

A Look Back at The 2011 Arab Revolts The Last Wave of Democratization, A Function of Capitalism, or A Challenge to Neoliberalism? A Multi-Factor Analysis

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Abstract: The 2011 Arab revolts have often been explained in a somewhat reductionist manner as the last chapter of Huntington's democratization waves and a celebrated march toward secular-liberal democracy, or as part of a world-wide revolt against neo-liberal capitalism, or simply as a function of the global expansion of capitalism. Rather than reducing these complex events to a single overarching factors, this article argues instead that they are better understood with reference to an interplay between global developments (changes in the international politico-military context) and local politico-economic, psychological, and cultural influences. I demonstrate this argument by focusing, from a macro-sociological perspective, on the major political-economic, technological, cultural, and psychological factors that helped shape the Arab revolts. These include people's reactions to inequality, lack of economic opportunities, and their demand for economic justice on the one hand, and their more general aspirations for social and political liberties and justice on the other. The article also addresses the impact of information and communications technologies (ICTs) on social mobilization and of religion on individual and political culture, and it further argues that these factors were complemented by people's search for dignity (*karama*) in the face of frustration with oppression as well as neoliberal social and economic policies.

Keywords: Arab revolts, "Arap Spring", dignity, Islam, Middle East, ICTs, revolutions, social mobilizations.

Öz: 2011 yılında başlayan Arap İsyanları sık sık indirgemeci bir biçimde bir veya birkaç faktöre dayanarak açıklanmakta, seküler-liberal demokrasiye doğru "küresel yürüyüşün" son safhası (veya "demokratikleşmenin dördüncü dalgası"), neoliberal kapitalizme karşı bir başkaldırı veya küresel kapitalizmin genişlemesinin bir sonucu ve gereği olarak görülmektedir. Bu makale ise bu isyanları daha iyi anlamak için tek bir ana faktöre indirgemek yerine uluslararası siyasi-askeri bağlamdaki değişimler çerçevesindeki birtakım küresel gelişmeler ile yerel siyasi, ekonomik ve psikolojik-kültürel etkilerin dikkate alınması gerektiğini varsaymaktadır. Bunun ortaya koymak üzere, makro-sosyolojik bir bakış açısından hareketle bu makalede Arap isyanlarının şekillendiren birtakım ana siyasi ve iktisadi, teknolojik, kültürel ve psikolojik faktörler incelenmektedir. Bu faktörler, insanların eşitsizlik ve ekonomik özgürlük ve fırsat eşitsizliğine karşı tepkileri ile siyasi ve iktisadi adalet talepleri, bilgi-iletişim teknolojilerinin (BİT'ler) toplumsal seferberlik üzerindeki etkileri, İslam'ın bireyler ve siyasi kültür üzerindeki etkisi ile bütün bu faktörleri tamamlayan bir psikolojik faktör olarak insanların onur (*kerame*) arayışı ve baskıcı yönetimler ve başarısız neoliberal iktisat politikaları sebebiyle rejimlere karşı duyulan öfkeyi ihtiva etmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Arap isyanları, "Arap Baharı", onur, İslam, Orta Doğu, iletişim teknolojileri, devrim, sosyal hareketler.

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Introduction

The world is still trying to come to terms with the 2011 Arab revolts, with both its causes and its repercussions. Early accounts by many in both the popular media and academia viewed them as the last episode of the glorious waves of democratization in a global march toward secular-liberal democracy, or as a function of capitalism's global expansion, or as part of a global revolt against neo-liberal capitalism. However, a closer look at this contentious process suggests that these three narratives are based on somewhat reductionist, one-sided, and Western-centric views that miss the complexities of these massive events, which unfolded across a vast region and affected millions of people, and thereby fail to adequately explain them. These early accounts have not aged well as they have few exponents today, but scholars, politicians, and others have not yet been able to come up with a satisfactory alternative yet. This paper is an effort to help fill this gap. I argue that the Arab revolts can better be explained with reference to an interplay between global developments (changes in the international politico-military context) and local politico-economic, psychological, and cultural influences. The revolts were a complex development that can only be explained by taking into account a diverse set of factors.¹

The article demonstrates this argument by revisiting, from a macro-sociological perspective, the common factors prevalent in most "Arab Spring" countries. These factors include (i) people's reactions to inequality, lack of economic opportunities, and their demand for economic justice and (ii) their more general (and long-oppressed) aspirations for social and political liberties and justice, as well as (iii) the urban character of the revolts and the impact of (iv) information and communications technologies (ICTs) and (v) religion on social mobilization. It also argues that these factors were complemented by (vi) participants' search for dignity in the face of frustration with oppression and neoliberal social and economic policies. Before embarking upon my analysis, it might be useful to briefly discuss the revolts' historical background.

1 In a previous study (Ardıç, 2012a), I examined the complex dynamics of the Arab revolts with reference to nine different factors. Here, I focus on only six common factors, revise some of my previous arguments in light of more recent literature, and present a deeper empirical analysis with new data.

Beneath the Commotion

Shaped by the international order of the post-World War I era, the “Middle East and North Africa” (MENA) have experienced a number of turning points over the past century. The first involved the creation of newly independent states in the region following the post-World War II decolonization process, including the creation of Israel in 1948. The second break came with the Camp David agreement (1978) and the Iranian Revolution (1979). The third, more deeply seated break was the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, which disturbed the bi-polar balance of the world order. The 1991 Gulf War led to rising anti-American sentiment in the region, and the general sense of uneasiness with the American occupation of Muslim countries laid the psychological ground for the mixed perception of September 11, which constitutes the fourth and last critical juncture before the Arab revolts (Ardiç & Duran, 2014).

The post-9/11 American “War on Terror” campaign and occupation of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) resulted in a power vacuum in the MENA region which gave Turkey and Iran greater freedom to maneuver and expand their spheres of influence. Also, with Iraq sliding into civil war, there remained virtually no major power representing the Arab world, for the Mubarak regime in Egypt had already lost its credibility on the Arab street because of its US- and Israel-dependent economic and foreign policies; it also had to shoulder the burden of failed liberalization policies that created many injustices, including hyperinflation, soaring unemployment, and a widening income gap (Kaymakçı, 2012; Pant, 2014; see also the section on “political and economic hardships” below). The negative consequences of the neo-liberal economic reforms that authoritarian Arab regimes had launched based on the Washington Consensus (Rand, 2013) were combined with a crisis of national dignity (*karama*) caused by Western-dependent foreign policies and humiliation in the face of Israeli aggression.

It is no coincidence therefore that the main slogans of the Arab revolts that shook some of these authoritarian regimes were “Bread, Freedom, and Dignity” and “The people demand the fall of the regime.” The Arab revolts, which initially puzzled many, politicians and analysts alike, were not without their own immediate past, either: in addition to the region-wide anti-American/anti-Israeli sentiment and protests since the Second Intifada (2000), the Kifaya movement was active in 2004, and the April 6 movement in 2008 before Tahrir.

Against the background of these developments, the uprising that began with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia on December 17, 2010, not

only led to the demise of the 23-year old regime of Ben Ali, who left the country on January 14, 2011, but also gave birth to waves of revolt throughout the MENA region that seemed to signal the end of the regional order, a legacy of the Cold War, and a move toward a new, more egalitarian order, which to this day remains unrealized. Several internal and external dynamics help account for this.

Packaging the Arab Revolts

Scholars of political revolutions do not agree on what constitutes a revolution or on when exactly a rebellion turns into a revolution (Ardıç, 2012a; cf. Goodwin, 2001). Different generations of scholars have sought to explain the causes of revolutionary uprisings in a number of ways. Early scholars, e.g. Sorokin (1925), Le Bon (1913/2004), explained revolutions through crowd psychology. The second generation did so by focusing on disequilibrium within the “social system” from a functionalist perspective (Smelser, 1962; Johnson 1966), or on psychological causes (discrimination, frustration, and aggression) (Morrison, 1978; Schwartz, 1971/1997), or on resource mobilization and power struggle among different socio-economic groups (Huntington, 1968/2006; Tilly, 1978, 1995; see also Stinchcombe, 1995). Both generations limited themselves to examining European and American revolutions. A third generation of scholars (e.g., Paige, 1975; Moore, 1978; Skocpol, 1979) extended the study of revolutions to non-Western cases and emphasized “external factors” (e.g., competition among states) as well as domestic ones (e.g., class conflict, elite struggles). Finally, a fourth generation (e.g., Sewell, 1985; Halliday, 1999) have both criticized and refined the earlier literature since the mid-1980s: They further expanded the scope of the literature beyond Western conflicts, paid attention to the role of ideologies and human agency, emphasized the significance of the international context, and integrated the study of revolutions with that of social movements (see Goldstone, 1980, 2001, 2003; Foran, 1993). Thus, an overview of the literature on revolts and revolutions suggests a growing trend toward adapting a multi-causal and multi-dimensional approach, which results in a sounder analysis of such complex events that avoids reductionism.

Immediately after the Arab revolts began in December 2010, however, three main explanatory frameworks dominated the popular and, to a certain extent, the academic literature. One view, rather conspiratorial in tone, explained the revolts as driven by capitalism’s need for new markets. This view held that multi-national corporations, and the Western politicians they controlled, wished to expand geog-

raphically to sell their products to new markets. This view ambiguously portrayed “transnational capital” as both an omnipotent actor and a helpless creature trying to maintain growth but falling in an unrecoverable existential crisis (e.g., Robinson, 2011; Jones, 2011).²

A second narrative, again from a leftist perspective, held that while these “revolutions” had started out as anti-imperialist, pro-democratic uprisings, they might soon be “stolen” by Western imperialism. In this view, “non-progressive” (i.e., non-socialist) participants could be easily co-opted by imperialism and fall prey to the West’s imperialist ambitions (e.g., Mackler, 2011; Badio, 2011; Achcar, 2012, 2013). Another version of this narrative simply claimed that the “Arab Spring” was an imperialist conspiracy, as “Americans are directly behind the turbulence or are helping the trouble makers [in order to] install new puppets” (*Communist Party of India*, 2012).

A third, “liberal” narrative was more sympathetic toward this process, portraying it as part of a long march toward secular democracy in the non-Western world and as a sign of Islamism’s failure in Muslim society. It assumed that the “color(ed) revolutions” in post-communist countries (Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova) and others elsewhere (the failed Cedar Revolution in Lebanon [2005] and the fall of governments in the Philippines [2001] and Ecuador [2005]) were part of the same singular process that had begun with Huntington’s “third wave” of revolutions in 1974. The “Arab Spring” was part of the fourth episode of these glorious “waves of democratization,” ending a century of “Arab exceptionalism” and spelling the victory of secularism (Huntington, 1991; Dobson, 2011; Ergil, 2011; Gershman, 2011; Grand, 2011; Mason, 2011; Taşpınar, 2011; *WMD*, 2012).

All these narratives suffer from reductionism, one-sidedness, and myopia because they ignore the interplay between internal and external factors that shaped the 2011 revolts. These Western-centric accounts also deny the participants any agency: they imply that the Arab-Muslim people of the “Middle East” cannot exercise any true agency in history. They treat these revolts as if they are an outcome of the ope-

2 Some (e.g., Amin, 2010) argued that the “Arab Spring” represented the last great crisis of capitalism and would necessarily lead to its collapse and socialism’s rise worldwide. The socialist participants in the uprisings, too, often characterized their action as a “fight against global, transnational capital(ism)” (e.g., *Comrades from Cairo*, 2011). Some Western corporations’ perhaps over-eager moves to invest in the region (e.g., in Libya after the fall of Qaddafi) fed this image (e.g., Shane, 2011).

rations of an “invisible hand” pushing peoples and states toward a universal, socialist or liberal, world order—implying the imagined end of history. Moreover, even their anti-American/anti-imperialist versions help discursively perpetuate the existing US hegemony by reducing the behavior of local actors to no more than the product of American/Western agitation, thereby rejecting the possibility of local agency and power (see Sayyid, 2011). Though it is true that international powers (particularly the USA and Russia) probably tried to develop (multiple and shifting) strategies to shape the revolutionary processes in both Eastern Europe and the MENA region, attributing these massive processes solely to these plans is implausible.³

These narratives are reductionist because they reduce the causes of such a complex set of events to one single, overarching factor, treating the Arab revolts as a function of the capitalistic need for new markets, or of a long global march toward democracy led by a metaphysical “invisible hand,” or of an outright American conspiracy. As such, they not only miss the complexity of these events but also reproduce the age-old Orientalist prejudices against non-Western peoples, particularly Arabs. Therefore, a sound analysis of this process requires a refined perspective emphasizing multiple factors.

Making Sense of the Arab Revolts: A Multi-Factor Analysis

Scholarly analysis requires a balance between simplifying complex events to make them more intelligible and maintaining enough complexity to keep the explanation accurate. This can be achieved by limiting the number of causal factors one employs as well as avoiding reductionism. Thus my examination adopts a macro-sociological perspective focusing only on the common factors that explain why the revolts occurred across the Arab world. That world is not monolithic. Different Arab countries have distinct features (see Bellin, 2012; Brownlee, Masoud, & Reynolds, 2013; cf. Altunışık, 2011) and were therefore affected in various ways by the uprisings (Delacoura, 2012). But they also share much, including a language, history, and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity and religion, as well as certain economic and political commonalities.

3 I have previously examined the crucial impact of the changing security environment on the Arab revolts, including the lack of superpower support for the regimes, which undermined their legitimacy, and the US-led, post-9/11 “War on Terror” campaign, which fundamentally threatened their sovereignty (Ardıç, 2012a).

It is not uncommon to take transnational regions as a unit of analysis in the long tradition of comparative-historical sociology. My analysis here is based on a Weberian methodology that favors multi-causal explanation in understanding complex human phenomena. Thus, it avoids reducing the causes of the Arab revolts to a single all-embracing factor, such as class conflict or religious fervor. Given the multiplicity of the backgrounds, social and ideological compositions, and grievances and demands of the actual participants in the revolts from Tunisia to Yemen, a multi-causal approach informed by a macro-sociological perspective is useful in explaining this highly complex issue.

There are three main ways of doing a (historical-)sociological analysis (see Skocpol, 1984): applying a general (theoretical) model to a case or a set of cases; providing a detailed narrative of case(s) in an interpretive manner; and analyzing case(s) by examining certain, significant aspects to make “deterministic” but historically specific arguments. Often researchers combine two of these. Here I draw on the third, “analytic” approach, but also make a limited use of narrative interpretation.

My brief analysis is based on six principal factors: people’s search for social and economic justice in the face of persistent poverty; their demand for social and political liberties; their desire for dignity, stemming from their frustration with oppressive regimes; the urban character of the revolts; the impact of ICTs; and the impact of Islam. The first three factors (which will be discussed in less detail below as they are more easily detectable) are fundamental causes that were echoed by a common slogan chanted across the region: “Bread, freedom, and dignity” (or sometimes “Bread, freedom, and justice”). The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia in December 2010, which sparked the initial protests, is a semiotic microcosm of the entire phenomenon: The 26-year-old Bouazizi might have been expected to become an educated, urban professional or civil servant; instead, he was denied a regular job and even prevented from working in the informal sector as a street vendor after a humiliating encounter with a police officer (Ryan, 2011). Facing a life of persistent poverty amid an absence of economic freedoms and the pervasive presence of a corrupt, patrimonial, oppressive security state, Bouazizi sacrificed his life in protest.

Political and Economic Hardships

For decades, most MENA societies were ruled by dictators who, backed by the world’s two superpowers, oppressed their own people with an iron rule, particularly

through military and police violence. These *mukhabarat* regimes denied their people basic rights and liberties (political participation and freedom of expression, association, travel, etc.) in the name of security and stability (Sayyid, 2011). Recently, these human rights abuses, especially the use of violence to suppress dissent and the silencing of political opposition, have become more visible thanks to improvements in information technologies, which has further fueled the sense of injustice and public anger against the ruling elite (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Salih, 2013).

People also suffered from perpetual poverty and economic inequalities under these regimes, which had established a corporatist system concentrating economic resources in the “dynasties” and their cronies. The Mubarak family, for example, is estimated to have accumulated a fortune of between \$40 billion and \$70 billion, and 39 officials and businessmen close to Gamal Mubarak made fortunes averaging more than \$1 billion each (Goldstone, 2011)—all while the masses over whom they ruled were mired in economic stagnation and dire poverty.

For decades, the ruling elites shared their countries’ resources (particularly oil) with Western powers or the Soviet Union in return for protection, causing both economic and legitimation crises. The ensuing socio-economic problems affected many Arab societies during at the turn of the century. For instance, according to a 2005 official Egyptian survey, 92% of all those unemployed were below the age of 30. About half of all the unemployed were in the 20–25 age group, with an unemployment rate between 30 and 40% during the 1995–2005 period.⁴ Moreover, unemployment was much higher among the better educated, and three times higher among women than men.

During the run-up to the revolts, blatant corruption among the elites fueled public anger against them and increased the income gap between them and the masses (Lesch, 2011; Winckler, 2013). Furthermore, the failure of neo-liberal policies across the Arab world created high rates of unemployment and inflation and a large income gap, causing the middle class to remain small in size—creating “mid-

4 According to UN statistics, half the population of the MENA region was under the age of 25 at the time of the revolts and the number of 15–24 year olds had doubled in the previous 30 years, increasing from 44.6 million in 1980 to 88.1 million in 2010. Also, the median age for MENA countries, excluding Qatar, the UAE, and Bahrain, was below the world average (29) in 2010: 24 for Egypt, 21 for Syria and Jordan, and 17 for Yemen. Furthermore, it was primarily the young who were hurt the most by worsening economic conditions: over 80% of the unemployed were below the age of 30 in Egypt in 2006, and 82% of the unemployed had never worked before; similarly, about 75% of the unemployed were under 30 in Jordan in 2007 (Roudi, 2011, pp. 2–5; cf. Assaad & Barsoum, 2007). See Hoffman and Jamal (2012) for a critical examination of the role of the youth in the Arab revolts.

le-class poverty,” particularly in Egypt (Ibrahim, 2002a; Kuhn, 2012; Adeel & Awadallah, 2013; Alexander & Bassiony, 2014). Austerity measures imposed as part of structural-adjustment programs and the impact of the recent global financial crisis resulted in a region-wide 32% rise in food prices in 2010 (Ianchovichina et al., 2015) and a soaring youth unemployment rate of 26%, double the global average, in 2011. (It would also exceed 27% the next year—see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Youth unemployment in the Arab world, 2008–2015

Source: World Bank (2018)

Rising education levels across the region raised expectations among the young. But governments’ efforts to expand the public sector could not keep up with the rapid population growth in the region (Bteddini, 2012), leading to frustration with the increasing difficulty of securing public-sector employment and leaving many people unemployed or in low-paying and ill-suited private sector jobs (UN ESCWA, 2014). The unemployment rates were also slightly higher in urban areas (Hassan & Sassanpour, 2008, pp. 4–7). Furthermore, 25% of self-employed households in non-agricultural sectors were poor (El-Laithy et al., 2003).

At the country level, likewise, there were stark differences between poor countries and a small group of oil-rich ones: Saudi Arabia’s per capita income was more than ten times that of Yemen—\$24,020 vs. \$2,330 in 2009 (Roudi, 2011, p. 3). Therefore, political-economic problems, especially those of the educated, urbanized population, played a significant role in the emergence of the revolts (see also

Campante & Chor, 2012; Ansani & Daniele, 2012; Bayat, 2015; Ianchovichina et al., 2015; 'Ayasira, 2016). As Perry Anderson (2011) has observed,

Beneath the commotion now shaking the Arab world have been volcanic social pressures: polarization of incomes, rising food prices, lack of dwellings, massive unemployment of educated—and uneducated—youth, amid a demographic pyramid without parallel in the world (p. 9).

Search for Dignity

The psychological drive underlying the move to stand up and speak out against these political and economic hardships was the search for dignity and respect (*karama*) by the long-oppressed and humiliated people of the Arab world. The effects of perpetual inequality and poverty were exacerbated by exposure to continuous violence and humiliation, widespread corruption, patrimonial-clientelistic relations, and favoritism, which further alienated the masses from the elites (see Davutoğlu, 2012). For instance, a survey by the Egyptian Information and Decision Support Center reported that 70% of jobs were secured through favoritism in 2007 (Hassan & Sassanpour, 2008, p. 11). Research also shows that people in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Tunisia, and Egypt were among the world's least happy people, especially in terms of their dissatisfaction with the quality of public services (Ianchovichina et al., 2015). The people's desire for dignity and respect and their anger and frustration at a long history of discrimination, nepotism, poverty, and violence were reflected in the slogans protesters adopted across the MENA region: "The people demand the fall of the regime," often combined with a call for *karama* (Dunne, 2013). Thus, concludes Gerges (2014),

a unifying thread runs through all of [the revolts]: a call for dignity, empowerment, political citizenship, social justice, and taking back the state from presidents-for-life, as well as their families and crony capitalists who hijacked it.

Similarly, Delacoura (2012) observes that "more than anything else, the rebellions were a call for dignity and a reaction to being humiliated by arbitrary, unaccountable and increasingly predatory tyrannies" (p. 67). This factor probably helped the participants transcend the threshold of fear, the main psychological barrier to such a risky endeavor, as was also the case in the Palestinian Intifada.

Coupled with the regime violence and oppression they faced domestically, another factor affecting the Arab-Muslim people's motivations and underlying desire

for *karama* in the run-up to the revolts was likely the decades-long history of humiliation by, and political-military failures against, Israel. The recent roots of this “awakening” go back to the early 2000s, when people across the Muslim world took to the streets in solidarity with the Second Palestinian Intifada (2000) and, later, to protest against the US invasion of Iraq (2003):

In Egypt as elsewhere, the upsurge in democratic activism was not born in a vacuum. For many young activists in Egypt, the second *intifada* was the initial galvanising event that bonded their hitherto isolated voices. The anti-Iraq war movement ... marked its coalescence. (Azimi, 2005; cf. Nez-à-Nez, 2011)

This activism, essentially born as a reaction to these two developments, eventually culminated in more organized movements (and sometimes coalitions of groups with different ideological agendas) targeting more specific issues—for example, the Kifaya movement, a coalition of Islamic and secular activists formed in Egypt in 2004–2005 to prevent Mubarak’s re-election. However, Kifaya could not turn into a mass movement, partly because of the Ikhwan’s reluctance to cooperate with them (Gerges, 2018, p. 363; cf. Azimi, 2005). These diverse groups (including many ordinary citizens) took to the streets and squares again in 2011.

The Urban Setting

The Arab revolts took place primarily in urban settings, rather than in rural areas turning into guerilla warfare – except for the protracted cases of Syria and Libya. Protests were mostly organized in streets and squares (notoriously Cairo’s Tahrir and Tripoli’s Green/Martyrs’ squares), on campuses and in conference halls, and in the virtual space that was an integral part of urban life. Thus the “Arab city” functioned as the physical and social space of struggle: it played a role as the major site where protests were organized, the masses were mobilized, and, ultimately, the regimes stepped in to repress the protesting city residents. Even in Libya, some cities stood out as major sites of massacre, bombing, resistance, and revolution, namely, Benghazi, Tripoli, Sirte, and Misrata; whereas Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Dara’a functioned as the centers of action in Syria (Saleh, 2017). An important consequence of the revolts’ urban character was the peaceable character of the protesters: they frequently adopted the strategy of occupying and camping on squares and streets, helping minimize “revolutionary violence” (unlike the regimes).

Furthermore, the city and its squares also functioned as the “democratic space of revolutionary occupation” (Döşemeci, 2011) during the revolts. This was par-

ticularly the case with Cairo's Tahrir Square, the symbolic (and actual) site of the abortive Egyptian revolution. The activists' main strategy was to physically occupy the square: for three weeks, hundreds of thousands of them stayed in Tahrir day and night. While regime forces gradually withdrew, protestors grew in number, at times up to a million people— especially on Fridays. This paradoxically resulted in both an opportunity and a challenge for the activists: They owned the square, showing their power and determination, but they also had to provide their own food, security, and cleaning and health services. Thus, they shared both the joy and the responsibility of their collective action in Tahrir Square. Armed with socio-economic, political, and psychological motivations in the face of frustrated expectations, these urban participants of the Arab revolts made effective use of another weapon: information and communication technologies.

The ICTs as “Weapons of Mass Communication”

Although streets and squares hosted many of the protests, much collective action was organized in virtual space, too—another urban characteristic of the revolts. The Arab revolts were the first of their kind, where large-scale demonstrations were relatively easily organized across different countries thanks to the use of previously unavailable ICTs, including “social media” (particularly Facebook and Twitter), cell phones, and satellite TV networks. While some observers were skeptical of social media's impact (e.g., Gladwell, 2011; Heaven, 2011; Kravets, 2011; Penny, 2011; Lawson, 2015), an empirical analysis of over three million tweets, gigabytes of YouTube content, and thousands of blog posts during the protests suggests that they actually “played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring” by spreading ... inspiring stories of protest and “democratic ideas across international borders” (Howard et al., 2011, p. 2; cf. McGarty et al., 2014).

When discussing the impact of technology, however, one should be careful to avoid technological determinism: Although modern technology is not simply an instrument that actors use however they wish, as it can and does influence social relations within circumstances imposed by the socio-historical context, it does not have an agency of its own, either (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999). Technology does not exist in a vacuum—its influence occurs only in and through social relations, including military and political power relations, economic interests, normative meaning systems, and even ideological drives. Thus, actors' use of ICTs during the Arab revolts is only meaningful in the context of the social circumstances that

conditioned them. For example, during much of 2011 it was the young protestors, rather than the regimes ruled by old people, who made the most effective use of Twitter and Facebook for organizational purposes (Howard & Hussain, 2013).⁵

As products of ongoing globalization and technological revolution, ICTs functioned as “weapons of mass communication” (Mann, 2003) against these regimes. Three forms of ICTs stood out as crucial: the satellite TV, the cell phone, and the internet, including WikiLeaks, which helped start the protests in Tunisia by revealing the dirty secrets of the regime, particularly the Ben Ali family’s corruption and wealth (see e.g., WikiLeaks, 2009). Activists used ICTs in different ways and to different degrees: While text-messaging probably played a limited part because of its geographical limits, though it was important in organizing protests (Kravets, 2011), protesters created many Facebook pages, using them together with Twitter and text-messaging in organizing, communicating with fellow demonstrators, and spreading their messages (and pictures) across the globe (Ackerman, 2011; Beckett, 2011; J. Rosen, 2011; R. Rosen, 2011; Vargas, 2011; Hussain & Howard, 2013; Bayat, 2013). In Tunisia, for instance, where the internet was routinely censored, while there were some 800,000 Facebook users in October 2009, this number reached 1.97 million, almost a fifth of Tunisia’s total population and over half of its internet users, by the time Ben Ali fled the country in January 2011 (Pollock, 2011).

ICTs also provided activists with an opportunity to gain worldwide recognition, legitimacy, and solidarity and undermined the legitimacy of autocratic regimes. Some were aware of this: The Mubarak regime shut down nearly all internet activity on January 28, 2011, including the “withdrawal of more than 3,500 Border Gateway Protocol (BGP) routes by Egyptian ISPs.” Aimed at blocking communication among activists, this ban resulted in the shutting down of 88% of Egyptian internet access that day (Williams, 2011). Similarly, Qaddafi ordered the internet to be shut down in Libya as of February 18, 2011 (Reuters, Feb. 19, 2011). Finally, social media also made the news coverage of the events more pluralistic, partly breaking the monopoly and manipulation of (particularly Western) media conglomerates (Schillinger, 2011).

On the other hand, satellite news networks such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya often worked in conjunction with social media during the revolts. The total num-

5 The Syrian Ba’ath regime was an exception, however: There were not only many pro-Assad Facebook sites but also a number of online activists who called themselves the “Syrian Electronic Army” and waged a cyber war against opposition targets (see Syrian Electronic Army, 2012; Amos, 2011; Noman, 2012).

ber of TV networks broadcasting in Arabic was estimated to be 700 (Fandy, 2007), with the pro-opposition networks providing alternative perspectives on news and opinion. They also often integrated social media and their own websites into their coverage. This was particularly true for Al Jazeera, which had long been an important news source and had a reputation for independence and professionalism. But it was during the Arab revolts that its influence and popularity skyrocketed:

Al Jazeera has consistently been able to influence public opinion. Many Arab rulers had accused it of inciting protest and dissent. Undoubtedly, the role Al Jazeera played in the Arab Spring was unprecedented, especially during the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings. Many Tunisians credited the channel with speeding the overthrow of Ben Ali's regime.... The role of Al Jazeera in inspiring the Libyan and Yemeni protesters is also undeniable. (Souaiaia, 2011)

These ICTs also produced a “demonstration effect”: Success stories spread just as fast as stories of oppression and violence across the region, not only raising awareness about human rights violations but also showing that it was possible to do something about them (Lesch, 2013). Thus, the pioneering activists in Tunisia and Egypt showed others that toppling a dictator was achievable. They also showed them the tactics and tools to be used for successful protests.⁶ The strategy of occupying physical settings, in particular, seems to have influenced some other movements around the globe, as it was replicated in US cities (with the “Occupy Wall Street” movement), London, Tel Aviv, Istanbul, and even Beijing. Another somewhat peculiar feature of the revolts was the role played by religion in mobilizing and motivating protesters, which is often neglected by analysts (e.g. Bamyeh, 2011; Zubaida, 2011).

The Role of Religion in the Arab Revolts

The positive association between religiosity and political mobilization has been well documented (e.g., Johnston & Figa, 1988; Harris, 1999; Jamal, 2005). While the Arab revolts were the product of a variety of groups with differing demands, expectations, motivations, and ideologies, from liberals and socialists to Islamists

6 Journalist William Dobson reported that Mohamed Adel, a youth leader he interviewed in Cairo, emphasized the impact of Tunisian protesters on their own Egyptian revolution in early 2011 (Dobson, 2011). Similarly, Carl Gershman reported that Sam Rainsy, a Cambodian exile, told him that “They [Middle Eastern activists] showed that it can be done. Now people have the idea that change is possible, and that’s the most important thing of all” (Gershman, 2011).

and “ordinary” religious people (Nugent, Jamal, & Masoud, 2016), the common demand for regime change and justice had an inclusive appeal, bringing many together from different corners of the Arab street and making their ideological divides less palpable. I argue, however, that Islam was the strongest of these ideologies (broadly conceived) and appealed to the most people. Its influence was also the most visible compared to others, particularly liberalism and secularism—though socialists were a vocal minority. Thus, Hoffman and Jamal’s statistical analysis on Egypt and Tunisia (2014) shows that “the Arab Spring protests were not, in general, motivated by anti-religious sentiment. On the contrary, individuals who read the Qur’an more often were three to four times as likely as others to participate in the protests” (p. 600).

Islam affected both Islamists and the wider “political culture” (used here in a broad sense to refer to a set of underlying values and symbols upon which narrower ideological doctrines and party politics draw) as well as the psychological motivations of many people to participate in demonstrations. For instance, when leaders of Libya’s National Transitional Council (NTC) announced Qaddafi’s death at a press conference, “even secular Muslim journalists started chanting ‘*Allahu Akbar!*’” The NTC further announced that Islamic sharia would be adopted as the main source of law in Libya after the revolution (Abu Toameh, 2011).

Because Islam has historically been one of the most powerful social forces in shaping political culture in the Arab world, it is no surprise that Islamic concepts and symbols were a significant ideological background factor that left a mark upon the revolts.⁷ Furthermore, Islamic movements have always been the main threat to the oppressive regimes in the region (Ibrahim, 2002b; Rosefsky-Wickham, 2002; Hirschkind, 2006). Many Islamic groups, particularly the Ikhwan in Egypt and Syria, were armed with an ideological repertoire for resistance derived from a politicized interpretation of Islamic activism. They also played a significant role in combating the region’s widespread poverty and inequality through their vast network of charity organizations and volunteers, for they were “able to work through mosques and charities, and [had] the ability to dispense goods, services and jobs,” all of which “became ever more important after the withdrawal of state services and subsidies” (Zubaida, 2011).

7 For an analysis of Islam’s significant role in shaping the political culture among both Islamists and secularists in North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, India, and Turkey during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, see Ardiç 2012b.

Islamic opposition groups often had to fight against the perception that they represented an “Islamist threat,” a perception successfully marketed by the regimes “via the state-controlled press, state-owned think-tanks and universities” (Brumberg, 2011). They did so by working through mosques, charities, and alternative media.⁸ Always working under state pressure, these Islamic groups enhanced civil networks from the bottom up to bring middle-class people, professionals in particular, into closer contact with lower-class citizens through communal and charity activities. They thus fostered trust and emotional solidarity “along these horizontal lines, indirectly leading to the development of new social networks and, potentially, the diffusion of new ideas” (Clark, 2004, p. 4). They also frequently capitalized on the failed neo-liberal policies that had, since the 1980s, “led to the transfer of state assets to a narrow circle of cronies around the dynasties of ruling figures, opening the way for much gain through contracts, licenses and rampant corruption” (Zubaida, 2011).

Though these Islamic movements were not always the initiators of revolts as organized movements, they were actively involved in determining the course of the events. For instance, Sarra Grira of France 24 reported on April 5, 2011, that “Islamists are at the forefront of anti-government protests” even in relatively secular Tunisia (Grira, 2011). Hoffman and Jamal (2014, p. 601) show that support for political Islam had a positive impact on participation in protests generally, despite some variation among different countries. Moreover, Islamic activism was at the center of the recent “Arab Awakening”: the protests by millions of people throughout the Muslim world against Israeli aggression leading to the Second Intifada (2000) and the American occupation of Iraq (2003) helped, as discussed above, prepare the ground for the 2011 revolts.

Islam’s role was evident in the slogans and discourses of the activists, too: many chanted “God is Great,” referred to different Qur’anic verses and Islamic idioms, called the victims of revolutions “martyrs,” and prayed collectively during demonstrations. Individual religiosity was also strongly correlated with participation in the protests (Hoffman & Jamal, 2014, pp. 600–602). Furthermore, many Islamic groups actively participated in the protests from the very beginning: for instance,

8 Hirschkind (2006) has shown that Islamic opposition groups in Egypt and elsewhere effectively employed a popular Islamic media form, the cassette sermon, which they had for decades produced and distributed via clandestine methods to spread their messages. In this way, they were able to produce an “ethical soundscape” and different forms of Islamic “counterpublics,” thereby transforming the political geography of the region.

although Islamic political activism had for a long time been suppressed and remained relatively invisible in Egypt, the Ikhwan, which initially preferred to keep a low profile, played a leading role in both organizing the demonstrations and providing political and logistical support for the activists in Egypt (Rosefsky-Wickham, 2002, 2011; Abu Toameh, 2011; Hessler, 2011).

Unlike many global media outlets and analysts who often downplayed the role of religion (e.g., Bamyeh, 2011; Brumberg, 2011; Rock-Singer, 2011; Grand, 2011; Zubaida, 2011), some Western politicians were aware of its importance: In fact, during the first days of the Egyptian revolution (Feb. 2, 2011) when Mubarak's supporters—armed and mounted on camels—attacked the protestors in Tahrir Square, Tony Blair congratulated Mubarak and warned him “against a rush to elections that could bring the Muslim Brotherhood to power” (*The Guardian*, Feb. 2, 2011). As the results of the first round of elections (December 2011) show, Blair was right to expect a Brotherhood victory: the Brotherhood's FJP got approximately 40% of votes and won 49% of seats in the parliament, and the salafi-oriented al-Nur Party received over 20% of votes. Similarly, in Tunisia, the Islamic opposition, led by the En-Nahda movement, regularly participated in the anti-government demonstrations and won the subsequent elections with a clear margin (Beissinger, Jamal, & Mazur, 2015). Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which was less popular than En-Nahda, was also at the forefront of the protests in Tunisia (Gira, 2011).

Moreover, the choices of Islamic groups in some cases played a decisive role in how the revolts affected the regime. For instance, when King Muhammad VI of Morocco conceded the constitutional amendments enacted in June 2011 that allowed more political participation and enhanced the parliament's authority, the Islamist opposition led by the Justice and Development Party accepted these compromises. The King also promised that Islam would still be kept as the basis of law and national identity in the revised constitution (Brumberg, 2011).

On the other hand, not only Islamic movements but also other participants drew on the rich repertoire of anti-oppression and justice-centered content found in the cultural “toolbox” provided by Islamic sources, including the Qur'an (e.g., 2:193, 16:90, 42:39), the prophetic traditions, and the Islamic tradition in general. As Hoffman and Jamal (2014) observed, in both Egypt and Tunisia, “Qur'an readers are significantly more likely to perceive inequalities in their treatment from the regime and are more supportive of democracy than are nonreaders” (p. 603). Moreover, Friday prayers and sermons, already an important venue for spreading Islamic messages, became increasingly politicized during the revolts. Thus, largest

demonstrations in Tahrir Square in 2011 took place following some of the (collective) Friday prayers. Furthermore, many mosques, particularly those controlled by the Brotherhood, functioned as logistical centers for the protests and as a locus of anti-government agitation (*The Telegraph*, 2011; Hessler, 2011). In the words of one journalist with no great affection for Islamism,

What many Western observers have failed to notice is that most of the antigovernment demonstrations that have been sweeping the Arab world over the past ten months were often launched from mosques following Friday prayers. This is especially true regarding Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Jordan. (Abu Toameh, 2011)

Likewise, prominent religious leaders played an important role, both from the pulpit and through ICTS, by repeatedly condemning oppression and calling on people to join anti-regime protests across the region. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, for example gave a sermon on February 21, 2011, a few days into the Libyan revolt, at a Friday prayer attended by tens of thousands of people in Tahrir, where he congratulated the Egyptian revolutionaries and urged the Libyans to join the insurgency. In a later interview with Al Jazeera, he condemned Qaddafi's violent reaction to the protests and issued a fatwa calling for his assassination (Michot, 2011). He further called on Muslim governments to recognize the NTC and send arms and ammunition to Libyan rebels (*Gulf Times*, 2011). Al-Qaradawi also issued several fatwas and declarations encouraging Syrians to fight against Bashar al-Assad and condemning him for his oppression (e.g., al-Qaradawi, 2012). Al-Qaradawi spoke to audiences throughout the region through his fatwas and speeches, which were widely circulated in the Muslim world, and his popular TV program "Sharia and Life" on Al Jazeera, which attracted "tens of millions [of viewers] worldwide" (Kirkpatrick, 2011; cf. Rock-Singer, 2011).

Finally, activists from Tunisia to Egypt often voiced their sympathy with the Palestinian cause against Israel; Hamas in turn announced its full support for the Syrian opposition organized under the Free Syrian Army. Therefore, Zubaida's (2011) claim that the Tunisian "Jasmine" and the Egyptian "Nile" revolutions "seemed to eschew religion and nationalism in favour of classic political demands of liberty, democracy and economic justice" does not hold much water. It also misses the fact that common elements of the demands across the region—namely, justice and the overthrow of tyranny—had already been the core elements of the Islamic opposition's discourse. Therefore, the widespread view in the West that associates democracy with secularization was shown once again to be misleading (see also Esposito, 2011; Filali-Ansary, 2012; Hoffman & Jamal, 2014; cf. Ardiç, 2012b).

Conclusion

The Arab revolts and the aspirations and demands of educated urban people for justice, dignity, affluence, and freedom initially promised to reshape the MENA region. Emerging in the context of a long history of oppression, corporatist economic structures, and Western (and previously Soviet) intrusion in the region, the revolts were due in part to the pressing impact of international structures and institutions upon the autocratic regimes of the region and in part to the internal contradictions and dynamics of Arab societies themselves. Therefore, these revolts should not be seen as a result of an imperialist conspiracy or as part of a class-based, international uprising against capitalism, nor as the last episode or “wave” of the purported global democratization process that has been ongoing since the 1990s.

Instead, the Arab revolts can be explained only with reference to multiple factors, some of which have been discussed here, including political and economic crises and people’s reaction to them, as well as people’s search for dignity and respect in the face of a long history of corruption, oppression, and domestic and foreign humiliation. My analysis has also addressed the roles played by Islam and ICTs, particularly social media and news networks, as well as the urban character of the protests. Some other factors, however, were excluded from the analysis, such as the different roles (active vs. passive) played by armies in different states and the changing regional security context due to international interventions and shifts in superpower backing (see note 1, above).

The impact of these multiple factors underlines the inadequacy of the above-mentioned reductionist narratives, which are more ideological than scholarly. These narratives also reflect the initial optimism by many in the West with regard to the direction of the revolts—that they would result in a better, more democratic future. Like earlier politico-military developments in the region, including military coups d’état and the speedy rise and spread of authoritarian regimes across the Arab world, from Nasser’s Egypt to Algeria, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, the revolts that started in Tunisia and reached their peak in Tahrir Square, too, were thought to be spreading at a fast pace (Owen, 2012, p. 374; Saleh, 2017 p. 7). For Dallmayr (2011, p. 640), for example, the “Egyptian democratic revolution” of 2011–2012 represented one of the three principal responses of the Muslim world to Western modernity—the others being Turkey’s secular Kemalist revolution and Iran’s Islamic revolution. For him, this new revolution had the potential to solve the problems of state-religion relations arising from Kemalist *laïcité* and Iranian

theocracy by producing an alternative democratic model that would find a healthy synthesis between Islam and democracy. Likewise, Dabashi (2012) claimed that the “Arab Spring” would end the colonial era (and even the existing “post-colonial” order) in the region.

However, it quickly became clear that democratic transition in the MENA region would be much harder than it had been in Eastern Europe in the 1990s (Pillar, 2011, p. 18), for the US and Europe did not change their attitude toward the region and continued to support its authoritarian regimes based on their strategic calculations—the security of the region’s oil, the war on terror, preserving the pro-Western balance of power, controlling migration, etc. Thus, they refused to risk “endangering” their “vital interests” by betting on a potential Arab democracy (Hollis, 2012). The autocratic regimes, too, were successful in suppressing civil society and reproducing their authoritarianism (Springborg, 2011, pp. 5–6).

Though the Arab revolts could have been an important turning point for the region, promising a paradigmatic change in terms of popular legitimacy, this change has largely been aborted, indicating that a democratic transition will at best be a long and challenging process. Though Islamic movements were initially thought to have benefited from these revolts the most, this proved not to be the case. The Ikhwan was declared a terrorist organization after the 2013 Egyptian coup, and En-Nahda has been experiencing some hardships in Tunisia, both of which signal a new political environment in which the very existence of Islamic movements is securitized. Consequently, the opportunity to integrate Islamic movements into the democratic process and thereby to prevent their potential radicalization has been missed. The Gulf countries, moreover, managed to escape the potentially transformative process right from the start—Bahrain being a partial exception.

The democratic-secularism narrative criticized here might have played into the Western powers’ response to the revolts in such a way that not only democracy failed but secularism (if it was happening at all) failed too. This has increased the oppression under which religious groups operate, alienating them from the democratic process, and likely making them less inclined to pursue in peaceful democratic reform movements in the future. This could spell trouble not just for the future of democracy in the region, but for the future security of the West and its interests as well.

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