories from underprivileged sectors and regions.

Digital media has considerably contributed to the shaping of a burgeoning activist culture in Morocco.¹⁶ One important lesson activists have learned from the 20 FM is the efficacy of online networking in fashioning a critical collective consciousness about serious socio-economic and political issues. Through these alternative platforms, activists have managed to implement creative watchdog mechanisms on policy-making centres, ultimately galvanising these “political opportunity indicators” for protest, and keeping momentum high.

It is also of significance to address a few important protest events and examine how mainstream and digital media have dealt with them. Overall, while Moroccan traditional media has dealt with social protests with excessive reticence, wariness and self-censorship, digital media and social networking websites in particular have been crucial to their success. Three cases in point are the 20 FM in 2011, Rif protests in 2017 and consumer boycott in 2018.

III.1 The February 20 Movement

During the February 20 Movement in 2011, Moroccan traditional media failed both itself as a watchdog institution and the protesters in their call for change. It failed itself by not seizing the opportunity to campaign for press freedom, journalistic quality standards and professional security. In terms of the protesters, it did not endorse their demands and instead did a great favour to the political establishment by praising its initiatives vis-à-

vis the movement. Furthermore, it was keen on framing the movement as uncertain and hazardous while repeatedly reminding audiences how the situation in neighbouring countries had escalated into failed states, religious sectarianism and civil wars.

Inversely, 20 FM digital activists benefited a great deal from affordable access to the digital space to educate, organise and mobilise support for their demands. Citizen-generated content was effective in circulating and relaying unvarnished images and videos of protests and police interventions, mainly through Facebook, to be aired and disseminated later on global news organisations such as CNN, BBC, France 24 and Deutsche Welle. And this allowed everyone, protesters and political centres alike, to perceive the amplitude of the protests and the unwavering determination of the protestors to make a change.

One of the leading digital activist platforms was *mamfakinch.com*. *Mamfakinch*, which means “no concession”, states its objectives as defending democratic values and promoting human rights and freedoms. The site served as one of the main online platforms for the February 20 Movement and considerably contributed to the production and dissemination of news content about 20 FM. It published its news content in Arabic, French and English, which gained it large reach. In 2012, it received the Google/Global Voices Breaking Borders Award for promoting freedom of speech rights on the Internet. *Mamfakinsh.com* was subjected to a cyber-attack by a sophisticated computer virus.¹⁷ This is an example of the state striking back and using the empowering potential of the internet to weaken protest movements.

¹⁶ Ibahrine, *Social Media and Soft Socio-political Change in Morocco*, 2013.

¹⁷ According to a FH Net Freedom report, the site administrator received an email through the page’s contact form that seemed to contain promising journalistic leads, such as videos of police scandals. An investigation into the source and nature of the virus revealed that it was a Trojan horse developed by a company in Milan, Italy.

The 20 FM compelled the Moroccan state to issue unprecedented democratising concessions underlined in the amended constitution of 2011, translating into a reduction of the king's powers, more transparent parliamentary elections with a relatively higher turnout (45%) and, most importantly, mandating the appointment of the head of government from the election-winning party.

III.2 The Amina Filali case of 2012

Civil society groups fighting for women's rights have been dynamic in the Moroccan public sphere and have managed for many decades to introduce major changes in Morocco's laws. In 2003, Morocco adopted a family code known as the *Mudawwana*, which was hailed by women's rights groups in Morocco and abroad as a major step forward. In addition to the *Mudawwana*, in 2006 they mobilised the political elite to change the equal nationality rights, allowing Moroccan women to pass on their citizenship to their children in the same way in which Moroccan men can. However, laws such as Article 475 of the Moroccan penal code, which allows rapists to avoid prosecution if they agree to marry their victims, were still applicable. Street and online protests were sparked in March 2012 when 16-year-old Amina Filali committed suicide after a seven-month ordeal in which she was forced to wed her alleged rapist. Women's rights activists successfully used street demonstrations and social media platforms to rally popular support for changes to the law. In January 2014, the Moroccan parliament unanimously amended Article 475.

III.3 The Rif protests of 2017

The protests in the northern region known in Morocco as *Hirak Rif* erupted after video footage circulated online in October 2016 of a fish vendor, Mouhcine Fikri, being crushed in a trash compactor while trying to recover his confiscated goods. The protests had spread

to other cities by June 2017, with demonstrators denouncing structural neglect and systematic harassment by the state and ruling elites. Hundreds of protesters, including several citizens and online journalists, were arrested as part of the government response to the protest. While the whole northern region was in turmoil, there was a total blackout on public service TV channels, radio stations and newspapers. Apart from sporadic citizen content that managed to break into the digital sphere, the mainstream media fell short of covering these issues. It was not until Arab satellite networks and international media and human rights organisations released unfavourable reports that all national media outlets at once put it on their agenda. This media coverage added nothing to official narratives. Their reports, coverage and analyses most often lacked balance and fairness. When they had to be critical, they targeted low-level officials and avoided real holders of executive power.

By contrast, citizen journalism and social media constituted vital instrumental resources that diffused the amplitude of the protests nationally, regionally and globally. Hundreds of ordinary citizens were recruited as "journalists". Their images and video blogs had an immediate 'gate-crushing' effect through online platforms and immediate impact on international rights organisations like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Reporters Without Borders, which immediately issued alarming reports condemning the authorities' repressive measures and calling on them to respond to protestors' demands.

Whether the Rif protests managed to challenge the political structure and achieve its goals is still a subject of debate. On the one hand, some observers see that it did achieve at least the most basic and vital of its demands. In fact, many important human development projects and initiatives were

immediately carried out. Initiatives such as building hospitals and universities had an immediate impact on the population. Moreover, mid-level officials were dismissed and sanctioned for their mismanagement of public funds, nepotism and corruption. On the other hand, others, including activists and residents of the northern provinces, contend that the *Hirak* did not succeed since the initiated projects were less substantial than expected and the region still endures severe discrepancies. Perhaps the most compelling argument is that most protest leaders, activists and media supporters were sentenced to lengthy periods in prison on “national security” charges.

III.4 The consumer boycott of 2018

In April 2018, a group of online activists launched a campaign to boycott products from three major companies to protest increases in the cost of living. This form of protest remains by far one of the most intriguing forms of social protest. Throughout Moroccan modern political history, never has a consumer boycott been as overwhelming and effective as it was in 2018. The boycott targeted Centrale Danone (dairy products), Sidi Ali (mineral water) and Afriquia (gas stations). The companies control 60 percent, 55 percent, and 29 percent of their respective national markets. Related hashtags in Arabic – corresponding to #boycotting and #let_it_spoil, in reference to milk, in English, respectively – trended online. The three boycotted businesses were carefully and rationally selected because of what they represented more than for what they sold. For boycotters, the three companies stood for five interrelated symbols: marketplace monopoly, egregious profiteering, social irresponsibility, close ties with the palace and the intertwining of business and politics.¹⁸ The economic impact of the boycott became evident ten days

after it started. On 30 April 2018, Afriquia and Centrale Danone recorded major drops in market value on the Casablanca Stock Exchange, with shares in each falling by nearly six percent.

According to a study conducted by the Moroccan Institute for Policy Studies published in May 2019, a week after the anonymous announcement of the campaign appeared on Facebook and WhatsApp, 90 percent of Moroccans knew about the boycott and 75 percent of them immediately participated in it. The large majority of the boycotters were youths (70%) and 31 percent were aged between 31 and 55.¹⁹ The far-reaching efficacy of the boycott could not have occurred without the impactful and ingenious manipulation of online mobilisation and networking. Activists tactfully picked and diffused discursively dense frames and slogans from the Moroccan popular stock of shared culture. Images and caricatures of the target products and their brand names combined with funny slogans quickly spread through social networks and rallied quasi-unanimous appeal and responsiveness. Meanwhile, diaspora Moroccans shared their support for the boycotters by posting videos contrasting prices of the target products inside and outside Morocco, which bolstered the rationality of the boycotters’ move even further and demonised corporate businesses for being socially irresponsible.

Unsurprisingly, sovereign broadcast media and newspapers did nothing more than relay public relations statements in favour of the target companies. First, they repeatedly aired reactions from the companies’ executives and hosted some of them to issue respective clarifications. Second, the majority of these media outlets kept on advertising the products subject to boycott, which, for most Moroccans, insulted and undermined the endeavour. Third, *Aloula* and *2M* TV stations

¹⁸ El Kadoussi, *Weapons of the Weak: Political Implications of Moroccan Consumer Boycott*, 2021.

¹⁹ Belalia, *Le Mouvement de Boycott au Maroc: Une Lecture Sociotechnique*, 2018.

insisted on tacitly framing the boycott as “anti-nationalist” and “inconsiderate”, elaborating on its repercussions on the overall national economy on one side and on simple individual milk producers, small-scale cooperatives, factory workers and petrol station attendants in particular. In a nutshell, these stations were conspicuously against the boycott to the point that activists suggested putting them on the boycott agenda.

The intrigue that the boycott produced among observers stemmed from a host of characteristics. It was anonymously instigated, leaderless, consistent and persistent, ubiquitous and social media savvy. Also, it mobilised domestic and overseas citizens and increased collective socio-political consciousness by unifying large segments of society, including the diaspora, around one cause. Further, it created important political dynamics and compelled political economic institutions to yield to the will of people by reducing prices, mobilising PR actions and addressing citizens with due respect.

The boycott bore more profound political meaning than simple abstinence from purchasing three products. First, Moroccans experienced a politically euphoric moment as they saw themselves – ordinary citizens – capable of challenging political economic structures and bringing change. Second, in the absence of institutional mediation mechanisms between the state and the citizenry, messages of frustration and indignation were directly addressed to the supreme political authorities (the *Makhzen* and its loyalists). Third, the boycott was an outcry against the monopolisation of political and economic life and trivialisation of political parties and institutions. Fourth, and arguably most significantly, in the absence of an effective political opposition that could watch the government’s policies and balance political practice in general, networking platforms remained arguably the only “gate-free” sphere

for ordinary citizens to practice effective watchdog mechanisms over political economic structures and hold them accountable.

IV. Legacies of the 20 FM: Lessons for activists and for political structures

Overall, both social movement activists and political institutions have learned very important lessons from the “Moroccan Spring” experience, and both have appropriated respective tactics to keep the ‘bras de fer’ going. First, social activists have lost trust in political institutions, and because of this they have developed insider tracking and fact-checking mechanisms. Second, they have realised the centrality of a critical collective consciousness for the creation and sustainment of an activist culture. They have also sought newer and safer manoeuvres and tactics of activism and resistance, managing at different protest occasions to successfully deploy savvy management of technological tools and processes. More importantly, and thanks to social media platforms, they have implemented a watchdog function on centres of power by seizing “political opportunity indicators” to mobilise their resources for effective activism.

Not least, activists have learned that in order to ensure the efficacy of social protest, they have to proceed alertly, creatively, rationally and smartly. Their alertness showed recently when leaks from a parliamentary deliberation on a future law to sanction free expression on social media (22/20 law) were posted on Facebook, which triggered endless comments of indignation and obliged the government to issue tampering clarifications. Creativity was apparent in their skillful manipulation of multimodality and creation of strikingly appealing protest memes and images. They demonstrated rationality in bringing uncontested evidence to support their calls and rally maximum public approval through sensible comparative lenses. Smartness was

evident in their ability to target key symbolic economic players and “strike where it hurts the most”.

Political structures have also revisited their tactics and strategies since the 20 FM. First, they have become more alert and anticipatory, which allowed them to keep well informed about potential riots and cope with them in advance. Second, grasping the infinite and ever-advancing possibilities of digital technologies, they upskilled their capabilities in the surveillance of and cyber-attacks on dissidents. When authoritarian regimes are not content with exerting repression on and stifling new media platforms, they quickly learn how to manipulate and utilise them for their benefit. In this regard, the Moroccan authorities have been able to create a considerable amount of new media that serves them. They created “shadow publications,” nominally independent but editorially supportive of the state. Shadow publications are news outlets that exist primarily to divert air-time from more serious and engaging news portals and to compete over online advertising money and audience share. They have also recruited innumerable ‘digital mercenaries’ to disturb online protest messages by producing counter-narratives, fake news, fabricated images and videos.

Outside of the ongoing digital rivalry over who prevails on digital platforms, the authorities’ stock of repressive measures remains diverse and efficient. Perhaps what distinguished the Moroccan regime from other Arab regimes was the use of a relatively milder and smarter repression of protest. Lethal measures were rarely considered as an option by Moroccan authorities. Second, unlike in other MENA countries, they never shut down critical digital channels or blocked access to networking platforms. Third, with the exception of the

heavy prison sentences given to the leaders of the Rif protest, most remaining cases have either already completed their jail periods, benefited from royal pardon or are expecting release in the near future.

However, Moroccan intelligence agencies are currently using rather intriguing tactics to get rid of annoying activists and mute critical journalists. They are deploying their hi-tech surveillance apparatus to track activists’ personal intimacies, hoping to spot them in embarrassing situations and publish their images and videos online before arresting them. So far, they have succeeded in incarcerating at least four journalists known for their critical and advocacy orientations on charges ranging from illegal abortion and extra-marital sex to sexual harassment and rape.

V. Conclusion

The digital takeover has had significant implications on power dynamics by altering the axes of domination, though not steadily and continuously, in favour of less privileged social actors. The Internet and social media have provided the new generation of digital natives with myriad possibilities to explore and make effective use of, not only in order to make their voices heard, but more importantly to subvert the arrogance of the traditional political establishment and negotiate their own definitions of public issues and policy priorities. Meanwhile, the ruling elites are engaging in fast-paced upskilling in order to catch up with their social contenders on the blogosphere and social networks. They have succeeded in placating dissent at its different stations using a number of procedures, including coercion, co-optation, legal channels and even extra-legal manoeuvres when necessary.

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James M. Dorsey

Middle East futures: Decade(s) of defiance and dissent

I. Autocrats get some things right

The second decade of the 21st century has been bookended by protest. The decade was ushered in by protest across the globe, from student rallies in Chile to Occupy Wall Street to fuel price demonstrations in Jakarta. The 2011 popular revolts that toppled four Arab autocrats grabbed the headlines and provided drama. The 2010s ended with similar drama. Protests in Chile resulted in a vote for a new constitution. A coalition of opposition parties challenged the legitimacy of the Pakistani government. Racism and the killing of people of colour by police sparked massive protests in the United States not seen since the 1960s. And like ten years earlier, demonstrators toppled Arab leaders in Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq, uncertain whether this would secure the aspired change.

The 2020s promise to be no different, nowhere more so than in the Middle East. Global mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic resulting in the worst global economic downturn in decades has hit hard in countries that are wracked by war, like Syria and Libya, nations with perennially weak economies that host large refugee populations, such as Lebanon and Jordan, and Gulf states, which have seen energy prices tumble with prospects dim for a quick recovery of oil and gas markets. Shifts towards greater autocracy in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere bode ill at a time in which populations with a youth majority are not necessarily clamouring for greater freedom but are increasingly gloomy about governments' ability to deliver jobs and other public goods.

That is not to say that autocrats like Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his UAE counterpart Mohammed bin Zayed have not got some things right, judging by the responses to recent public opinion polling.¹ Both men have to varying degrees replaced religion with nationalism as the ideology legitimising their rule and sought to ensure that various countries in the region broadly adhere to their worldview. David Pollock, a Middle East scholar who oversees the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's polling in the region, said:

"I know that the Saudi government under MbS (Prince Mohammed) has put in a lot of effort to actually do its own public opinion polls [...] They pay attention to it [...] They are very well aware of which way the winds are blowing on the street. They take that pretty much to heart on what to do and what not to do [...] On some issues, they are going to make a kind of executive decision [...] On this one, we're going to ignore it; on the other one we're going to [...] try to curry favour with the public in some unexpected way."²

The two crown princes' similar world-views constitute in part a response to changing youth attitudes towards religiosity evident in the polls and expressed in mass anti-government protests in countries like Lebanon and Iraq. The changes attach greater importance to adherence to individual morals and values and less focus on formalistic observance of religious practice as well as a rejection of the sectarianism that is a fixture of governance in

¹ ASDA'A BCW, *Arab Youth Survey*, 2020; Arab Center Washington, *Arab Opinion Index 2017-2018*, 2018.

² Interview with the author, 14 October 2020.

Lebanon and Iraq as well as Saudi religious ultra-conservatism.

The problem for rulers is that the moorings of their rule potentially could be called into question by a failure to deliver public goods and services that offer economic prospects. At the same time, social reforms needed to bolster development go hand in hand with the undermining of the authority of religious establishments. Increased autocracy that turns clerics and scholars into regime parrots has fuelled youth scepticism not only towards political elites but also religious institutions. For rulers like the Saudi crown prince, the loosening of social restrictions – including the disempowerment of the kingdom’s religious police, the lifting of a ban on women’s driving, a less strict implementation of gender segregation, the introduction of Western-style entertainment and greater professional opportunities for women, and in the UAE a degree of genuine religious pluralism – are only first steps in responding to youth aspirations. According to Gulf scholar Eman Alhussein in a commentary on the latest Arab Youth Survey,

“Youth have [...] witnessed how religious figures, who still remain influential in many Arab societies, can sometimes give in to change even if they have resisted it initially. This not only feeds into Arab youth’s scepticism towards religious institutions but also further highlights the inconsistency of the religious discourse and its inability to provide timely explanation or justifications to the changing reality of today.”³

II. Youth put premium on reform

Middle Eastern youth attitudes towards religion, religiosity and religious leadership

mirror their approach towards material concerns. Their world is one that focuses on the individual rather than the collective, on *what’s in it for me?* instead of *what’s in it for us?*. It is a world that is not defined by ideology or politics and does not see itself reflected in the values and objectives espoused by elites and governments. In their world, the lingua franca differs substantially from the language they were raised in.

Two thirds of those polled by the Arab Youth Survey believe that religious institutions need to be overhauled. They question fundamental religious concepts even if they define religion as the most important constituent element of their identity. “The way some Arab countries consume religion in the political discourse, which is further amplified on social media, is no longer deceptive to the youth, who can now see through it,” Alhussein said.⁴ James Zogby, an Arab-American pollster with a decades-long track record of polling in the Middle East and North Africa, concluded “Arabs know what they want and what they do not want. They want their basic needs for jobs, education, and health care to be attended to, and they want good governance and protection of their personal rights.”⁵

Michael Robbins, director of the Arab Barometer, another pollster, and international affairs scholar Lawrence Rubin concluded that the youth in post-revolt Sudan had soured on the idea of religion-based governance because of widespread corruption during the region of toppled president Omar Al-Bashir, who professed his adherence to religious principles. Robbins and Rubin cautioned, however, that religion could return as the catalyst for protest if the government fails to cater to youth aspirations. They warned,

“If the transitional government can deliver on providing basic services to

³ ASDA’A BCW, *A Voice for Change*, 2020, 2020, 44.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Interview with the author, 24 August 2020.

*the country's citizens and tackling corruption, the formal shift away from Sharia is likely to be acceptable in the eyes of the public. However, if these problems remain, a new set of religious leaders may be able to galvanize a movement aimed at re-instituting Sharia as a means to achieve these objectives.*⁶

It is a warning that is as valid for Sudan as it is for much of the Arab and Muslim world.

III. Saudis empathetic to protests

Asked in a recent poll conducted by The Washington Institute whether “it’s a good thing we aren’t having big street demonstrations here now the way they do in some other countries”, a reference to the past decade of popular revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq and Sudan, Saudi public opinion was split down the middle. 48 percent of respondents agreed and 48 percent disagreed.⁷ Saudis, like most Gulf Arabs, appear less inclined to take grievances to the streets. Nonetheless, the poll indicates that they may prove to be empathetic to protests should they occur.

Saudi attitudes towards protest take on added significance in an environment in which governments in the energy-rich Gulf have seen their ability erode to invest in infrastructure and cradle-to-grave welfare states. The need to diversify economies away from dependence on oil and gas exports in order to create jobs against the backdrop of depressed energy prices and markets as a result of the global economic downturn means changing expectations and rewriting social

contracts that offered economic security and well-being in exchange for surrender of political and social rights. In May 2020, The Dubai Chamber of Commerce provided a foretaste of problems to come. Based on a survey of 1,228 CEOs, the chamber warned that a staggering 70 percent of businesses in the emirate expect to close their doors within the next six months.⁸ Analysts added to the gloomy prospects by reporting that non-oil growth in the UAE pointed toward a contraction of the economy.⁹

The challenges Gulf and other Middle Eastern states face are compounded by the pandemic and a painful, protracted and complex road towards economic recovery, coupled with the toll of debilitating regional conflicts. They are also complicated by apparent conditional willingness to accept belt-tightening and the unilateral rewriting of social contracts. “If it’s temporary, one or two years, I can adapt. My concern is that more taxes will be permanent – and that will be an issue,” said Saudi government worker Mohammed according to a report by Bloomberg after his USD 266 a month cost-of-living allowance was cancelled and sales taxes were tripled as part of painful austerity measures announced by finance minister Mohammed Al-Jadaan.¹⁰ Mohammed’s words were echoed in a rare pushback against the government by columnist Khalid Al-Sulaiman, writing in the Okaz daily newspaper, one of the kingdom’s tightly controlled media outlets, who wrote,

“Citizens worry that the pressure on their living standards will outlast the current crisis. Increasing VAT from 5% to 15% will have a big effect

⁶ Robbins and Rubin, *Sudan’s government seems to be shifting away from Islamic law. Not everyone supports these moves*, 2020.

⁷ Pollock, *Saudi Poll: China Leads U.S.; Majority Back Curbs on Extremism, Coronavirus*, 2020.

⁸ Turak, *70% of Dubai companies expect to go out of business within six months due to coronavirus pandemic, survey says*, 2020.

⁹ Al Jazeera, *Egypt and Saudi business conditions improve, while UAE’s worsen*, 2020.

¹⁰ Nereim and Westall, *Crisis Austerity in Oil-Rich Gulf May Test Political Balance*, 2020.

¹¹ Al-Sulaiman, *Will the Finance Minister Do It?*, 2020.

on society's purchasing power and will reflect negatively on the economy in the long term."¹¹

The surveys leave no doubt that even before the economic crisis sparked by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, the Middle Eastern youth was first and foremost concerned about its economic future. Asked what had prompted the wave of protests in 2011, 2019 and 2020, respondents pointed to unemployment, personal debt and corruption. 35 percent of those polled in the latest Arab Youth Survey reported that they were mired in debt, compared with 15 percent in 2015.¹² A whopping 80 percent said they believed Arab regimes were corrupt.

Analysts suggest that the Arab youth has nonetheless become less concerned about issues of democracy and political freedom. According to Middle East scholar Michael Milstein,

*"This evinces a realization that the past decade of revolutions has borne rather bitter fruit: civil war, humanitarian distress, the rise of powerful extremist elements, and the collapse of governing restraints [...] Today, rather than seeking to change the world, most Arabs (especially the younger generation) demonstrate that mere improvements in their material condition would suffice,"*¹³

IV. Voting with their feet

If the surveys suggest one thing, the streets of Algerian, Sudanese, Lebanese and Iraqi cities suggest something else.¹⁴ Protesters

in those four countries appeared to have learnt lessons from the failed 2011 revolts in Egypt, Libya and Yemen. In contrast to 2011, protesters in 2019 and 2020 refused to surrender the street once a leader was forced to resign. Instead, they maintained their protests, demanding a total overhaul of the political system,¹⁵ which led to the formation of a governing transitional council in Sudan and a referendum on a new Algerian constitution. Feeling outmanoeuvred by the military and political elites, Algerians voted with their feet. While the new constitution won in the referendum with a two-thirds majority, less than a quarter of eligible voters cast their vote.¹⁶ "Algerian youths do not see the 'New Algeria' that lives in the president's speeches. Activists are jailed for social media posts and memes, and the entire nation feels abandoned by both the political establishment and the traditional opposition," cautioned Algerian scholar Zine Labidine Ghebouli.¹⁷ In Sudan, the jury is still out on whether the council will satisfy popular demand. In Lebanon and Iraq, the protesters also insisted on the removal of the sect- and ethnic-based political structures that underpin the two countries' political systems.¹⁸

Like in Algeria, protesters in Lebanon and Iraq confronting police violence and the impact of the pandemic were at an inflection point. That was graphically visualised in late October 2020 with the reopening of a key bridge in Baghdad and the clearing out of tents from a sit-in in Tahrir Square, the epicentre of the anti-establishment protest movement that erupted a year ago to demand basic services, employment opportunities and an end to corruption.¹⁹

¹² ASDA'A BCW, *7th Annual ASDA'A Burson-Masteller Arab Youth Survey*, 2015.

¹³ Milstein, *Ten Years Since the 'Arab Spring': Despair Has Not Become More Comfortable*, 2020.

¹⁴ Dorsey, *The Tumultuous Decade: Arab Public Opinion and the Upheavals of 2010–2019*, 2020.

¹⁵ Dorsey, *2019 was a decade of defiance and dissent. The 2020s are likely to be no different*, 2020.

¹⁶ Al Jazeera, *Algerians back constitutional reforms amid low voter turnout*, 2020.

¹⁷ Ghebouli, *Requiem for a Revolution*, 2020.

¹⁸ Dorsey, *Countering civilisationalism: Lebanese and Iraqi protesters transcend sectarianism*, 2019.

¹⁹ Al Jazeera, *Baghdad's Tahrir Square cleared, Jamhuriya Bridge reopened*, 2020.

Few doubt that the combination of repressive law enforcement, politics rather than engagement and a public health crisis at best buys elites a reprieve. The writing is on the wall, with intermittent protests erupting in Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Iran and war-ravaged Syria. "For political transformation to happen, you need a generation," noted Lina Khatib, head of London-based think tank Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa programme.²⁰

The question is not whether another wave of protest will occur, but when and where. As noted veteran journalist and Middle East scholar Rami Khouri noted,

*"The essential situation is that this mass of citizens has reached the point of discontent but (of) desperation and therefore has done the only thing it sees as available to it other than immigrate, which is challenging their state openly in street protests. Something has to give between these two forces."*²¹

Give and take seems, however, for now a way off. The immediate reality is stalemate. Protesters have demonstrated their ability to topple heads of government but have so far failed to force elites, determined to protect their perks at whatever cost, to address their fundamental concerns, let alone surrender power. Aggravating the stalemate is the breakdown in trust between significant segments of youth populations and governments as well as traditional opposition forces fuelling demands for reforms that replace existing elites rather than exploring ways of finding common ground. According to Marwan Muasher, Vice President for Studies at the Carnegie

Endowment for International Peace and former Deputy Prime Minister of Jordan,

*"Arab governments' long suppression of the development of inclusive, democratic, and effective institutions has left a vacuum of leadership among regime and opposition forces alike. That vacuum is acutely felt today [...] with no trusted institution in the region who could carry out people's rightful demands for more effective management of their countries, the endgame is unclear."*²²

V. A catalyst for reinvigorated protest?

Much like US President Jimmy Carter's support for human rights in the 1970s boosted popular resistance to the Shah of Iran and helped pave the way for the Islamic revolution,²³ President-elect Joe Biden, with his emphasis on democratic values and freedoms,²⁴ could contribute to renewed public manifestations of widespread discontent and demands for greater transparency and accountability in the Middle East and North Africa.

Supporters of a human rights-driven foreign policy juxtapose the emergence of an anti-American regime in Iran with the rise of post-revolt democratic leaders in Chile, the Philippines and South Korea. US President Barack Obama and his Vice-President Biden struggled almost a decade ago with how to handle the 2011 popular revolts. Critics accuse Obama of enabling the Muslim Brotherhood to gain executive power in the aftermath of the revolts. The rise of the Brotherhood sparked a counter-revolution that led to a military coup in Egypt and civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen.

²⁰ Malsin, *Middle East Protesters Try to Avoid Mistakes of Arab Spring*, 2020.

²¹ Wilson Center, *Ten Years of Pan-Arab Protests: Understanding the new Dynamics of Change*, 2020.

²² Muasher, *Is This the Arab Spring 2.0?*, 2019.

²³ Cofman Wittes, *Iran's revolution and the problem of autocratic allies*, 2019.

²⁴ Harrison, *There are signs that as president, Joe Biden could adopt a proactive human rights approach similar to Jimmy Carter's*, 2020.

As Tamara Cofman Wittes, a Middle East scholar who coordinated US democracy and human rights policy as the State Department's deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, said,

*“The cases of Chile, South Korea, and the Philippines, along with a few others, are often cited [...] by foreign policy elites arguing that American human rights advocacy needn't come at the expense of American interests. And yet, as we can see in [...] harsh Monday-morning quarterbacking of Obama's policy toward the Egyptian uprising against Mubarak, for example, this argument still faces a steep uphill climb.”*²⁵

Cofman Wittes was referring to Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian leader who was forced to resign in 2011 after 30 years in office.

Biden has pledged to “defend the rights of activists, political dissidents, and journalists around the world to speak their minds freely without fear of persecution and violence. Jamal's death will not be in vain.” Biden was referring to Khashoggi, the murdered Saudi journalist.²⁶ Biden has also said he would convene a global Summit for Democracy in his first year in office as part of an effort to confront authoritarian regimes and promote elections and human rights. The summit would be attended not only by political leaders but also including civil rights groups fighting for democracy.²⁷

Campaign promises are one thing, enacting policies once in office another. As a result, the jury is out on how a Biden administration will handle potentially sustained protest in the Middle East and North Africa. To be sure, taken together the most recent surveys of public opinion paint a picture of a youth that has shifted in much of the region from optimism at the time of the 2011 revolts to deep-seated pessimism if not despair about its future prospects and a lack of confidence in the ability and/or willingness of most governments and elites to cater to its social and economic needs. That makes predictions of civil unrest all the more real.

Fact is also that the lesson of the last decade for the coming one is that political transition sparked by waves of protest is not a matter of days, months or even a year. It is a long, drawn out process that often plays out over decades. 2011 ushered in a global era of defiance and dissent, with the Arab uprisings as its most dramatic centrepiece. The 2020s are likely to be a decade in which protests may produce at best uncertain and fragile outcomes, irrespective of whether protesters or vested interests gain an immediate upper hand. Fragility at best and instability at worst is likely to be the norm. To change that, protesters and governments would have to agree on economic, political and social systems that are truly inclusive and ensure that all have a stake. No doubt, that is a tall order.

²⁵ Cofman Wittes, *Iran's revolution and the problem of autocratic allies*, 2019.

²⁶ Biden, *Anniversary of Jamal Khashoggi's Murder – Statement by Vice President Joe Biden*, 2020.

²⁷ Biden, *The Power of America's Example: The Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century*, no date.

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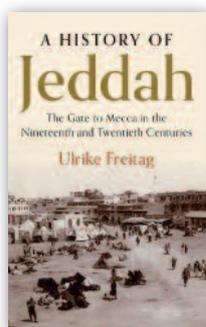
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Ulrike Freitag

A History of Jeddah: The Gate to Mecca in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries



Freitag, Ulrike: A History of Jeddah. The Gate to Mecca in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020, ISBN 978-11-0-847879-3, 404 S.

„Dschidda ist anders“. Ausgehend von dieser Prämisse, legt Ulrike Freitag, Professorin für Islamwissenschaft an der FU Berlin und Direktorin des Zentrums Moderner Orient, ihre Arbeit über die Geschichte der am Roten Meer gelegenen saudischen Hafenstadt Dschidda vor.

Dass Freitag ihre fast vierhundert Seiten umfassende Arbeit in englischer Sprache vorlegt, dürfte ihre deutschsprachige Leserschaft, die vorwiegend im islamwissenschaftlichen, geopolitischen und humangeografischen Spektrum zuhause ist, kaum stören. Der Blick auf die beeindruckend umfangreiche Bibliographie und auf die zitierten Quellen legt indes nahe, dass sich vorwiegend die angelsächsische Wissenschaftscommunity von der Thematik angesprochen fühlen dürfte.

Nicht zu unterschätzen ist auch die häufig übersehene Tatsache, dass es im städtischen Saudi-Arabien ein vitales Bildungsbürgertum mit exzellenten englischen Sprachkenntnissen gibt, mit großem Appetit auf fundierte wissenschaftliche Recherchen und Ergebnisse ausländischer Forscher, gerade im Bereich der jüngeren Geschichte des Königreichs.

Seit der Gründung der Monarchie durch Abd al-Aziz ibn Abd ar-Rahman ibn Faisal

Al Saud, allgemein bekannt als Ibn Saud, vor fast 90 Jahren wurde – und wird teilweise heute noch – das historische (post-osmanische) Narrativ vorwiegend durch die muslimische Identität des saudischen Staats vorgegeben, in dem die wahhabitischen Geistlichen (die `Ulama) das Interpretationsmonopol für alles im weitesten Sinne Religiöse beanspruchen. Seit der Regentschaft von König Abdallah (2005-2015) und verstärkt unter seinem Nachfolger Salman bzw. der de facto-Herrschaft seines Sohnes und Thronfolgers Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) hat der Einfluss der Religiösen erkennbar abgenommen.

Ein weiteres großes Leserpotential dürfte sich aus der heterogenen Masse der Pilgerreisenden nach Mekka erschließen, von denen die allermeisten über den Flughafen Dschidda einreisen. Daher scheint es folgerichtig, dass ein Schwerpunkt der Monographie auf der historischen Bedeutung der Stadt Dschidda als unumgänglichem Durchgangstor für Pilger in die Heilige Stadt Mekka und als Transitplatz für Handelswaren ins Hinterland liegt.

Eingangs beleuchtet Freitag den Gründungsmythos Dschiddas unter dem Dritten rechtgeleiteten Kalifen, 15 Jahre nach dem Tod des Propheten, um anschließend ausführlich auf die wachsende Bedeutung der Stadt am Roten Meer von den Anfängen des Osmanischen Reiches bis zu dessen Niedergang einzugehen. Interessant ist hier die Beschreibung des Beginns der von Handelsinteressen angetriebenen europäischen (v.a. britischen und niederländischen) Penetration in die Region. Regionalpolitische Ereignisse wie der Ägyptenfeldzug Napoleons gegen Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts sowie die Festigung der osmanischen Herrschaft in Ägypten und der ganzen Region, aber auch die Entstehung der Wahhabitischen Bewegung als neuer Machtfaktor im Inneren Arabiens, seien

Gründe für einen temporären Bedeutungsverlust Dschiddas, der unter der Herrschaft des osmanischen Statthalters Mohammed Ali Pascha in Ägypten und der Kontrolle des Pilgerwesens in Arabien endete. Eindrucksvoll und farbig beschrieben werden die schließlich erfolgreichen Bemühungen europäischer (v.a. britischer) Händler, auch Sklavenhändler, in Dschidda Fuß zu fassen, ebenso wie das wachsende Interesse ausländischer Forschungsreisender und Abenteurer an dieser bis zu diesem Zeitpunkt weithin unerforschten Region. Interessant ist hier der Vergleich mit der südlibanesischen Stadt Tyros.

Prägnant dargestellt werden die jeweiligen und unterschiedlichen Interessenlagen der verschiedenen politischen Akteure, vor allem der Hohen Pforte, aber auch die Ambitionen der europäischen Großmächte im 19. Jahrhundert, die zunächst – bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg – in Form von konsularischen Vertretungen auftraten, mit der erklärten Mission der Handelsförderung. Der Übernahme der saudischen Herrschaft über Dschidda Ende 1924 und der Entstehung eines modernen Staates durch Ibn Saud ist ein eigenes Unterkapitel gewidmet. In diese Zeit fällt auch die für den entstehenden Staat so schicksalhafte Entdeckung des Erdöls.

Anhand der Geschichte einiger bekannter Familien (z.B. Ali Rida, Zaynal, Nurwali) zeigt die Verfasserin, wie sich die Bevölkerungsstruktur Dschiddas im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert darstellt und weiterentwickelt, wobei die Familiennamen sehr oft wichtige geografische und ethnografische Aussagen über deren Herkunft beinhalten, im Falle der vorgenannten drei Familien aus dem heutigen Iran bzw. Indien. Ein beträchtlicher Teil der Bevölkerung Dschiddas im genannten Zeitraum waren aus dem heutigen Südjemen, insbesondere dem Hadramaut, zugewanderte arabische

Stammesangehörige, auf der Suche nach besseren Lebensbedingungen. Hier wird als besonders prominentes Beispiel die Familie Bin Ladin beschrieben.

Ein nicht unbedeutender Nebenschauplatz der Zuwanderung ergibt sich aus dem schwunghaften Sklavenhandel, der vorwiegend Frauen aus Ostafrika als Hausangestellte oder tscherkessische Mädchen als Nebenfrauen betraf. Letztere wurden in der Regel mit den Pilgerkaravanen aus der heutigen Türkei und aus Syrien nach Dschidda gebracht. Eines der prominentesten Beispiele für die Funktion der Sklavinnen als Nebenfrauen war das Verhältnis des langjährigen Kronprinzen Sultan bin Abdulaziz (1928-2011) mit einer sudanesischen Sklavenkonkubine, aus der dessen Sohn Bandar hervorging, der mehr als zwei Jahrzehnte Botschafter seines Landes in den USA war. Offiziell abgeschafft wurden Sklavenhandel und Sklavenhaltung in Saudi-Arabien erst in den sechziger Jahren des vorigen Jahrhunderts.

In einem weiteren umfangreichen Kapitel wird die physische Stadtentwicklung beschrieben, über einen Zeitraum ausgehend von einem Zustandsbericht des Orientforschers Johann Ludwig Burckhardt aus dem Jahr 1814, bis kurz nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. Hier ist der historische Vergleich mit den kartografischen Aufzeichnungen Carsten Niebuhrs interessant, der Dschidda über ein halbes Jahrhundert zuvor besucht hatte. Das Kapitel befasst sich schwerpunktmäßig mit den urbanen Entwicklungen des Seehafens, den städtischen Märkten und der Wasserversorgung; man erfährt hier z.B., dass die erste Seewasserentsalzungsanlage in Dschidda im Jahre 1907 gebaut wurde, aber auch, dass es schon zu Zeiten von Niebuhrs Aufenthalt einen christlichen Friedhof außerhalb der Stadtmauern gegeben hat.

Ulrike Freitag erwähnt, dass dort der im Jahre 1884 von Beduinen ermordete französische Arabienforscher Charles Huber begraben liegt, „who discovered a famous stele with Aramaic inscriptions in Tayma“. An dieser Stelle hätte sich der Rezensent eine tiefergehende Quellenforschung gewünscht, da der Entdecker der sog. Tayma-Stele mit großer Wahrscheinlichkeit der schwäbische Orientalist Julius Euting war, in dessen Begleitung Huber diese mehrmonatige „Reise ins Innere Arabiens“¹ gemacht hat.

Im folgenden Kapitel über die Funktionsweisen der städtischen Gesellschaft, im Spannungsfeld zwischen Solidarität und Wettbewerb, wird anschaulich dargestellt – teilweise anhand mündlicher Überlieferungen – wie das tägliche Leben organisiert war, wie einzelne Familien zu Wohlstand kamen und wie sie zur heutigen Elite heranwachsen; wie Tradition und Religion diese gesellschaftlichen Entwicklungen ganz entscheidend geprägt haben und bis heute bestimmen. Dem Leser werden die religiösen Riten, Sitten und Gebräuche im Rhythmus des Jahres anschaulich vor Augen geführt. Selbst die integrationsförderliche Rolle des ursprünglich von asiatischen Pilgern in den zwanziger Jahren des 20. Jahrhunderts mitgebrachten Fußballs findet Erwähnung.

Das ebenfalls recht umfangreiche Kapitel über die (über-)lebenswichtige Bedeutung von Wirtschaft und Handel für Dschidda im 19. und bis Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts, aber darüber hinaus für die Identität der Stadt und ihrer Bewohner schlechthin, befasst sich logischerweise mit dem Hadsch und seinen vielfältigen Aspekten (z.B. der Organisation) als wichtigstem Wirtschaftsfaktor. Freitag zeigt anschaulich das Zusammenspiel zwischen den großen Händlerfamilien, dem internationalen und regionalen Warenverkehr und der fein-

teiligen Organisation des Handels auf. In diesem Umfeld und Hand in Hand mit dem entstehenden Bildungswesen, dem Gesundheitssektor, dem Verkehrswesen und der Versorgung der Bevölkerung einschließlich der Pilgerscharen bildeten sich die gesellschaftlichen Eliten heraus, die größtenteils auch im heutigen Saudi-Arabien noch Rang und Namen haben. Wie die großen regionalen Entwicklungen (z.B. Eröffnung des Suez-Kanals) und weltpolitischen Umwälzungen (z.B. der Erste Weltkrieg) die Handelsrolle Dschiddas beeinflussten bzw. zeitweise stark beeinträchtigten, auch wie der sorgenvolle Blick der europäischen Großmächte auf das Massenphänomen Hadsch hinsichtlich ihrer eigenen Sicherheitsinteresse ausfällt, wird ebenfalls dargestellt.

Da diese Buchbesprechung mitten in der Corona-Pandemie stattfindet (Herbst 2020), fällt der Blick des Rezensenten fast automatisch auf den Abschnitt, in dem das Thema sanitärer Kontrollen der aus allen Erdteilen einreisenden Pilger und der erforderlichen Quarantänemaßnahmen beleuchtet wird. Auslöser dafür waren die massiven Cholera-Ausbrüche in Asien, Europa und Amerika in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts. Wir erfahren, dass u.a. britische, französische und niederländische Ärzte nach Dschidda entsandt wurden, um die Pilger aus den muslimischen Teilen ihrer Kolonialreiche zu betreuen und ärztlich zu versorgen. Die Einrichtung von Quarantäne-Stationen zwischen Dschidda und Mekka habe wegen der befürchteten Einnahmeverluste zu Unruhen unter den Händlern geführt.

Die beiden Schlusskapitel der Monografie befassen sich zuerst mit der Herausbildung örtlicher und lokalpolitischer Institutionen im Spannungsfeld zwischen dem osmanischen Machtmonopol, einer intensiver

¹ Euting, Julius, *Tagbuch einer Reise in Inner-Arabien*, Erster Teil (Leiden: Brill, 1896).

werdenden Präsenz der europäischen Großmächte durch die Einrichtung von Konsulaten und mit den lokalen Inhabern von Autorität und Einfluss (bekannte Händler, wahhabitische Religionsgelehrte, Stammes-Scheiks), bis hin zur Entstehung des saudischen Staatswesens als Erb-Monarchie (1932). Anschaulich werden die ersten Schritte des jungen Staats und seine progressive Konsolidierung unter der dynamischen Führung seines unumstrittenen Anführers und Gründers Ibn Saud beschrieben.

Daran anknüpfend beschäftigt sich das zweite Schlusskapitel mit den Veränderungen, denen die Stadt und ihre Bewohner nach Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges ausgesetzt waren: der dominanteste Faktor hierfür ist der enorme Bevölkerungszuwachs (von etwa 50.000 nach Kriegsende auf über dreieinhalb Millionen heute), getrieben von der starken Zuwanderung ausländischer Arbeitskräfte; die Veränderungen innerhalb der traditionellen Familienstrukturen und die Entstehung der sog. *Compounds* für Familiengruppen und für Ausländer; die unausweichlichen Auswirkungen der Technisierung und Modernisierung auf die verschiedenen gesellschaftlichen Bereiche; die Einflüsse der modernen Transportformen (ab 1981 Pilgerflughafen; seit 2018 Schnellbahnverbindung zwischen Dschidda und Mekka; mehrspurige Autobahn etc.) auf das gesamte Pilgerwesen; die Generalisierung des Schulwesens und die Entwicklung eines Rechtssystems im Schatten weiterhin starker konservativer religiöser (Gegen-)Kräfte; und schließlich die Herausbildung einer authentischen saudischen Identität.

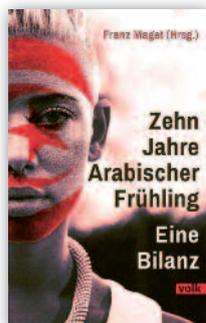
Für den einheimischen Bürger bedeutet die Tatsache, in Dschidda zu wohnen und zu leben, ein Dschaddawi zu sein, einen immateriellen und identitätsverstärkenden Mehrwert gegenüber dem Rest des Landes, insbesondere der Hauptstadt Riad und dem Hinterland. Der alte Gegensatz zwischen dem Naschd, dem Landesinneren mit der Hauptstadt Riad, und der im Nordwesten gelegenen Region Hidschas mit der Hafenstadt Dschidda und den zwei Heiligen Stätten Mekka und Medina, schimmert immer wieder durch.

Die Schlussbetrachtung ist dem eingangs erwähnten Diktum gewidmet, wonach Dschidda „anders“ sei. Die Autorin macht dies u.a. fest an den besonderen regionalpolitisch-historischen Hintergründen und Strömungen, den multikulturellen Erfahrungen und den soziokulturellen Befindlichkeiten der einheimischen städtischen Eliten, erkennbar an deren offeneren, toleranteren und inklusiveren Lebensgefühl. Die persönlichen Erfahrung des Rezensenten, der selbst einige Jahre in diplomatischer Funktion in dieser Stadt gelebt und dabei die ersten Forschungsschritte (ab 2005) der Verfasserin aus direkter Nähe mitverfolgt hat, bestätigen diesen Befund.

Ulrike Freitag hat eine breit angelegte und fundierte wissenschaftliche Arbeit vorgelegt, die nicht nur die Geschichte einer ganz besonderen Stadt bis ins Detail vor Augen führt, sondern bei manchen Lesern auch ein von vielen Widersprüchen geprägtes Bild des heutigen Saudi-Arabien in ein verdient besseres Licht rücken dürfte.

Dr. Hubert Lang

Franz Maget (ed.)
Zehn Jahre Arabischer Frühling. Eine Bilanz



Maget, Franz (ed.): *Zehn Jahre Arabischer Frühling. Eine Bilanz*, Volk Verlag, München 2020, ISBN 978-3-86222-360-2, 180 pp.

Um die Jahreswende 2020/2021 jährt sich der „Arabische Frühling“ zum zehnten Mal. Diese Welle von Protesten, Revolten und Revolutionen, die die arabische Welt erfasste, stellte in vielerlei Hinsicht eine Zäsur dar. Binnen weniger Monate wurden noch kurze Zeit zuvor kaum vorstellbare Veränderungen erwirkt: Staatschefs traten ab, neue oder reformierte politische Ordnungen und Systeme wurden definiert. Schnell wurde analysiert, dass die vorher dominierende Angst vor Repressionen vielerorts verschwunden war und die Bevölkerung grundlegende Rechte einforderte. Doch diese Euphorie wich vielerorts bald einer nüchternen, wenn nicht pessimistischen Deutung.

Das Jubiläum nimmt Franz Maget zum Anlass, in *Zehn Jahre Arabischer Frühling. Eine Bilanz* die Entwicklungen, erfreulich wie enttäuschend, genauer zu betrachten. Neben seinen eigenen Ausführungen zu Protesten und deren Folgen in mehreren Staaten nimmt er auch die Rolle Europas und einzelne Themenfelder in den Blick. Komplettiert wird diese sehr leserliche Annäherung durch weitere Auseinandersetzungen mit der Rolle von Religion(en) (Sonja Zekri), der Rolle von Frauen (Hoda Saleh), dem Abgleiten friedlicher Proteste in einen Bürgerkrieg in Syrien (Martin Gehlen), Reformen und deren Wirkung in Algerien (Sofian Philip Naceur) sowie

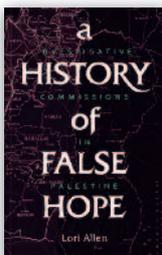
politischer Transformation und Krieg im Jemen (Said Al-Dailami).

In der breiteren Öffentlichkeit wird der „Arabische Frühling“ oftmals vereinfacht dargestellt. Zu Beginn kannte die Euphorie kaum Grenzen und einfach und schnell umzusetzende, weitreichende Veränderungen wurden erwartet. Über die Jahre und nach zahlreichen Rückschlägen veränderte sich das Narrativ dann allerdings vielerorts hin zu einem breiten Scheitern der Proteste. Die dazwischen liegenden Nuancen, die Unterschiede zwischen verschiedenen Ländern und die Faktoren die in all diesen Prozessen tragende Rollen spielen beleuchten Maget und seine Koautorinnen in einem zugänglichen Schreibstil der es interessierten Lesern ermöglicht, sich die Materie tiefergehend zu erschließen.

Neben der Analyse der tatsächlichen Entwicklungen der vergangenen zehn Jahre erweitert Maget – ebenso wie die Koautoren – den Blick, denn nicht nur das Abhalten von Wahlen sollte als Gradmesser eines Demokratisierungsprozesses gelten. Viel mehr sind außerdem die Stärkung bürgerschaftlichen Engagements und zivilgesellschaftlicher Organisationen, von Medien und Gewerkschaften, säkularen Parteien und „vor allem [von] Frauen“ notwendige Schritte (174).

Zur Verständlichkeit des Buchs auch ohne ausgedehnte Vorkenntnisse trägt indes ebenfalls bei, dass wichtige Begrifflichkeiten mittels „Erklärungsboxen“ näher erläutert und definiert werden, wie beispielsweise die Muslimbruderschaft oder Wahhabismus. *Zehn Jahre Arabischer Frühling. Eine Bilanz* erfüllt dabei, was der Untertitel verspricht: es bietet eine Bilanz dessen was passiert ist, lesbar und verständlich auch für jene, die sich nicht täglich damit beschäftigen.

Benedikt van den Woldenberg



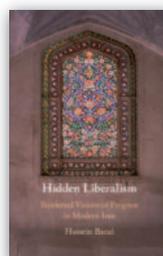
Allen, Lori: *A History of False Hope. Investigative Commissions in Palestine*, Stanford University Press, December 2020, 432 pp., ISBN 978-15-0-360672-2:

This book offers a provocative retelling of Palestinian political history through an examination of the international commissions that have investigated political violence and human rights violations. More than twenty commissions have been convened over the last century, yet no significant change has resulted from these inquiries. The findings of the very first, the 1919 King-Crane Commission, were suppressed. The Mitchell Committee, convened in the heat of the Second Intifada, urged Palestinians to listen more sympathetically to the feelings of their occupiers. And factfinders returning from a shell-shocked Gaza Strip in 2008 registered their horror at the scale of the destruction, but Gazans have continued to live under a crippling blockade. Drawing on debates in the press, previously unexamined UN reports, historical archives, and ethnographic research, Lori Allen explores six key investigative commissions over the last century. She highlights how Palestinians' persistent demands for independence have been routinely translated into the numb language of reports and resolutions. These commissions, Allen argues, operating as technologies of liberal global governance, yield no justice – only the oppressive status quo. *A History of False Hope* issues a biting critique of the captivating allure and cold impotence of international law.



Aran, Amnon: *Israeli Foreign Policy since the End of the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, December 2020, 300 pp., ISBN 978-11-0-705249-9:

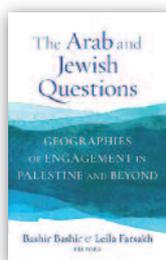
This is the first study of Israeli foreign policy towards the Middle East and selected world powers including China, India, the European Union and the United States since the end of the Cold War. It provides an integrated account of these foreign policy spheres and serves as an essential historical context for the domestic political scene during these pivotal decades. The book demonstrates how foreign policy is shaped by domestic factors, which are represented as three concentric circles of decision-makers, the security network and Israeli national identity. Told from this perspective, Amnon Aran highlights the contributions of the central individuals, societal actors, domestic institutions, and political parties that have informed and shaped Israeli foreign policy decisions, implementation, and outcomes. Aran demonstrates that Israel has pursued three foreign policy stances since the end of the Cold War – entrenchment, engagement and unilateralism – and explains why.



Banai, Hussein: *Hidden Liberalism. Burdened Visions of Progress in Modern Iran*, Cambridge University Press, December 2020, 230 pp., ISBN 978-11-0-849559-2:

Compared to rival ideologies, liberalism has fared rather poorly in modern Iran. This is all the more remarkable given the essentially liberal substance of various social and political struggles – for liberal legality, individual rights and freedoms, and pluralism – in the century-long period since the demise of the Qajar dynasty and the subsequent transformation of the country into a modern nation-state. The deeply felt but largely invisible purchase of liberal political ideas in Iran challenges us to think more expansively about the trajectory of various intellectual developments since the emergence of a movement for reform and

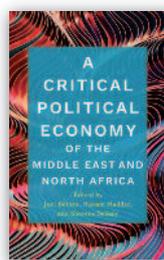
constitutionalism in the late nineteenth century. It complicates parsimonious accounts of Shi'ism, secularism, socialism, nationalism, and royalism as defining or representative ideologies of particular eras. *Hidden Liberalism* offers a critical examination of the reasons behind liberalism's invisible yet influential status, and its attendant ethical quandaries, in Iranian political and intellectual discourses.



Bashir, Bashir and Leila Farsakh (eds.): *The Arab and Jewish Questions. Geographies of Engagement in Palestine and Beyond*, Columbia University Press, December 2020, 320 pp., ISBN 978-02-3-119921-6:

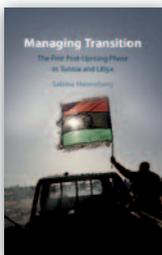
Nineteenth-century Europe turned the political status of its Jewish communities into the “Jewish Question,” as both Christianity and rising forms of nationalism viewed Jews as the ultimate other. With the onset of Zionism, this “question” migrated to Palestine and intensified under British colonial rule and in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Zionism’s attempt to solve the “Jewish Question” created what came to be known as the “Arab Question,” which concerned the presence and rights of the Arab population in Palestine. For the most part, however, Jewish settlers denied or dismissed the question they created, to the detriment of both Arabs and Jews in Palestine and elsewhere. This book brings together leading scholars to consider how these two questions are entangled historically and in the present day. It offers critical analyses of Arab engagements with the question of Jewish rights alongside Zionist and non-Zionist Jewish considerations of Palestinian identity and political rights. Together, the essays show that the Arab and Jewish questions, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in which they have become subsumed, belong to the same thorny history. Despite their major differences,

the historical Jewish and Arab questions are about the political rights of oppressed groups and their inclusion within exclusionary political communities – a question that continues to foment tensions in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. Shedding new light on the intricate relationships among Orientalism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, colonialism, and the impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this book reveals the inseparability of Arab and Jewish struggles for self-determination and political *equality*.



Beinin, Joel, Bassam Haddad and Sherene Seikaly (eds.): *A Critical Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa*, Stanford University Press, December 2020, 344 pp., ISBN 978-15-0-361383-6:

This book offers the first critical engagement with the political economy of the Middle East and North Africa. Challenging conventional wisdom on the origins and contemporary dynamics of capitalism in the region, these cutting-edge essays demonstrate how critical political economy can illuminate both historical and contemporary dynamics of the region and contribute to wider political economy debates from the vantage point of the Middle East. Leading scholars, representing several disciplines, contribute both thematic and country-specific analyses. Their writings critically examine major issues in political economy – notably, the mutual constitution of states, markets, and classes; the co-constitution of class, race, gender, and other forms of identity; varying modes of capital accumulation and the legal, political, and cultural forms of their regulation; relations among local, national, and global forms of capital, class, and culture; technopolitics; the role of war in the constitution of states and classes; and practices and cultures of domination and resistance.



Henneberg, Sabina: *Managing Transition. The First Post-Uprising Phase in Tunisia and Libya*, Cambridge University Press, December 2020, 275 pp., ISBN 978-11-0-884200-6:

Examining the factors that shaped the first interim governments of Tunisia and Libya, which formed in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprisings that brought down their governments, *Managing Transition* analyses each interim government to enhance our understanding of how political transition occurred within two North African countries.

Tracing the importance of the key decisions made during these transition periods, Sabina Henneberg demonstrates the importance of these decisions taken during the short phase between authoritarian collapse and first post-uprising elections, including decisions around leadership, institutional reform, transitional justice, and the electoral processes themselves. By documenting, in close detail, the important events of the 2011 Arab Uprisings, and the months that followed, this study shows that while pre-existing structures strongly influence the design and behaviour of first interim governments, actors' choices are equally important in shaping both immediate and longer-term phases of transition.

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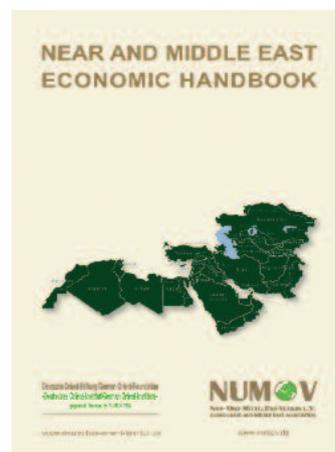
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For further information please see:

<https://tinyurl.com/y579pzqu>

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Date: 20-21 February 2021

Location: London, United Kingdom (online)

Organisation: London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research

The conference aims to bring together scholars from around the world to exchange and share their ideas and research findings in all relevant aspects of migration and integration. It will provide an effective interdisciplinary platform to discuss the most recent innovations, trends as well as practical challenges encountered and solutions adopted in the fields of migration, integration and cultural diversity.

For further information please see:

<https://integration.lcir.co.uk/>

Conference (online)

The Tudeh Party of Iran at 80: A Critical Re-Appraisal and Re-Evaluation

Date: Week commencing 29 March 2021

Location: St Andrews, United Kingdom (online)

Organisation: School of History and Institute for Iranian Studies, University of St Andrews

This conference seeks to explore the various dimensions of the Tudeh Party from its inception in 1941 to the present era. It aspires to focus on both the party's political evolution through decades of upheaval in Iran and exile in Europe, as well as the impact of the Tudeh on the Iranian arts, literature and cultural scenes.

For further information please see:

<https://tinyurl.com/y39cpawt>

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