PArtecipazione e COnflitto
http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)
PACO, Issue 14(2) 2021: 511-529
DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v14i2p511

Published 15 July, 2021

RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVOLUTION AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA. GLOBAL POLITICS, PROTESTING AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN THE REGION AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the current political phase in South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) or Middle East and North Africa (MENA) by contextualising it in global politics. First, the transformations of the nation state and neoliberal capitalism are discussed along with the mobilisational strategies shared among social movements in the region, Europe and North America, Africa, and Latin America. Second, the paper discusses how such transnational developments have influenced the scholarship on SWANA/MENA politics, highlighting a number of epistemological breaks in the content and process of knowledge production.

KEYWORDS: South West Asia and North Africa, Middle East, North Africa, Arab Uprisings, counter-revolution, knowledge production

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1. Introduction

This Special Issue sees the light ten years after the beginning of a revolutionary and counter-revolutionary phase in South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) or Middle East and North Africa (MENA), whose consequences and outcomes will not be known for quite some time. In December 2010, the Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in an act of extreme desperation *vis-à-vis* constant police harassment. His self-immolation is conventionally taken as the starting point of the "Arab uprisings", which,

from Tunisia, eventually spread to the rest of the region and beyond, reverberating across the African continent, Europe, and North America.

The Tunisian ruler Ben Ali, who had controlled the state for more than two decades, fled the country on 14 January 2011, and a few days later, mass protests in Egypt led to the occupation of Cairo's Tahrir Square and the resignation of Hosni Mubarak – Egypt's ruler for three decades – on 11 February 2011. Tunisia and Egypt were however just two of the countries where protests took place. In 2011, people in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Morocco, Iraq, Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Kuwait also took to the streets. Although the roots of the uprisings were shared across the region, the protest movements followed different trajectories, leading to reforms, conflict, and/or state repression depending on the socio-political, institutional, and economic conditions in each country (Davis and Serres 2013; Teti et al. 2018).

While at first the uprisings were seen as the inevitable march of democracy and democratisation across the Arab world – "the completion of the 1989 revolutions" (Kaldor 2011) – the year 2013 is conventionally considered to be the turning point revealing the intricacies of local and trans-regional politics, and not for the good necessarily. The Army-led coup d'état in Egypt, which took place on 3 July 2013 and dislodged the Muslim Brotherhood from power, and the aftermath of the Saudi-led repression in Bahrain concluded the first chapter of this historical phase, just as foreign interventions in Syria, Yemen and Libya complicated the political situations in the countries and regionally. These events consolidated the Saudi Arabia-Egypt-Israel axis, and its alliance with the United States and the EU, as the powerhouse in the region and a potent counter-revolutionary force.[1] It was supposed to stem the revolutionary wave and stabilise the region, but it did not happen. In fact, external interventions in early uprisings drew further interference from a range of foreign actors, including Russia, plunging a number of countries into civil war (Libya, Yemen, Syria) and further complicating them.

However, protests demanding change did not stop despite the strength of the counter-revolutionary reaction. They continued after 2013, moving the geographical pivot of revolutionary politics eastward, taking Turkey in. The Gezi Park protests in Istanbul erupted in the spring of 2013 and posed a serious threat to the stability of the AKP rule, opening up discussions about authoritarian neoliberalism at the national and international level. In the same year, the Sunnis of Iraq also took to the streets in protest against the sectarian system that had been set up following the 2003 US-led invasion, also demanding services and democratic accountability (Chams El-Dine 2018). The repression of these protests favoured the military success of the Islamic State in the Sunni areas of Iraq, as Merone explains in this Special Issue. The year 2015 saw mass protest movements in Lebanon (the "You Stink" movement), with demonstrators calling for better public services and an accountable policy-making process. The protesters also criticised the sectarian system in place in Lebanon. By 2019, Jordan, Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon again saw another massive wave of anti-regime and anti-government protests, which led to the fall of Bouteflika in Algeria, Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, and the resignation of the Prime Ministers in Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, putting to rest the idea that authoritarian stability had reaffirmed its primacy in the region. The Iraqi case (Hasan 2021; Lovotti and Proserpio in this Special Issue) is particularly important because it suggests that democratic institutions are hardly capable of channelling widespread social upheaval, while the Intifada of Unity in Palestine/Israel in 2021 – in continuity with the decades-long anti-colonial Palestinian resistance – confirmed the relevance of the issues of colonisation and imperialism, bringing the opposition to them to an unprecedented level of visibility ad gathering widespread international support.

[1] Among the counter-revolutionary forces operating in the region is also Iran, for its support to Bashar al-Assad against the popular mobilisations in Syria and against the PKK-led Rojava autonomous region. The Saudi Arabia-Egypt-Israel can also count on other "friends" in the region, such as Jordan and Morocco.

The contributions to this Special Issue reflect this ongoing history of revolutionary mobilisation and counter-revolutionary action. The dialectic between the two connects the present, contemporary time with more ancient political dynamics of power negotiations and contention, and it is explored with a variety of approaches and from a variety of epistemological vantage points. The shared trait of the pieces presented here is to offer the opportunity to reflect on how the scholarship has changed during the past decade or so. The intersections between the global waves of (counter-)revolutionary politics, the issues they bring to the surface, and knowledge production, are explored in this introduction. Rather differently from traditional introductory texts, this piece examines the contributions to this Special Issue in a larger landscape of knowledge production and not simply through the themes that have emerged in the scholarship.

Most of the scholarship on the uprisings and their aftermath has focused on the roots of the protests, the factors leading to failure or success, the capacity of authoritarian systems to remain in place, and on the security consequences for the regional and global systems. While the contributors to this Special Issue discuss these topics, they also speak to the links between the uprisings and the global context within which they took place and evolved. The contention here is that the uprisings did not simply resonate across the world but were organically linked to political debates and struggles occurring globally. Although there are local factors that explain the uprisings and how they have developed, there is also a strong international dimension that connects the way in which the protests have been taking place, what kind of coalitions they generated, how states and counter-revolutionary forces responded, and what kind of previously marginalised issues could emerge.

There is little doubt that the slogan of this revolutionary wave – freedom, bread, dignity – encapsulates the demands for more efficient and better service delivery, and for technocratic and institutional solutions that would permit greater popular input in decision-making (Teti et al. 2018). However, the significance of the protests is not exhausted in such demands (see Chamas in this Special Issue), as protest movements also deepened their commitment to intersectionality as an analytical and practical tool for political action (Kiwan 2015; Fedele in this Special Issue). For instance, the Gezi Park protests and their aftermath ignited heated and difficult debates about patriarchy and nationalism (Yıldız 2014) as well as about Turkish racial supremacism (Ferguson 2013), showing how identity and racialisation are structurally intertwined with authoritarianism. As protesters asked for an end to military assaults on Kurdish-majority towns in the south of the country, the central government, also alarmed by the resurgence of Kurdish guerrilla activism in Northern Syria (Rojava) and the complexity of the Syrian conflict, increased its repressive measures. Issues of race, ethnicity, and racialisation were also crucial in the development of protest movements elsewhere, as in the case of the Moroccan Rif-based Hirak, which erupted in 2016 and forcefully posed the question of the racialisation of Amazighs and, in addition, the environmental exploitation of the peripheral territories they inhabit (Collado 2013; El Kahlaoui and De Smet in this Special Issue). A further example is the role of domestic workers in Lebanon, mostly Black women from Eastern Africa who migrated through the *kafala* system, also in place in the Gulf countries, which gives extensive rights to their employers, chief among them the right to confiscate their identity documents (Longva 1997; Fernandez 2021). The hard-won visibility of domestic workers in Lebanon, who campaigned unsuccessfully to end the *kafala* system in the framework of the 2019-2020 *thawra* or revolution, centred on the intersection between race and racialisation, gender, and class, highlighting that the liberation of Black migrant women working as domestic workers is central to the liberation of all and everyone (Ayoub 2019). Similarly, Iran was home to waves of protests related to the struggle against patriarchy, such as the mediatised and performative yet significant "white Wednesday" protests against compulsory *hejab*, and neoliberal economic reforms, with protests taking place against price increases.

Movements have often intersected, and transnational solidarity played a considerable role in their development, both historically and during the uprisings of the last decade. Not only protests in Tunisia inspired protests elsewhere, with activists learning from each other's mistakes, but the revolutionary waves have also offered a space where people could participate by activating multiple identities. For instance, the role played by Palestinian refugees in Syria and Lebanon was important to sustain the protests in both countries (Salamah 2016). In turn, and as a consequence of the presence of Palestinian refugees in many countries in the region, solidarity with the Palestinians was a common feature in the squares of Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Algeria to name a few. Solidarity and resonance also crossed regional geographical boundaries, as the important role Palestinian activists played in the context of the BLM protests in the US demonstrates, in continuity with the long history of Black-Palestinian solidarity (Erakat and Lamont Hill 2019; Erakat 2020) reignited by the most recent Intifada in May 2021. Cross-regional transnational solidarity is also kept alive by displaced Syrians, Egyptians, Iranians, Kurds, among the others, who migrated to North America, Europe, Asia, Australia and continued to organise politically. The intersectionality and trans-territoriality of the uprisings are crucial aspects that need to be underlined if one wants to fully understand the nature of the protests, their evolution and development, in the specific local contexts where they took place.

At the same time, it should be noted that there are two aspects of this phenomenon that also need to be highlighted. First, the transnational and intersectional linkages connecting political struggles across the globe are not a novelty. Powerful waves of international solidarity have often occurred in the past both within and outside of the region, i.e. Arab leftists joining the Lebanese civil war, Iranian revolutionaries leaving to Iraq for guerrilla training or joining revolutionaries in Dhofar (Oman), or international militants joining the Palestinian resistance, such as Fusako Shigenobu, the founder of the Japanese Red Army (Sohrabi 2019, 2020; Leopardi 2020).[2] Second, the map of the protests would not be complete if the map of repression were not also drawn. As protest practices and demands changed and evolved so did the vast array of means to repress such protests, as authoritarian states – often in collaboration with established democracies – cooperated to design new authoritarian practices (Fibiger 2014; Shehabi and Jones 2015; Gengler 2015; El Kurd 2019; Bilal 2020; Del Panta, Mabon in this Special Issue).

In addition to understanding the uprisings in this global context, and in part precisely because of the necessity of doing so, this Special Issue also contributes to the scholarly debate on how to abandon what can be termed Area Studies' isolationism or exceptionalism to connect research on the SWANA/MENA to broader themes in comparative politics. The intersectional expansion and convergence mentioned above mirror a change in the scholarship. We argue, in fact, that in Middle East studies, scholars are resolutely moving away from neo-Orientalist interpretations of politics in the region, centred on the notion of "Middle Eastern exceptionalism" (Bilgin 2004). There is a move away from the tendency to study "the region" in isolation towards increasing attention to transnational resonance and connections, in parallel with a growing determination to contribute to debates that preoccupy social sciences at large, both theoretically and methodologically (Clark and Cavatorta 2018; Lynch 2021). This reflects a growing interest in issues related to social justice and structural oppression. In particular, we see a growth of studies engaging with the issues of race and racialisation,[3] analyses of neoliberalism from a variety of theoretical and empirical vantage points, such as critical and feminist international political economy (Arslan 2020; Beinin et al. 2021),

[2] On Shigenobu's life, see the documentaries "Children of the Revolution", by Shane O'Sullivan (2010) and "My name is Mei Shigenobu", by Jocelyne Saab (2018). On Dhorfar: "The Hour of Liberation has Arrived", directed by Heiny Srour (1974).

[3] As this is an interest that is growing among scholars, yet underexplored, a number of reading lists have been compiled and circulated. One was compiled by the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies and is available at https://www.brismes.ac.uk/resources/outreach-a-pedagogy/224-race-and-the-middle-east-a-reading-list

environmental exploitation, logistics, and infrastructures economy (Meiton 2019; Khalili 2020) – topics that an increasing number of scholars of SWANA/MENA politics approach with a commitment to produce knowledge useful to both political analysis and action, a paradigmatic shift from 15 years ago.

This renewal in the scholarship is not matched, however, with similar developments in the policy-making world. The ideological underpinnings of European policies have not changed significantly during the past decade. They have mostly remained imbued with Eurocentrism, liberal normativity, and anxieties around Islam and security (Cebeci and Schumacher 2017), hindering thus significant policy changes. Yet, policy change is much needed. The EU for instance, after enjoying relative support from the populations and policy-making networks from the region for decades for its aid programmes and liberal rhetoric, is experiencing a dramatic drop in credibility and appeal (Teti et al. 2020). People living in the region find little to no correspondence between the liberal discourse of democracy and human rights that the EU propagates, and the actual EU policies, which turn borders into lethally dangerous areas, are economically predatory and perpetuate a state of post-coloniality and dependence in the region. The EU lost its "normative" power and pull, and is seen as hypocritical. Furthermore, the EU is responsible for the support to authoritarian regimes aimed at maintaining stability, even when stability comes at the price of human rights violations and state repression, often realised with Western technology.

We have no intention to romanticise academia, where scholars are systemically incentivised to produce technocratic and a-critical knowledge. We are aware of the complicity of academic scholarship with larger injustices while professing scientific neutrality and innocence – an issue that Pace, Shehada, and Abu Mustafa engage in this Special Issue through the case of Gaza and Palestine. Contrary to policy-making circles, however, in universities the tide is slowly turning, and this Special Issue is a good example of that. The uprisings have stimulated reflections and self-reflection, engendering a number of epistemological breaks and leading to the consolidation of new perspectives, languages, and interpretations which open up new research – and hopefully political and policy – horizons. In the spirit of knowledge production highlighted above, this Special Issue discusses new interpretative and analytical perspectives, recasts known issues in a new light, and contributes towards the development of disciplinary conversations in the social sciences.

2. The uprisings in global context

2.1 The neoliberal authoritarian state

In his work, Adam Hanieh argues that the 2008-2009 global economic collapse is the immediate cause of the 2011 uprisings, but long-term economic and political processes were in place well before then.[4] The *longue durée* of the ongoing revolutionary and counter-revolutionary phase is in continuity with the economic, political and social transformations taking place under what scholars of Middle East studies have termed "the neoliberal authoritarian state" (Durac and Cavatorta 2009; Joya 2011; Dahi and Munif 2012; Hinnebusch 2016). The introduction of neoliberal reforms in the region in the 1980s necessitated greater and "better" political authoritarianism to contain the popular discontent that the prices hikes, indirect taxation, and the downgrading of public services created. Maintaining political stability – the top priority of both authoritarian rulers and the international community – was vital. The most optimistic and naïve policy-makers hoped that authoritarianism would eventually dissipate once economic reforms were implemented

[4] Hanieh is a prolific and well-known economist. While he reiterated this point on several occasions, we refer here to his 2015 lecture "Crisis, Conflict and the Political Economy of the Middle East Region" (available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgIqlVCDBD8).

because they would have given rise to a large liberal-minded entrepreneurial middle class demanding democratic change. The opposite occurred: a sustained pauperization of the population and an increased dependence of the middle class on the authoritarian state, which, in turn, became increasingly predatory (Beau and Graciet 2009; Haddad, 2012).

Far from being a cycle of dispossession specific to the region, this trend was (and still is) global, although it has local specificities. In line with a much longer genealogy of exploitation and colonialism (Rodney 1972), scholars of African politics have analysed similar dynamics and detected several responses to "authoritarian neoliberalism" in the continent (Mensah 2008). Others have looked at Latin America and highlighted growing inequality similar to the Middle East's, despite diverging contextual specificities (Breman et al. 2019). Despite its economic success, inequality has become a formidable challenge for China as well (Li et al. 2013) and even in established liberal democracies the relation between the need to implement neoliberal policies and political authoritarianism is increasingly clear. To implement neoliberal reforms, venues for democratic – potentially oppositional – political participation have to be controlled, severed, and closed down. This vicious cycle has taken different forms, starting off with the weakening of collective rights in most of Western Europe during the 1990s (Baccaro and Howell 2017). As economic austerity measures had to be implemented in response to the global crisis in the late 2000s, neoliberal authoritarianism resurfaced, as evidenced in the reluctance to hold national elections in places like Greece and Italy in favour of technocratic governments (Verney and Bosco 2016) or in the outright ban on strikes and demonstrations (Portos García 2016). The 2021 laws in France and the UK severely curtailing the right to protest are just another indication of this trend. It is no coincidence that between 2008 and 2011, we have witnessed the strengthening of authoritarian politics all over the world, with far right authoritarian leaders in Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Philippines, India, Brazil, and the US elected to power to restore economic and social order. From this perspective, the scholarship devoted to discuss hypothetical clashes of civilisations or the exceptionalism of the Middle East – the only world region to have missed the "third wave of democratisation" – is just out of touch with reality.

Thus, the 2011-2013 uprisings are rooted in a long history of systemic dispossession – both economic and political – that has been more intense in degree, but not different in nature to a much larger global process of radical neoliberal restructuring of the economic and political fields. The uprisings swept from power four dictatorships, but only in Tunisia there has been a process of institutional democratisation. In countries where they survived the revolutionary phase, regimes have been able to implement a counter-revolutionary offensive that resulted into new and more exclusionary social contracts (Sultany 2017; Valbjørn 2019; Heydemann 2020; Loewe et al. 2020). Neoliberal economic reforms continue unabated to politically pauperize the population and more sophisticated and broader authoritarian practices are put in place to quell dissent, including ethno-nationalism and sectarianism sponsored by the elites in power (Jones 2016; Mabon in this Special Issue). In addition, the fear for civil conflict and widespread violence is weaponised and used to blackmail citizens into obedience and calm. This is the case even when these contracts are dressed with the trappings of liberal-democracy, as in the case of Tunisia. Dissatisfaction with the revolution and the political system in Tunisia is largely due to the fact that the new social contract elites have offered citizens is similar to the one that existed under Ben Ali (Brumberg and Ben Salem 2020). There are exceptions of course to this trend, as Martin highlights in his contribution on the failure of the protest movement in Kuwait, where the radicalism of the protesters' demands frightened the public and allowed the regime to reassert its legitimacy.

These new exclusionary social contracts are in continuity with the mantra of political and institutional stability in place since the 1990s, but – and here is a novelty – they face greater popular challenges, in part because the 2011 uprisings have breached the wall of fear and new innovative modes of organising and

protesting have been designed. Thus, the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary phase is not over and continues to stir political events in the region. Before the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, popular mobilisations took place in many parts of the SWANA/MENA, from Morocco to Lebanon and Sudan, and from Iran to Algeria and Iraq. People have mobilised both *en masse*, protesting the exclusionary politics of sectarianism and neoliberal social engineering, and on a smaller scale, with a focus on local issues. The latter, however, are not simply local. Protesters have mobilised against the corruption of local or national elites and their policies, but in connection with larger, transnational issues. For example, Amazigh protesters in Imider, Morocco, have led an eight-year long struggle against the biggest silver mine in Africa, which disrupted their access to water and farming land. They have mobilised against both their local political class, who have economic stakes in the project, but also against the corporation currently working on site. Similarly, the anti-shale gas protesters in Southern Algeria have since 2014-2015 invested both the national and international scene. Citizens formally protest on local issues such as poor access to water, but also rail against the complicity of the national elites with transnational oil corporations in causing environmental devastation (Belakhdar 2019). The same can be said about agricultural workers in Tunisia, who produce for export to Europe but cannot access natural resources for their own sustainment (Ayeb and Bush 2019), or the workers in the oil industry in Iran, who find themselves struggling against both the corruption of the local elite and international sanctions, which leave them in an increasingly precarious situation (Morgana 2020).

Since 2013, the protests have acquired a more conscious transnational nature along with a more defiantly anti-neoliberal nature. Indirect taxation in Jordan and Lebanon, for instance, has been increasingly framed as a practice of extractive neoliberal capitalism, which replaces progressive taxation with indirect taxation to fill the gap caused by tax-breaks granted to foreign investors. While the 2010-2011 uprisings lacked a political and economic vision able to tackle the roots of social and political problems beyond liberal reformism (Bayat 2017; see also Molina 2011), the continuation of protests across the region suggests otherwise. This should not lead to conclude that these struggles will "win the day" because powerful national and international counter-revolutionary forces have significant material and immaterial resources they can draw on, but the long wave of protests cannot be dismissed as unable to learn from the mistakes of the past, or as "simply" demanding the satisfaction of immediate needs and, above all, as void of original political analysis.

2.2 Frames and strategies

Mobilisations in the region echo the ones that have taken place in other parts of the world, including the frames and the strategies that protesters adopted. Since 2010-2011, scholars have highlighted the connection between the strategies of protesters in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Turkey, and those in the Global North. Notwithstanding laborious dynamics of cultural translation and domestication (Gerbaudo 2013), high-profile demonstrations in Madrid's Puerta del Sol, London's St Paul's, and the Occupy movement in the US have borrowed strategies from protesters in the region, who occupied squares, public parks, and other public spaces, turning them into venues saturated with political meanings. The French Yellow Vests mobilisational strategies, which revolved around the occupation of roundabouts to disrupt traffic, also echoed the strategies of protesters in SWANA/MENA, from the occupation of the Pearl Roundabout in Manama, to the occupation of roads and street junctions in Iran. Correspondences and similarities have however also occurred on the South-South axis and beyond such high-profile examples. The campaign against the silver mine in Imider, Morocco, organised a permanent encampment, which lasted for eight years, on the very site of the mine, thus physically obstructing access to the land and adopting the same strategies as protesters in Cairo and Tunis. In 2019, Iraqi protesters occupied Tahrir square in Baghdad, echoing the strategies and names of the 2011 protests in Cairo. Workers' mobilisations have been rocking the African continent for

over a decade, with occupations and mobilisational strategies in the MENA resonating with them (Ekine and Manji 2012), the most famous of which is "Freedom square" in Khartoum.

Such resonance has found a parallel in the protests' causes and framing. The direct extraction of value from ordinary citizens on the part of the state took different forms but generated quasi-revolutionary opposition. The specific extractive measure *per se* was only the *casus belli*, as citizens had felt victimised by a state perceived as inefficient, corrupt, and beholden to private interests. The so-called WhatsApp tax in Lebanon sparked the *thawra* in 2019, the increase of the price of fuel and electricity in Iran, Haiti (where major protests threatened the stability of the country in 2018), Ecuador (where the state of emergency was declared because of the protests in 2019), and France brought millions of people to the streets, with protests often descending into violence due to the repressive response of the state, including in democratic France. Hikes in the price of public transport in Brazil caused major unrest in 2014, and in Chile they sparked a quasi-revolutionary situation in 2019. While the frame of reclaiming control over the national economy and political system is the "master frame" of all mobilisations (Charrad et al. 2021), feminist movements and women's strikes have expanded the intersectional nature of the protests and their framing, both in the region and globally. Veronica Gago (2020) has examined the foundational role the international women's strikes played in creating momentum for larger mobilisations in places like Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Mexico, and Argentina and in transforming the "master frame" of the protest movements, presenting the questions of gender violence, reproductive work, and patriarchy as a constitutive part of neoliberalism and foundational to the work of reclaiming of dignity, life, and autonomy. In places like the West Bank and Gaza, women and feminists have mobilised building on, and yet re-shaping, the same frame and forcefully saying that there is no national liberation if women are not free. These protests build on a longer genealogy of Palestinian feminism committed to tackle patriarchy within the nationalist movement. In 2019, the women's strike also spoke to the issues of discrimination and patriarchal practices as linked to nationalism and neoliberalism, and so Palestinian women – hailing from the West Bank, Gaza, the 1948 territories, and the diaspora – did again in 2021 (Asaad 2019; Palestinian Feminist Collective 2021).

Another protest frame which has resonated globally is related to race, ethnicity, and discrimination. Black Lives Matter and campaigns for indigenous rights may come to mind first, but people in the region have been grappling with these issues for a long time too and contributed globally relevant political analyses. Palestinian scholars and activists have long been engaged in reflections about settler colonialism and apartheid, echoing and contributing to the theoretical and political work by indigenous communities in Australia, North America, and South Africa (Tatour 2019; see also Pace, Shehada, and Abu Mustafa in this Special Issue). More recently, an increasing number of scholars of SWANA/MENA politics have been looking at the processes of racialisation of Black people in the region, reflecting on ancient and contemporary slavery, the politics of representation of racialised people in Arabic, Turkish, and Persian culture, and on migration in the region, innovating and moving away from more traditional approaches based on the rights of ethnic minorities (Christensen 2016; Scaglioni 2020; Powell 2020; Menin 2020; El Zein 2021; Tayeb 2021). Employing racialisation as a lens to interrogate power also highlights issues implicated both in the construction of neoliberal hegemony and the reaction against it. The way in which white Arab, Persian, or Turkish women navigate neoliberalism is different from the way in which racialised women do it, who are seen as fitting the economic and political spheres only in dedicated and racialised spaces. This calls for specific analyses and oppositional frames. The above-mentioned mobilisation against the *kafala* system in Lebanon is a good example of this.

2.3 The question of political organising

In SWANA/MENA, the counter-revolution has taken different forms, from institutional regime change to passive revolution and from outright state repression to foreign military intervention (De Smet 2020; Achcar 2021), successfully fragmenting and interrupting revolutionary action. All these strategies have been able to sap resources, energy and enthusiasm from popular mobilisation. However, even when resilient, protests movements suffer from endemically weak organisational capacity, which has left them more exposed to repression and to the action of other, better organised groups which have taken advantage of the grassroots' weak structure. Abdelrahman (2013) reflected that Egyptian grassroots revolutionaries were able to defeat a seemingly undefeatable regime but were unable to resist the *divide et impera* strategy that the Army deployed, when it branded itself as a trustworthy revolutionary player.

The intention here is not to blame grassroots activists for the success of the counter-revolutionary action, especially considering the dramatic imbalance of power between the two. In fact, forms of grassroots self-organising and solidarity, in spite of difficult conditions, should be celebrated and their enabling causes investigated further, as for instance in the case of Iranian society during the covid-19 pandemic (see Ghiabi in this Special Issue; Behrouzan 2020). What needs to be highlighted though is the dominance of grassroots, unstructured, and horizontal activism (see Chapi in this Special Issue), to the detriment of more organised actors such as political parties, which enjoy little trust among citizens. This is a global trend and speaks to the fact that political parties are seldom seen as viable venues for meaningful political engagement.

Grassroots activism is not a new phenomenon and played a fundamental role in a number of struggles that took place in the region, for example during the First Palestinian Intifada in the late 1980s. However, in the ongoing revolutionary and counter-revolutionary phase, it seems to present a number of distinct characteristics. First, the technological and power divide between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces is more difficult to bridge through the determination and *sumud* (or steadfastness, to borrow a Palestinian expression) of grassroots activists. Today, counter-revolutionary action is empowered by surveillance technology, drones, artificial intelligence, and the alliance with global superpowers. Second, the current era is characterised by individualism and the constant dispossession of physical places and venues where people can meet, socialise, and organise in a sustainable manner. The privatisation of the public space and public property, gated communities, and the increasing surveillance of urban spaces are just some of the material obstacles that hinder political organising. Third, it is no coincidence that activism, especially grassroots activism, has moved towards immateriality, such as social media activism, which had a facilitating role during the uprisings and of the organisational work behind them. Scholars and activists have however also highlighted the limitation of this kind of activism: on social media, immaterial political labour can easily become a question of framing and branding, an "economy of visibility", and an individual project.[5]

It would be mistaken though to analyse activism and political work only in terms of success versus failure, particularly given the long-term implications that this engagement implies. Social movements and grassroots political work create, co-opt, shift, build, and pollinate, rather than fail or succeed (Musallam 2020). Likewise, the complex processes of transformation taking place the region cannot be understood in terms of success or failure, or in terms of the binary democratisation/authoritarian resilience. A binary analysis would not be able to capture and examine the seemingly contradictory reality whereby, since 2011, the uprisings have been "successful" if we look at the impact on society and their political imagination, as expressed in the culture and the arts (Mostafa et al. 2021; Tripp 2021) but "unsuccessful" if we look at the changes they have brought about in the institutional and economic systems. The complex work that the contributors to this

[5] See the 2020 talk titled "Beh Tou Cheh? Feminist Challenges in Iranian Social Media" by Soraya Batmanghelichi. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3qBiv-bujM

Special Issue, among other scholars, carry out is to identify the "molecular transformations" (Marchi 2021) in society, that is the micro-crises of hegemony present in society which de-construct state hegemony and sovereignty as they are to re-create them in a different shape. While molecular transformations are not sufficiently powerful to bring about regime or political change, they create the conditions for it at the micro-level.

3. Epistemological breaks and continuities

3.1 Marking the tenth anniversary

As the year 2021 opened, scholars, journalists, and commentators rushed to mark the tenth anniversary of the uprisings. A cursory look at the language and themes that accompanied the anniversary reveals that most of the analyses highlighted the "elusiveness of democracy", "ongoing conflicts", the "anger over economic setbacks", "raging civil wars", the "failure of the Arab Spring", and the "little hope" left to the people. Another recurring theme is the metaphor of "spring vs. winter", where "winter" is accompanied by changing descriptors such as "Arab winter" or "Islamist winter" to be juxtaposed to the happier and more hopeful one of spring. While we understand the pressing need to offer sharp analyses, especially when the target is the general public, we also believe in the necessity for analyses that are richer, more nuanced, and, crucially, closer to reality. As mentioned, the dichotomy "success vs failure" hardly provides useful instruments to comprehend it. In this section, we examine the "success vs failure" narrative and its implications to set the background for a larger analysis of the current state of the art.

The "success vs failure" narrative identifies a specific beginning and an end point in time for the uprisings. As mentioned, there is a conventional starting point, that is Bouazizi's self-immolation and the protests that ensued in Tunisia. However, if we think of the uprisings as a process, temporal coordinates become less clear. In addition, other events and mobilisations preceded Bouazizi's suicide and were important "steps" in the process of organising the discontent which eventually led to revolutionary action. Crucially, these events are linked to police violence, like Bouazizi's suicide. One example is the killing of Khaled Said, murdered by two policemen in June 2010 in Alexandria, Egypt. It played an important role in diffusing a critique of systemic police brutality, which greatly contributed to organise dissent, as the story was mediatised through the campaign "We are all Khaled Said" and went viral, underlining the significance of on-line mobilisations. Just as the "starting point" of the uprisings is uncertain – some scholars would include Iran's 2009-2010 Green Movement in the uprisings (Kurzman 2012; Alimagham 2020) or the 2005-2009 protests in the Gafsa mining basin in Tunisia (Allal and Bennafla 2011) – so is their end point (Haugbølle and Bandak 2017; Durac 2019). Narratives of "failure vs success" imply that a phase, an event, or an era ought to be concluded. Therefore, it is possible to assess the "result". As the mobilisations in Iraq, Sudan and Algeria in 2019 and 2020 demonstrate, the claim that the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary phase was over in late 2013 does not reflect reality.

Temporality is not the only element to be contested: the geography of the uprisings is contested, too. As they are conventionally referred to as the "Arab" uprisings, it remains unclear if the Amazigh mobilisations in Morocco, Gezi Park protests in Turkey, or Iran's mobilisations, are part of the same cycle of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary politics, or not. So, if we widen the geography and temporality of the uprisings, success and failure become even more difficult to identify, as experiences, trajectories, and medium-term "results" – some of which are successes from the activists' point of view – of the uprisings multiply.

Moreover, the philosophy underpinning the "success vs failure" narrative is often informed by the binary democratisation/authoritarian resilience. Success is in fact equated with full institutional transition to liberal

democracy, while failure equates with a return to authoritarian rule, the continuation of it, or conflict. While in the early 2000s, the inter-paradigm debate between authoritarian resilience and democratisation allowed political scientists to move away from post-1989 assumptions about the ineluctability of liberal democracy and the free market, we argue that this binary conceals more than it reveals. The uprisings are fundamentally changing the culture and perceptions of people in the region and beyond, but these changes hardly translate into tangible transformations of the political system and its institutional arrangements. As the binary democratisation/authoritarian resilience focuses on institutional and formal politics, it is not the best research option for scholars interested in the uprisings and their afterlife. While different political systems deliver different outcomes and goods, it should be noted that authoritarianism and democracy are lived, experienced, and understood differently and might not ultimately matter much in terms of what movements and activists want to achieve. Disillusion with liberal democracy in Tunisia and relative popular satisfaction in Morocco with the monarchy speak for example to the impossibility of equating democracy and authoritarianism with normative values conceived for different times and in different places. This is not to say that liberal-democracy is not a "sportive good" *per se* and that authoritarianism should not have negative connotations, but it is also important to consider that in reality there are democratic spaces and efficient governance within authoritarianism and, conversely, authoritarian spaces and inefficient governance in liberal-democratic systems.

Finally, going beyond the "success vs failure" binary allows scholars to think about the obstacles against revolutionary politics in more fruitful ways, rather than subsuming them to the rubric of "failure". Such obstacles can in fact vary significantly, ranging from foreign intervention and the de-mobilisation of protesters, to the counter-revolutionary action of the middle classes and the national elites. As Yadh Ben Achour highlighted (in El Din Hassan 2021), narratives of failure have served the purpose of mortifying hope and radical political imagination, justifying thus the taking over of the revolution by bureaucratic elites.[6]

3.2 Epistemological breaks and connections

Since the uprisings, regional specialists in political science have abandoned their previous scholarly isolationism to embrace more fully the broader debates – both methodological and theoretical – central to political science, adopting two strategies of inquiry. First, a greater number of scholars imported theoretical debates and methodological innovations into the study of Middle East politics. Despite the majority of Middle East specialists decrying Orientalism, many fell into the same trap when discussing and explaining politics in the region as specifically distinct from politics elsewhere. Although the idea that the region was "unmodern" and therefore necessitated *ad hoc* intellectual tools to explain its politics and society had been roundly rejected for decades, its "exceptional" nature still informed the majority of SWANA/MENA political science studies. This explains in part the near total absence of cross-regional comparisons. Since the uprisings, an increasing number of Middle East specialists have abandoned the implicit exceptionalism in their research and have employed the tools of comparative politics and international relations – in all of their diversity – to explain political phenomena in the region. Methodologies that had been marginalised or systematically eliminated because of their supposed inability to work in Middle Eastern contexts have been increasingly used, with varying degrees of success. This has allowed Middle East scholars to connect their findings with the ones from the broader discipline and to begin relevant cross-regional comparisons.

[6] See also his talk at the conference "*Ṯawrat al-karāma*: memorie, percorsi e analisi a 10 anni dalla rivoluzione tunisina", Pisa University, January 2021. Available at https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=1046031742530824&ref=watch_permalink

Second, Middle East political scientists have begun to contribute to debates in the wider discipline by putting forth theoretical insights and empirical findings that challenge, transform, or reject long-held assumptions. This suggests that what happens in the Middle East and how it is explained has broader disciplinary implications. The study of contentious politics for instance has benefitted greatly from the insights that Middle East political scientists have been able to provide and that can and should be integrated into the general theory. Something similar can be said for the role and functions of political parties.

Ample room for improvement however remains available when it comes to abandon Western-centric social sciences in favour of knowledge that comes from the region and from non-academic environments. This is reflected in the politics of citations of most published work in the field and in the limited number of joint publications between scholars based in Europe or North America, and in the region. While the scholarship has moved towards increased activism in disciplinary debates, it has not sufficiently engaged in de-constructing its Western-centrism. This is not to say that nothing has changed.

The first epistemological break present in the scholarship relates to geography. As mentioned earlier, scholars increasingly understand the uprisings as a global event. This translates into a move away from methodological nationalism, which in turn contributes to make the nation state and its institutions more peripheral and less central to the analyses. But the question of geography also has wider implications for how we understand world regions and SWANA/MENA region in particular. The region is often thought of in relation to the Global North through conceptual prisms such as post-coloniality, de-coloniality, and the legacy of European colonialism. While European colonialism and Western neo-colonialism clearly remain crucial, less often we think of the region in relation to the Global South, or through the prism of internal colonialism. Egypt-Sudan relations, for instance, are seldom theorised as having a direct bearing on how mobilisations have taken place in the two countries in the past two decades. Likewise, the role of Black African intellectuals, of cultural events such as Festac '77 in Lagos or Cuban-Palestinian relations are not sufficiently explored to understand how lineages of solidarity have developed between anti-colonial movements in places like Algeria, Dhofar, Palestine and Africa between the 1950s and the 1970s, and how traces of such relations structure contemporary political activism. How would the very geographical boundaries of "the region" change if we privileged South-South relations, instead of North-South relations?[7] The same can be asked about how we think of national space and culture – usually understood as culturally quasi-homogeneous, held together by language and religion – when we integrate forms of domestic colonialism, or "intra-subaltern colonialism" as Matin put it.[8]

A second epistemological break has to do with the conceptualisation of democracy. Demands for democracy have accompanied all protests and mobilising efforts, but they have evolved during the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary cycle. Paralleling developments in Global North, demands for social justice have become more present and stronger. Democracy appears today as a demand for life (Munif 2020) and, as such, as a demand for alternatives to predatory neoliberalism, whereby social and economic rights are as central as civil and political ones in the construction of democratic governance. This constitutes a paradigmatic shift away from a technocratic understanding of democracy, centred on institutional transition and elections. This paradigmatic shift is encapsulated in local political practices (Munif 2017), in the ambition to build institutional models alternative to the nation state such as Rojava's democratic federalism, as well as in the work of intellectuals such as Omar Aziz/Abu Kamal, who theorised grassroots democracy built on revolutionary councils (Aziz 2013; Al Shami 2013, 2017). The uprisings have forcefully brought this shift to light, along with the theoretical and practical work of local activists and intellectuals. However, while

[7] We are very grateful to Estella Carpi for bringing up this point during many fruitful discussions.

[8] See Matin's intervention in the event "New Voices in Middle East Studies" organised by the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, and available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xciyVmZb90U

indigenous activist strategies have travelled across world regions more easily, as discussed earlier, the scholarship is incorporating local theoretical reflections at a slower pace.

The third epistemological break relates to the relevance of immaterial political labour. As counter-revolutionary forces rely on material resources that outpower grassroots activists and social movements, scholars have emphasised how immaterial resources such as love, friendship, and affect strengthen the activists' coping strategies and the "human" stamina of mobilisation. The attention paid to immaterial labour is in continuity with the "relational turn" in social movement studies, but scholars of the region have brought in a specific nuance, considering how care, love, and friendship affect larger authoritarian configurations (Allam 2018; Maritato 2018; Saeidi 2020). Friendship, trust, and affect have been crucial in 2011 revolutionary Egypt both to create a consistent collective will and to engender new ideas of self-worth at the individual level (El Chazli 2020). Work on immaterial political labour de-centres "high politics" to bring at the core of our analysis the political imagination of individuals and groups, which has long-term implications as to how political and cultural processes unfold. As Chamas and Biagini demonstrate in this Special Issue, love and friendship have a real impact on how activists prioritise political relationships and goals, impacting on how organisations function.

The fourth epistemological break relates to the question of violence. In Middle Eastern studies, violence has mostly been relegated to discussions of jihadism for decades. As anti-colonial armed struggles moved out of focus and were increasingly seen as crystallised in the past, with little relevance for the analysis of today's politics, violence has almost exclusively been associated with so-called "Islamic terrorism" leading to a proliferation of security studies focusing on the Middle East. State repression, foreign military interventions, and conflicts have continued to be present in the region (Schwarzmantel and Kraetzschmar 2013), but violence rarely was a subject worthy of discrete analytical attention. Political violence was in fact seen as something negative, destabilising and considered as a by-product of state authoritarianism – or, according to blatantly Islamophobic and neo-Orientalist scholars, of Islam. The uprisings have changed this. The uprisings have presented a greater variety of violence, including self-defence, urban guerrilla, and revolutionary armed struggle, and scholars have increasingly engaged in the analytical task of unpacking violence and distinguishing between different types and sources of it (Gordon and Perugini 2020; Stefanini in this Special Issue). As the battle of Muhammad Mahmoud street in Cairo acquired the shape and the substance of urban guerrilla – with peaceful activists destroying street furniture to source material useful to confront the police – and the YPJ and YPG's revolutionary armed struggle became crucial to issues larger than Kurdish independence, such as containing the expansion of the Islamic State and its capacity to attack Europe, it became urgent to question pre-existing moral binaries about violence and non-violence and approach violence as a structural issue rather than a specific set of actions (Ali 2021) to acquire the instruments necessary to dissect reality.

4. Conclusion

The articles in this Special Issue highlight how the 2011 uprisings have not exhausted their transformative drive, which continues – in different forms and through different actors – to dominate regional politics. The articles though do more than simply recounting or analysing revolutionary and counter-revolutionary actors within their national or regional confines. The issues dealt with have global resonance and are analytically connected to wider debates in political science about what to study and how. Looking beyond the traditional institutions of the nation state is particularly important due to the empirical observation that change takes place elsewhere than institutional politics. The contributions in this Special Issue follow this trend and highlight an ethical commitment to a politics of justice, calling civil actors to do the same.

Acknowledgement

We are very grateful to the contributors and the anonymous peer reviewers, who committed to write and revise, read and assess, often multiple times, the pieces of this Special Issue. We thank the contributors for their comments on this introduction. All errors that linger are our responsibility.

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