



The Arab Uprisings

A decade of struggles

Edited by Miriyam Aouragh & Hamza Hamouchene



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May 2022

We pay tribute to the fallen, the injured, the political prisoners and the ones who continue to struggle. We dedicate this work to them, and to all those who have sacrificed their lives for bread, justice and dignity.

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Around a year ago we were reminiscing about how a decade had passed since the mass protests in Alexandria (Egypt) in June 2010 against the police murder of a young Egyptian, Khaled Mohamed Saeed,¹ and since the start of the third Saharawi intifada in Gdeim Izik² (Occupied Western Sahara) in October 2010. We talked about how for us that marked the beginning of a life-changing epoch.

In the year that followed (2011) a wave of revolt spread throughout the whole Middle East and North Africa region, in what came to be called the ‘Arab Spring’.³ These uprisings were acknowledged as world-shaking events. The Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions ignited historic upheavals in North Africa and beyond. People there celebrated the toppling of the dictators, Ben Ali and Mubarak, and looked ahead towards meaningful change in their lives. These uprisings, like most revolutionary situations, released enormous energy – a collective effervescence, an unparalleled sense of renewal and a shift in political consciousness.

The peoples of the region are all too familiar with the racist stereotype and contemptuous cliché embodied in the facile falsehood that ‘Arabs and Muslims are not fit for democracy and they are incapable of governing themselves’. The imperial and colonial dominance over the region has led to it being seen in some quarters as a homogeneous entity that can be systematically reduced through negative tropes. Seen through this distorting lens, the region evokes images of conflict and wars, ruthless dictators and passive populations, terrorism and extremism, as well as rich oil reserves and expansive deserts. This orientalist imaginary and the rigid representation of ‘the other’, as well as having the power to ‘block

1 The murder by Egyptian police of Khaled Mohamed Saeed, and the outrage it provoked, contributed to the growing discontent in the weeks leading up to the Egyptian Revolution of 2011.

2 Gdeim Izik was a protest camp in Western Sahara, established on 9 October 2010 and maintained till November that year. While protests were initially peaceful, they were later marked by clashes between Saharawi civilians and Moroccan security forces. Some have referred to the protests as the Third Saharawi Intifada, following the First (1999–2004) and Second (2005). Scholar and political activist Noam Chomsky has suggested that the month-long protest encampment at Gdeim Izik constituted the start of the Arab Spring.

3 The term *Arab Spring* is an allusion to the Revolutions of 1848, which are sometimes referred to as the ‘Springtime of Nations’, and to the Prague Spring in 1968, as well as later uprisings in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989. This term was coined, and has been promoted by, Western media and pundits, and has been criticized by some scholars as part of a US strategy of controlling the movement’s aims and goals and directing it towards Western-style liberal democracy. However, it is important to acknowledge some positive uses of the term Arab Spring, and how it makes a link with earlier historic uprisings in the region, such as the Berber Spring of 1980 in Algeria and the Damascus spring of 2000.

narratives', are hallmarks of a political and geographic violence that is produced by imperialism.⁴

The uprisings shattered many of these stereotypes and debunked many myths. The wind of revolution that began to blow in 2011 spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco and Oman. The emancipatory experience was contagious, inspiring people all over the world: activists in Madrid, London and New York, whether calling themselves the Occupy Movement or the Indignados, were all proud to 'Walk like an Egyptian'. Although the last three to four decades have seen attempts to delegitimize meaningful and radical change through revolution, following the shortcomings and defeat of decolonization efforts in various parts of the global South, and although counter-revolutionary onslaughts will always seek to crush the will of the people – revolutions and uprisings for emancipation continue (and will continue).

For both of us, as for many activists, the pride and hope that these events generated remains deeply personal and political. Our career paths, activism and world-views were shaped by this formative political experience. We participated in conferences/round-tables celebrating and analysing these historical events, we marched with our peoples in protests, and we were involved in various solidarity initiatives. We discussed, debated and disagreed with friends and comrades. Sometimes we felt hopeful, at others sad and dispirited. Above all, we learnt a great deal: engaging with revolutionary praxis offers a unique source of knowledge.

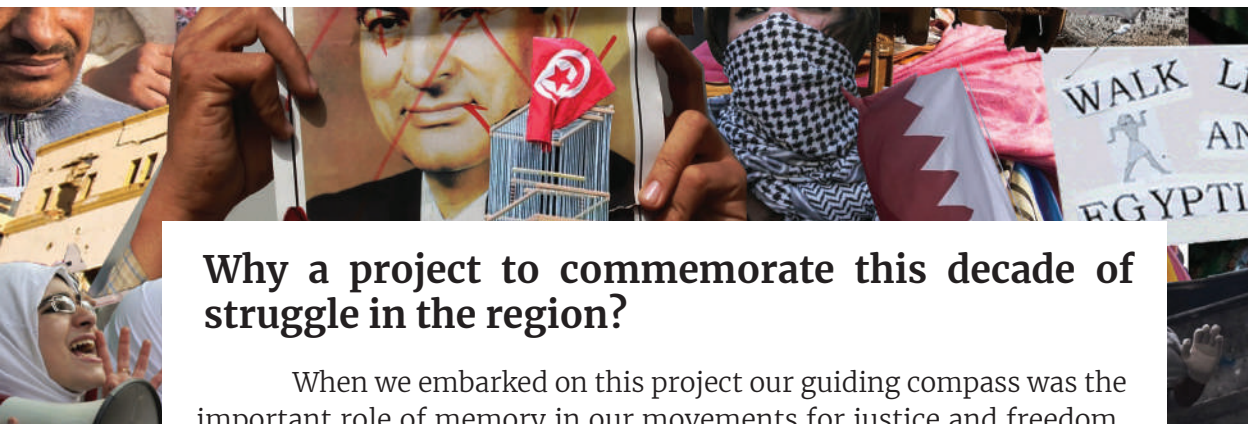
Nevertheless, we cannot deny that what started as inspiring uprisings against authoritarianism and oppressive socio-economic conditions, demanding bread, justice and dignity, morphed into violence and chaos, profound polarizations, counter-revolution and foreign intervention. The various people's movements in the region found themselves pitted against entrenched authoritarian and counter-revolutionary forces bent on suppressing them. All were met with resistance from the state, often in conjunction with global capital and foreign interference. The military coup in Egypt ended up restoring a much more ruthless and repressive form of dictatorship. The brutal descent into civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, and the series of crackdowns in Gulf countries like Bahrain, provide examples of the cruel logic of proxy war so reminiscent of the

4 Said, E. (1984) 'Permission to narrate', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13(3): 27–48.

colonial schemes with which the region and its people are all too familiar. Tunisia, which had seemed to be the exception in this gloom and doom, is now in a very fragile position. Moreover, the deep polarizations (e.g. Islamists versus secularists) imposed on the masses have distracted them from the key socio-economic issues that were at the heart of the uprisings in the first place.

Some mainstream commentators have argued that the ‘Arab Spring’ gave way to an ‘Islamist winter’ (with Islamist forces coming to power in some countries). Some progressive voices have been less pessimistic and have presented a more historically nuanced perspective, arguing that these events should be seen as part of a long-term revolutionary process, with ups and downs, periods of radicalization and periods of setback and counter-revolution. This latter view received some vindication when, eight years after the 2010/11 events, an escalation of the revolutionary process took place, in the form of a second wave of uprisings in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon (2018–21), alongside the return to the spotlight in 2021 of the unending and heroic struggle of the Palestinians – all of which reveals people’s determination to continue fighting for their rights and sovereignty.

All of these momentous events between 2010 and 2021 have opened new horizons for people to express their discontent and demand radical change and reforms, forcing almost every government in the region to concede on issues – both political and economic.



Why a project to commemorate this decade of struggle in the region?

When we embarked on this project our guiding compass was the important role of memory in our movements for justice and freedom, and the crucial task of maintaining an archive. Our political memory is not an automatic process, like muscle memory; rather, it is shaped by the political and economic conditions in which we exist. The nurturing of

political affinity and the maintenance of radical kinship does not occur in a vacuum – it must be fed, to be kept alive. To be archived and reflected upon. Anniversaries provide one occasion for such activities, and that is what this project represents. The project includes webinars and podcasts, together with the chapters collected here, all of which can help us to look at the concrete within what are sometimes too-abstract debates, and to engage with some less visible cases.

One of our aims in this project has been to challenge a number of misconceptions about the region, its people and their revolts and uprisings. One such misconception was the attempt by the global and mainstream media, Western governments, as well as international financial institutions, like the World Bank, to portray the uprisings as merely revolts against authoritarianism and as demanding only political freedoms and democracy of the stunted kinds that exist in Western industrial countries. This framing steers away from any class analysis and tends to dissociate the political from the economic, ignoring the fundamental socio-economic demands of bread, social justice, dignity and popular sovereignty. But the misreading – or more accurately distortion – did not stop there. The Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings were dubbed by Western mainstream commentators ‘Facebook and Twitter revolutions’, exaggerating the role of social media in fomenting them. Another dominant – but no less superficial – framing was the demographic one, which interpreted the revolts as primarily youth uprisings against the older generation – the product of a ‘youth bulge’ in the affected countries.

A decade later, mainstream interpretations commemorating the tenth anniversary of the events have gained little by way of insight. Several media reports and chapters talk of failed and lost revolutions and broken promises. But the dominant tone is captured by a title of one Guardian article published in December 2020, referring to Mohamed Bouazizi, the street fruit vendor who set himself on fire, catalysing the Arab uprisings: ‘He ruined us: 10 years on, Tunisians curse man who sparked Arab Spring’. The narrative advanced is one of despair and hopelessness: the uprising was not worthwhile, better to have remained in poverty and in chains. Such an interpretation needs to be strongly challenged and deconstructed in order to offer a more nuanced and less idealist (more materialist) reading of revolution and what it entails. Various critical progressive activists and researchers have emphasized the importance of acknowledging the complexities of revolutionary dynamics and their inevitable crises,

shortcomings and even failings.⁵ This necessitates seeing revolutions as being imbued with counter-revolutionary tendencies and encroached upon by reactionary forces. The fact that people in the region are continuing to revolt is testimony to this complexity. Ultimately, the ideas people hold about revolutions have a critical impact on the outcomes of such events when they actually occur; hence the necessity of reflecting and learning from past revolutions.

Throughout this project we have sought to make space for critical reflection: we prioritized an inclusive approach regarding different disciplinary views and political emphases, and in the process gave a platform to younger, female and local voices from the region – the least we can do. We hope we have eschewed rigid dichotomies, as well as self-righteousness as regards possession of ‘the truth’ – a desire that stems from our rejection of sectarian and polemical styles and behaviours, which can too easily morph into personal attacks. One outcome of this collaboration has been to learn to disagree and to work respectfully in a comradely fashion, and to continue the discussion in a constructive way. Anyone who is engaged in the issues presented in this project will be all too aware of how the nefarious effects of trench positions (campism) have weakened progressive possibilities for meaningful engagement over the years. So often we have seen debates about Syria or Libya, for example, turn into deeply polarizing (and often false) binaries – alienating participants and choking off productive debates regarding revolutionary strategies and international solidarity. Ultimately, how exactly we can reconcile certain positions (e.g. anti-authoritarian versus anti-imperialist) will be put to the test in our movements, but we should never absolve ourselves of our duty to argue against selective political positions. One case of freedom should be in the service of – not expendable in pursuit of – another. This was powerfully captured during one of our webinars between our Moroccan and Saharawi participants.

⁵ Bayat, A (2017) *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. See also Traboulsi, F (2014) *Revolutions without Revolutionaries*. Beirut: Reyad El-Rayyes Books.



Summary of the chapters

The contributors to this dossier are outstanding scholars and activists from, or having their roots in, the region.⁶ They were given the choice to write either in Arabic or English. All pieces are offered to our readers in both languages.

In his piece, Adam Hanieh delves into the root causes of the regional uprisings through a historical and political economy approach. By describing in detail some of the lineages of the revolt that broke out in 2011, he deconstructs the mainstream liberal framing of the region and its uprisings. He argues that we must pay attention to the region's centrality to the world economy, and how its political structures are directly reflective of the capitalist development that has taken place in the region over the last few decades.

Ghassen Ben Khelifa takes us back to 2010–2011, when Tunisian people who desired to live in dignity rose up to claim their rights. He takes a very critical look at the initial events that constituted Tunisia's *intifada* and shows how it has now been contained, if not aborted. He cogently

⁶ We note briefly here the various ways the authors in this dossier refer to the region that is the focus of this project. Some use 'Middle East' or 'Middle East and North Africa (MENA)'. Others refer to the 'Arab region' or 'Arab world', while others go for the less-used coinages 'North Africa and West Asia (NAWA)' or 'West Asia and North Africa (WANA)'. Our own view is that if we are committed to advancing counter-hegemonic narratives that challenge structures of power, and to decolonizing concepts and names, it is only fitting to call into question the colonial designation 'Middle East' – a construct of, and designed to sit in opposition to, the West; part of the legacy of Orientalism, of creating an 'other'. We are sympathetic to the use of 'Arabic region', but without its ethnic connotations. We acknowledge that this naming can arouse feelings of exclusion and oppression among some. No naming is perfect, and each has its own limits. In our view, without trying to efface the rich shared cultural and political legacies in our region, a reference rooted in a geographic identification, such as North Africa and West Asia (NAWA), is a more apt description.

challenges the 'exceptionalist' framework around the Tunisian experience by showcasing a series of counter-revolutionary imperial and neoliberal measures designed to strangle the revolution and its economic demands.

Mostafa Bassiouny and Anne Alexander argue in their piece that any attempt to understand the course of the 2011 Egyptian revolution must necessarily grapple with the role of the workers' movement. They show how workers' struggles were an independent factor in the revolutionary process. They also underline the importance of 'reciprocal action' between the economic and the political aspects of the class struggle, and how this process played a pivotal role in the revolutionary developments in Egypt.

Fourate Chahal delivers beautiful and evocative illustrations for all the chapters in this dossier. She also offers us some exquisite and powerful artistic collage, capturing the beauty, creativity and the energy released by various uprisings through graffiti, art, slogans and the recapturing of public spaces by people in revolt.

In his contribution, Ali Amouzai critically reflects on the historic February 20 Movement in Morocco, which arose in 2011, and details the balance of political and social forces that preceded it. Then, he describes and analyses the reaction of the monarchy to this threat to its rule, which took the form of repression, cooptation and containment. He also shines a light on Morocco's role as an outpost of imperialist designs in the African continent, while continuing to resist the right to self-determination of the Saharawis.

Rafeef Ziadah argues that one of the major outcomes of the uprisings has been the increased role of regional players in multiple states, working to stabilize the political system to their advantage. With a focus on Libya and Yemen, she examines the various modes of intervention applied by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, including direct military campaigns, the use of proxies, financial aid and humanitarian packages – all working in tandem to shape a regional outcome that has buttressed the status quo against the initial hopes of change offered by the uprisings.

Yasser Munif starts his chapter by examining bread as a central commodity in times of war and peace, offering an overview of the agrarian reform implemented by successive regimes in Syria from 1963 to 2000. He then focuses on the weaponization of bread as an important military strategy of the Assad regime during the revolt in Syria, while giving us a glimpse

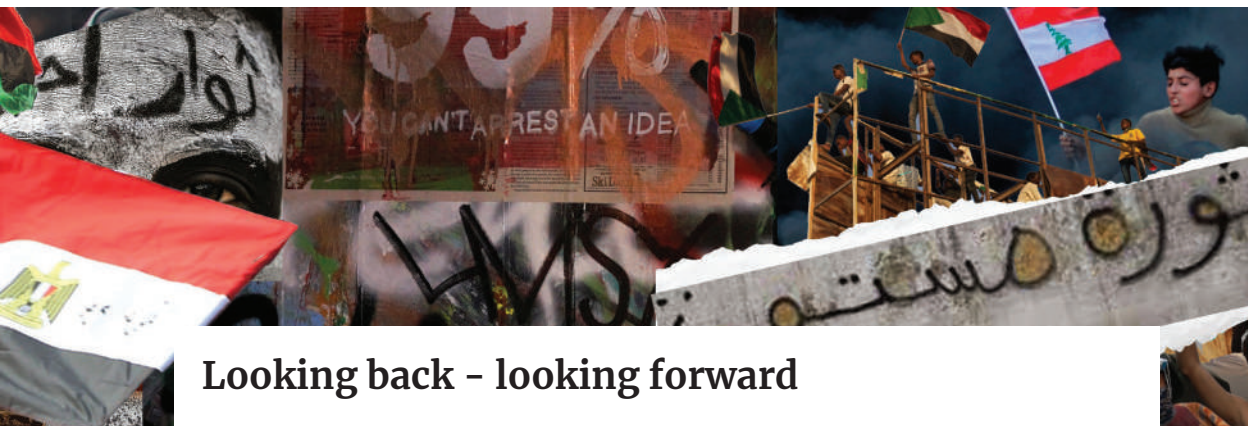
of the rebels' grassroots resistance, using the city of Manbij in northern Syria as a case study.

Muzan Al Neel's contribution focuses on the 2018–2019 Sudanese revolution and explains why the Sudanese rose up, and what it was they wanted to overthrow when they chanted 'Just fall'. She analyses the current moment and the role of the transitional government, and its evolution vis à vis the uprising's objectives. She ends by exploring the ways the Sudanese uprising could and should continue to achieve its goals in the face of the counter-revolution.

Zahra Ali puts forward a feminist analysis of the Iraqi uprising of 2019. Based on her in-depth fieldwork conducted with women and youth networks and social movements in Iraq, she takes the 2019 uprising as a framework for thinking about how massive protests allow for an understanding of emancipation that broadens our feminist imagination, paying particular attention to the spaces the uprising produced.

Hamza Hamouchene adopts a Fanonian lens to analyse the 2019–2021 Algerian uprising, and argues for the rationality of rebellion in the context of the new popular movement (Hirak) in Algeria – a movement that he argues represents a continuation of the decolonization process. He also connects the uprising in Algeria with the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and considers what Fanon's thought has to offer to these and other struggles for economic and political justice.

And last, but not least, Rima Majed applies a comparative approach and asks what the Iraqi and Lebanese uprisings of 2019 have in common beyond a regional/cultural proximity. She first discusses whether these uprisings can be termed 'revolutions' or 'revolutionary' in the first place. She then focuses on the internal contradictions of these revolutions, looking at the rhetoric of corruption, national unity, technocratic politics and individualism.



Looking back - looking forward

Anniversaries have a symbolic power and can be good opportunities for taking stock of what happened, and for reflecting on the positives and negatives. They can also be dynamic moments where we think about how to move forward. Our aim is not to reminisce about the beautiful times that are long gone, or to romanticize these great historical events. Instead, in this project we hope to get closer to the spirit of the revolutions, their creative energy, as well as their contradictions and shortcomings – and their enemies.

Obviously, this project has some lacunas – things that are not addressed. This is partly due to our own limits, in terms of our labour and time, and partly due to the limits of a project whose *raison d'être* is bound to a certain moment in time. In truth, revolutionary processes are always unfinished. The same goes for political praxis, which includes writing about revolutions. And although we would not pretend, or seek, to be fully comprehensive when discussing such a vast region, we hope we offer here an important glimpse, in the voice and the language of its people. What we have sought to present is a progressive analysis that can contribute to deepening our knowledge about the region – with the hope that this will allow us to learn from past mistakes and continue to push for long-sought change in the prevailing oppressive political and socio-economic conditions.

Our memories of the incredible events over the last decade have been foundational. We feel privileged to have witnessed people acting with a political stamina and bravery that can only be termed 'historic'. Our minds have been enlightened and our spirits elevated by the countless ordinary men and women who dared to say 'the people want' [al sha'b yourid], and who rose up in unprecedented circumstances. We inherit

their legacy, and the enormous price paid to arrive at a tipping point from which neither the friends nor the enemies of revolution can return. There are few things as powerful as ordinary working class people overcoming all the odds and shaking the very foundation of the status quo.

‘The personal is political’ proclaims the feminist maxim. ‘Nothing about us goes without us’ runs the motto of the disability struggle. In the spirit of these two messages we wholeheartedly thank all of the contributors to this project, who bring their perspectives as scholars and activists in and from the region.

And we pay tribute to the fallen, the injured, the political prisoners and the ones who continue to struggle. We dedicate this work to them, and to all those who have sacrificed their lives for bread, justice and dignity.





**Authoritarianism, economic
liberalization, and the roots of
the 2011 uprisings**

Adam Hanieh

كرامة
عدالة اجتماعية



Exactly 10 years on, how should we understand the root causes of the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa?¹ At the time, many commentators and policy-makers answered this question with reference to the simple mantra of ‘political and economic freedom’. While much of the world appeared to move away from authoritarian state structures through the 1990s and 2000s, the Middle East had remained largely mired in autocracy and monarchical rule – ‘the world’s most unfree region’ as the introduction to one prominent study of politics in the Arab world put it.² The problem, according to these frameworks, lay in the stifling effect of authoritarianism over capitalist markets, which prevented the emergence of a vibrant private sector and held back the region’s economic potential. The popular rage expressed on the streets of the Middle East in 2011 could thus be understood as a desire for both ‘free’ political systems and ‘free’ economies.

In this vein, then-US President Obama noted in a major policy speech on the Middle East in May 2011 that the region needed ‘a model in which protectionism gives way to openness, the reins of commerce pass from the few to the many, and the economy generates jobs for the young. America’s support for democracy will therefore be based on ensuring financial stability, promoting reform, and integrating competitive markets with each other and the global economy.’ Likewise, the president of the World Bank at the time, Robert Zoellick, argued that the revolts in Tunisia occurred because of too much ‘red tape’, which prevented people from freely engaging in capitalist markets. Western policy-makers have repeated this basic argument incessantly since 2011 – autocratic states smother economic freedom, and ‘free markets’ are essential for any sustained transition away from authoritarianism. As part of this narrative, Western governments and international financial institutions (IFIs) are recast as benign and benevolent actors – ready to support the ‘transition’ to democracy and willing to provide the necessary technocratic expertise to construct open economic markets.

In what follows, it is argued that this standard framing of the Middle East’s political economy is false. It is certainly true that the region’s political structures were (and remain) highly authoritarian, but this kind of political system is directly reflective of how capitalist development occurred in the

1 This chapter draws on Hanieh, A. (2013) *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of contemporary capitalism in the Middle East*. Chicago: Haymarket Books

2 Schlumberger, O. (2007) *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and durability in nondemocratic regimes*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press. p. 5.

region over the last few decades. Central to this development trajectory were the far-reaching economic shifts that began in the 1980s under structural adjustment packages (SAPs) supported by the leading IFIs. Locked into these agreements, Arab governments moved through the 1990s and 2000s to reorient their economies in line with market-driven principles. The policies adopted in the region differed little from those found elsewhere around the globe – the prioritization of private sector growth, fiscal austerity, opening up to foreign capital inflows, privatization, and the deregulation of markets (including labour). There was no essential contradiction between these economic policies and political authoritarianism – indeed, the opening up of markets and the steady creep of neoliberal policies throughout the region depended precisely upon authoritarian rulers (as it still does). Crucially, this process was fully supported by Western governments, who applauded the coming to power of autocratic rulers in the region in the 1980s and continued to laud the direction of economic policy-making in the decades preceding 2011.



Postwar politics and the modern Middle East

Any analysis of the contemporary Middle East needs to begin with the region's centrality to the world economy. Long a strategic crossroads of trade, the area took on special importance following the discovery of large supplies of hydrocarbons during the early twentieth century. Oil and gas were to become essential commodities underpinning modern industrial production and transport following World War 2 and, in this context, control and influence over the region shaped the balance of global rivalries in the postwar period. The United States, which emerged as the dominant power at this time, placed particular emphasis on building privileged relationships with countries across the region.

The 1950s and 1960s saw both a deepening of the region's importance to the world economy and, at the same time, the coming to power of Arab

nationalist movements in Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, Syria and Iraq. These new governments overthrew regimes allied to former colonial powers and attempted to pursue economic models based upon statist forms of development – emphasizing domestic control of industry, support to education and employment for university graduates, subsidies for basic consumer items such as food, and state control of land and other resources. Nonetheless, despite the frequent reference to ‘Arab socialism’ made by these new governments, their economic strategy was still very much capitalist in orientation.³ These policies led to an improvement in living conditions for much of the region’s population, but they were also characterized by repressive forms of rule aimed at curtailing any independent political action.

Western governments – led by the United States – initially confronted these nationalist struggles through strengthening relations with three key regional allies: Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel. In the Gulf, the Saudi monarch, King Saud, had long been reliant on US political and military support, and was all too willing to undercut Arab nationalism through the corrupting influence of oil revenues. Saudi funding of pro-Western movements in the region enabled these forces to deny any direct link to Western governments. The Saudi government was also encouraged to deploy Islam as a regional counterweight to nationalist and left-wing ideas, organizing ‘Islamic summits’ that asserted Saudi influence and challenged Egypt’s role as the leading Arab state. A vitriolic propaganda war opened up between the Saudi and Egyptian governments. This proxy conflict with Egypt took its most vivid form during the eight-year North Yemen civil war, where Saudi Arabia was the main supporter of the royalist, pro-British forces that had been overthrown in 1962, while Egypt backed the republican movements arrayed against the ousted monarchy.

In the case of Iran, the United States (and Britain’s M16) engineered a coup against the Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953, bringing to power a pro-Western government that was loyal to the Iranian monarchy, headed by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. The US explicitly conceived of Iran as its principal base of control for the Gulf region, with a 1969 report by the RAND Corporation – a prominent think tank closely connected to Washington policy-makers – noting that Iran could ‘help achieve many of the goals we find desirable without the need to intervene

³ Hanieh, A. (2021) ‘Class, nation, and socialism’, *International Politics Reviews* 9: 50–6–0. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41312-021-00104-2>. [Accessed 26 July 2021].

in the region'.⁴ This role was convincingly demonstrated in 1973 with the dispatch of the Iranian military to Oman to assist British troops in the repression of the Dhofar rebellion – a powerful struggle that was at the heart of left-wing movements in the Arabian Peninsula. The Iranian troops, supplied with US helicopters and other weaponry, succeeded in crushing the rebellion. US military support to Iran skyrocketed from 1973 onwards, amounting to more than \$6 billion annually between 1973 and 1975. This close relationship continued up until 1979, when the Iranian revolution ousted the Pahlavi monarchy and removed Iran from the sphere of US influence in the region.

The other major pivot of US power in the broader region was the state of Israel. As a settler-colonial state, Israel had come into being in 1948 through the expulsion of around three-quarters of the original Palestinian population from their homes and lands. Inextricably tied to external support for its continued viability in a hostile environment, Israel could be counted on as a much more reliable ally than any Arab state. During the 1950s, Israel's main external support had come from Britain and France. But the 1967 war saw the Israeli military destroy the Egyptian and Syrian air forces and occupy the West Bank, Gaza Strip, (Egyptian) Sinai Peninsula, and (Syrian) Golan Heights. Israel's defeat of the Arab states encouraged the United States to cement itself as the country's primary patron, supplying it annually with billions of dollars' worth of military hardware and financial support.

Israel's victory in 1967 signalled a decisive turning point in the evolution of Arab nationalism. While pro-Western regimes continued to be challenged from below by various radical movements, and new nationalist governments came to power in Southern Yemen (1967), Iraq (1968) and Libya (1969), Israel's victory dealt a devastating blow to the notions of Arab unity and resistance that had been crystallized most sharply in Nasser's Egypt. The military defeat was symbolically reinforced by Nasser's death in 1970 and the coming to power of Anwar Sadat, who subsequently moved to reverse many of Nasser's more radical policies. The priority given by the United States to its relationship with Israel was further highlighted in 1973, when another war broke out between Israel and a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria. Despite initial Egyptian and Syrian advances in the opening salvos of the war, US airlifts of the latest military equipment led to Israel's eventual victory.

⁴ Cited in Stork, J. (1975) 'US Strategy in the Gulf', *MERIP Reports* 36: 19.



The emergence of neoliberal authoritarianism

Given this regional political context, the global economic downturn of the early 1970s placed severe pressure on the statist development strategies of various Arab governments. The global recession hit the non-oil exports of many Arab countries, while the cost of food and energy imports increased. Moreover, large military expenditures associated with ongoing conflicts in the region (particularly the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel) placed considerable strain on government budgets. Following the sharp rise in US interest rates that began in 1979 – the so-called Volcker Shock – an acute debt crisis swept through key Arab states, including Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan.

As a result of this debt crisis, many Arab governments sought financial support from IFIs, in return for signing SAPs that committed them to a reorientation of economic priorities. Morocco was the first to sign a SAP in 1983, and similar reform programmes were soon adopted in Tunisia (1986), Jordan (1989), Egypt (1991), Algeria (1994) and Yemen (1995). These SAPs sought to strengthen the private sector and achieve closer integration with the world market. The private sector would be, as the World Bank later put it, the ‘engine of strong and sustained growth’ – a necessary requirement of the ‘new global economy’ in which ‘rewards... go to the most hospitable environments [for capital investment]’.

From the 1980s onwards, the economic policies of Arab states followed such prescriptions, much like countries elsewhere around the world. Trapped in a cycle of debt and compelled by the conditionalities of multilateral loan packages, Arab governments embraced the standard policy priorities of market-based development: privatization and the prioritization of private sector growth, deregulation of labour and financial markets, a lowering of corporate tax rates, relaxation of barriers to trade and foreign investment, and cutbacks to public spending, including subsidies on food and energy. These

new policies were widely unpopular, and their introduction was met with strikes, demonstrations and violent clashes between citizens and security forces – one survey documented 25 outbreaks of major protests between 1977 and 1992 against structural adjustment in nine countries across the region (Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Iran, Sudan, Tunisia and Turkey).⁵

In the face of this widespread opposition to economic change, Arab states took on increasingly authoritarian characteristics through the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, several of the regimes that were overthrown in 2011 first came to power in this period and led the turn towards neoliberal development models. The 1987 coup by Ben Ali in Tunisia, for example, was followed by the country's decisive orientation towards IFI-led structural adjustment. Likewise, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, who became president in 1981 following the assassination of his predecessor Anwar Sadat, consolidated a system of repressive rule that included the suspension of the constitution, imposition of an Emergency Law, restrictions on the press, detention without charge, and the introduction of military courts to try political opponents. In 1991 Mubarak agreed to an SAP with the IMF and World Bank, and then turned his security forces against the resulting labour strikes and mass demonstrations that occurred throughout the 1990s. Similarly, governments in Jordan, Morocco and Algeria became much more authoritarian in this period. Western governments and IFIs were nonetheless supportive of these governments, viewing their repressive practices as a necessary means to undercut the widespread social discontent around the new neoliberal measures.

These economic measures reversed many of the previous policies embraced by Arab nationalist governments from the 1950s to the 1970s. One indication of this is the large-scale privatization of state-owned firms during this period. According to World Bank figures, total proceeds from privatization in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen reached a little over \$8 billion between 1988 and 1999, with more than half of this figure coming from sales in Egypt alone (\$4.172 billion).⁶ Over the subsequent decade, the scale of privatization expanded considerably, with privatization receipts totalling more than \$27 billion between 2000 and 2008. This latter period saw many more countries in the region engage

5 Walton, J.K. and Seddon, D. (1994) *Free Markets and Food Riots: The politics of global adjustment*. Wiley-Blackwell. p. 171.

6 See Hanieh, A. (2013) *Lineages of Revolt*, pp. 76–80, for further discussion of the figures in this paragraph.

in the selling of assets, as well as a shift away from the privatization of industrial and manufacturing industries and towards the privatization of the telecommunications and financial sectors. Despite the increasing number of countries involved in privatization, Egypt continued to register both the highest number of deals and the largest value of assets sold (\$15.7 billion from 1988 to 2008).

A further core priority of structural adjustment in the region was the deregulation of labour markets through reducing (or abolishing) minimum wages and severance pay, and easing laws around hiring and firing.⁷ Arab governments were urged by the World Bank and other IFIs to implement 'more flexible hiring and dismissal procedures' as a means of reducing 'the dominant role of government as employer' – in this manner, the costs of labour across the board could be reduced. In particular, those firms that were earmarked for privatization would not have to compete with better labour conditions in the public sector and would thus become more attractive to potential investors. Throughout the 2000s, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia all passed significant laws deregulating the labour market.

Another important focus of IFI policy in the region during this period was liberalization of the agricultural sector. Here, policies aimed to develop new agribusiness models that would link production more closely to global markets. Alongside laws that commodified land and dismantled collective ownership rights, other measures lifted price caps on agricultural inputs (such as fertilizers, pesticides and water), and sought to integrate farmers into agribusiness commodity chains. The Egyptian case has been particularly well documented. In 1992, the Mubarak government passed Law 96, which allowed landlords to sell land without informing or negotiating with tenants and lifted longstanding caps on rural rents.⁸ As a consequence of this law, rents increased by 300 to 400 per cent in some areas and over a third of all tenant families in Egyptian rural areas (around 1 million households) lost their rights to land. Law 96 was enthusiastically backed by the World Bank and IMF as part of a general policy to establish private property rights in agriculture. A USAID-sponsored study applauded the Egyptian government for passing the law, which it saw as doing away

7 Ibid.

8 See Bush, R. (ed.) (2002) *Counter-Revolution in Egypt's Countryside: Land and farmers in the era of economic reform*. London: Zed Books.

with ‘more than 40 years of an imbalanced relationship between landlords and tenants’.

The logic of these and other policies was further reinforced through international trade and financial agreements signed throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Of particular significance here are the Association Agreements signed with the European Union as part of the European Mediterranean Partnership (which later became the European Neighbourhood Policy). Between 1995 and 1997, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia signed Association Agreements with the EU, while Egypt followed them in 2004. These agreements promised financial aid and greater access to the markets of the EU – the region’s most important trading partner – in return for deepening neoliberal reform. Alongside similar bilateral treaties with the US and accession to the World Trade Organization, these international agreements constituted an important driving force behind the reduction of trade barriers and the opening of new sectors – such as finance, telecommunications, transport, and energy – to foreign ownership.

These economic agreements were also directly tied to the intensification of Western military and political intervention in the region throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Most significantly, this included the decade-long imposition of sanctions on Iraq through the 1990s, culminating in a 2003 US/British-led invasion that overthrew the Iraqi ruler, Saddam Hussein, and that led to a devastating series of social and economic crises from which the country has yet to emerge. At the same time, the United States and European Union sought to normalize Israel’s place in the region – backing the misnamed Oslo Peace Process through the 1990s and advancing a range of regional initiatives aimed at deepening Israel’s ties with Jordan, Egypt and the Gulf states. In relation to both the Iraq War and Israeli–Arab negotiations, US strategic objectives carried an explicit economic dimension (frequently overlooked) that aimed to deepen the region’s integration with global trade and financial flows – war, politics and the region’s economic transformation need to be seen as intimately connected.

Of course, not all states in the Middle East were integrated into the global economy and the Western orbit to the same degree. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, countries such as Libya and Syria largely stood outside the US-dominated system, seeking instead to build relationships with other powers – notably the Soviet Union (up until the early 1990s), and later Russia and China. These two states were headed by tightly centralized,

authoritarian regimes – that of Gaddafi in Libya and the Assad family in Syria – in which state power was based on highly patrimonial structures and, in the case of Syria, the deliberate cultivation of sectarian patterns of rule. Due to the way that state control underpinned the power of these regimes, and their relative isolation from Western markets, both Libya and Syria did not see the adoption of IFI-led structural adjustment throughout the 1980s in the same way as other Arab states. Nonetheless, in the wake of the decline of their traditional international backers in the 1990s and early 2000s, both Syria and Libya began to seek a rapprochement with the West. This move was not solely political: it also included an opening to world markets and initial steps towards economic liberalization. In the case of Libya, Gaddafi gave his strong support to the US attack on Afghanistan in 2001 and was later to participate in CIA rendition flights and torture programmes. In 2003, following the lifting of UN sanctions that had been placed on Libya in 1992, key regime figures began lobbying for economic liberalization, with Gaddafi's son Saif el-Islam insisting that 'everything should be privatized' in a speech at the Libya Youth Forum in 2008.⁹ Only tentative steps in this direction were to be adopted, however, due to the highly centralized concentration of state power in the hands of the Gaddafi family. Despite this fact, the IMF was to note on 15 February 2011 – just two days prior to the beginning of an uprising that was to lead to the overthrow of the regime – that 'An ambitious program to privatize banks and develop the nascent financial sector is under way. Banks have been partially privatized, interest rates decontrolled, and competition encouraged . . . ongoing efforts to restructure and modernize the Central Bank of Libya are under way with assistance from the Fund.'

For Syria, significant steps towards economic reform began following the accession to power of Bashar al-Assad in 2000, after the death of his father Hafez al-Assad. The younger Assad began to privatize and open up the Syrian economy to foreign direct investment, leading to private control of key industrial sectors such as metallurgy, chemicals and textiles. According to one analyst of the Syrian economy, the size of the private sector had risen to just over 60 per cent of GDP by 2007, up from 52.3 per cent in 2000.¹⁰ Much like other countries in the Middle East, privatization

9 Prashad, V. *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter*. Oakland, Baltimore, Edinburgh: AK Press Publishing and Distribution. p. 111.

10 Haddad, B. (2011) 'The Political Economy of Syria: Realities and challenges', *Middle East Policy* 18(2): 53.

benefitted a small group of business groups that were closely linked to the Assad regime, and that were enriched through state contracts and joint projects with foreign investors. As these reforms accelerated during the period 2005–10, much of the rest of the Syrian population saw a severe worsening of their living standards.

The cases of Syria and Libya confirm that the core assumptions of market-led development had become widely accepted by state and ruling class elites throughout the region by the end of the first decade of the 2000s. Although Syria and Libya may have sometimes expressed opposition to US policy in the Middle East – an opposition that was, however, typically rhetorical rather than substantive – their ruling regimes sought entry into the world market on the basis of economic programmes that paralleled those found elsewhere in the region. Characterized by a similar intertwining of authoritarian rule and economic power, the embrace of these policies expressed an attempt to strengthen the position of those located at the centre of the political system.



Social inequality and the polarization of wealth

Throughout this period of economic transformation, large and persistent disparities opened up in the ownership and control of wealth, access to resources and markets, and the exercise of political power. Alongside consistently high unemployment, rising poverty, and substantial levels of rural dispossession, a tiny layer of the region's population benefitted considerably from the new economic policies. Privatization and new market opportunities presented lucrative openings for well-connected business groups involved in areas such as trade, finance and real estate speculation. State elites and militaries also came to wield significant economic power, building a web of highly opaque relationships

with private capital groups.¹¹ These patterns of inequality were sustained through authoritarian rule and state repression. Indeed, it is impossible to separate the highly autocratic political structures of the region from the policies (and outcomes) of the market-led development models implemented from the 1980s onwards.

One important illustration of these patterns can be seen in jobs and employment statistics. Before the global economic downturn of 2008, the average official unemployment rate across Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria and Tunisia was higher than in any other region in the world. Young people and women were most affected by unemployment – with around one-fifth of all Arab women and one-quarter of youth in the region unemployed. These figures hide large regional disparities: in the Mashreq sub-region (Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the West Bank and Gaza Strip), over 45 per cent of all young females were unemployed in 2011, more than double the rate for young men. The Middle East also ranked at the bottom of the world for labour market participation rates, with less than half of the region's population considered part of the labour force. Only about one-third of young people and 26 per cent of women were in work, or actively seeking employment. This profound marginalization of young people and women carried deep social implications in countries where elderly men monopolized political power.

The region's labour markets were also marked by a widespread prevalence of informal and precarious work. In 2009, the United Nations Development Programme reported that the growth of informal work in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia was among the fastest in the world (reaching between 40 and 50 per cent of all non-agricultural employment). In Egypt, three-quarters of new labour market entrants from 2000 to 2005 joined the informal sector, up from only one-fifth in the early 1970s.¹² Not only did these trends affect the character of employment, they also carried important implications for the way urban space was used, and the kinds of social and political movements that emerged in the Middle East – the residents of densely-packed informal settlements across cities such as

11 For Egypt's military-economic links see Marshall, S. and Stacher, J. (2012) 'Egypt's generals and transnational capital', *Middle East Report* 262(Spring); and Abul-Magd, Z. (2011) 'The army and the economy in Egypt', *Jadaliyya*, 23 December 2011.

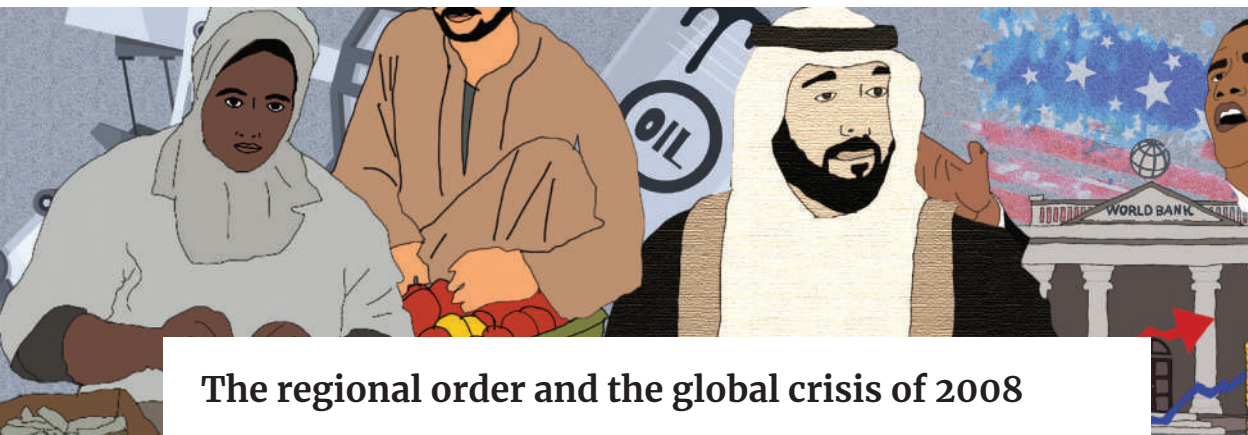
12 Wahba, J. (2010) 'Labour markets performance and migration flows in Egypt', in *Labour Markets Performance and Migration Flows in Arab Mediterranean Countries: Determinants and Effects*, European Commission Occasional Paper 60, Vol. 3. Brussels: European Commission. p. 34.

Cairo, Casablanca, Algiers and Beirut were viewed by governments with deep mistrust and suspicion.

These highly unequal employment and labour market outcomes contributed to worsening overall poverty levels in the region. The proportion of the population without the means to acquire basic nutrition and essential non-food items (the 'upper poverty line') averaged close to 40 per cent across Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Mauritania, Lebanon, Egypt and Yemen in the decade prior to the uprisings.¹³ Health and educational outcomes also reflected unequal access to state services and social support. Between 2000 and 2006, around one-fifth of all children in Egypt and Morocco exhibited stunted growth as a result of malnutrition. Across the Mashreq countries, undernourishment increased from 6.4 per cent in 1991 to 10.3 per cent in 2011. In 2010, on the eve of the uprisings, a striking 30 per cent of all adults in the region were illiterate (rising to 40 per cent for females aged 15 and above). Educational access was also marked by clear inequalities. In Egypt, for example, UNESCO noted that 'one in five of the poorest [children] do not make it into primary school at all, while almost all rich children get through to upper secondary'.

It is essential to stress, however, that alongside this widespread deterioration of social conditions throughout the 1990s and 2000s, many of the region's leading economies were experiencing very high growth rates and were being lauded as successful cases of economic reform, worthy of emulation by other countries in the Global South. Egypt, for example, was ranked by the World Bank as the 'world's top reformer' in its 2008 Doing Business report, and continued to rate within the top 10 global reformers until the overthrow of Mubarak. Likewise, the World Bank's 2010 Development Policy Review on Tunisia praised the country for its 'steady structural reforms and good macroeconomic management' that had earned Tunisia a place 'among the leading performers in the group of emerging economies' and led to 'enviable achievements' for the country's poor. This kind of support to authoritarian governments continues to mark IFI policy in much of the Middle East today (such as the Sisi regime in Egypt) – a fact that it is crucial to remember in the light of attempts by these institutions to rewrite their historical record in the region.

¹³ Achcar, G. (2013). *The People Want*. London: Saqi Books. p. 31.



The regional order and the global crisis of 2008

The economic policies imposed by IFIs on the Middle East throughout the 1990s and 2000s did not just reconfigure social structures at the national scale, they also precipitated new economic and political hierarchies at the regional level. A key feature of these emergent hierarchies was the growing weight of the six Gulf Arab states (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman) in the regional political economy – and the linkage between capital accumulation in the Gulf and processes of class and state formation elsewhere in the area.

Taken as a whole, the Gulf Arab states are marked by features that set them apart from the rest of the region. All these states are monarchies whose rich and relatively cheap hydrocarbon resources (both oil and natural gas) made the Gulf a critical focus of Western strategy in the Middle East throughout the twentieth century. At the same time, the social structures of the Gulf monarchies differ considerably from those found elsewhere in the Middle East. Most significant is the Gulf's reliance on a large number of temporary migrant workers, mostly drawn from South Asia and to a lesser degree neighbouring Arab countries, who now make up more than one-half of the Gulf's total population of 56 million. When considered as a percentage of the labour force, non-nationals make up from 59 to 86 per cent of the employed population in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait, increasing to around 92 to 95 per cent in Qatar and the UAE. Denied labour, political and civil rights, these migrant workers have been fundamental to patterns of urban growth and capital accumulation in the Gulf; they have also underpinned the 'vertical segmentation' of Gulf

societies, with citizens incorporated into the surveillance and control of migrant populations through the kafala system.¹⁴

Over the past several decades, growing international demand for the Gulf's hydrocarbons – underpinned by a near continuous increase in the price of oil from 2000 to mid-2014 – has massively increased wealth levels in the Gulf.¹⁵ This has helped nurture the development of large capitalist conglomerates in the Gulf, closely linked to ruling monarchies and the state, whose activities span sectors such as construction and real estate development, industrial processes (particularly steel, aluminium and concrete), retail (including import trade and the ownership of shopping centres and malls) and finance.

While much of the surplus capital held in the Gulf has been invested in North America and Europe, large amounts also flowed into neighbouring Arab countries throughout the 2000s.¹⁶ Critically, this regional expansion of Gulf capital was predicated upon the SAPs discussed above, and the subsequent liberalization and opening up to foreign direct investment flows throughout many Arab countries in the 1990s and 2000s. As a result, Gulf capital was a prime beneficiary of the neoliberal turn throughout the wider region – becoming intimately involved in the ownership and control of capital across the Middle East as a whole.

These regional hierarchies are crucial to understanding the impact of the 2008–09 global economic crisis on the Middle East. As noted, in the years preceding this crisis the region was already facing very high levels of social and economic inequality. In addition to issues of youth unemployment, social exclusion and poverty, rising costs of food and energy placed considerable pressure on the livelihoods of many families.¹⁷ Growing import bills meant that Arab governments faced enormous difficulties in maintaining already reduced subsidy levels; simultaneously, the cost of living for poorer families also rose. This precipitated a large

14 Khalaf, A. (2014) 'The Politics of Migration', in A. Khalaf et al. (eds.) *Transit States: Labour, migration and citizenship in the Gulf*. London: Pluto Press. pp. 39–56.

15 Hanieh, A. (2018) *Money, Markets, and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the political economy of the contemporary Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 31.

16 A commonly cited figure throughout the 2000s was that around 50 to 55 per cent of all Gulf Cooperation Council investments went to US markets, 20 per cent went to Europe, 10 to 15 per cent went to Asia and 10 to 15 per cent went to the Middle East and North Africa.

17 From July 2007 to July 2009, the food consumer price index rose 53 per cent in Tunisia, 47 per cent in Egypt, 42 per cent in Syria, 22 per cent in Morocco, and 20 per cent in Jordan.

jump in the number of the region's poor – one estimate from the African Development Bank calculated that a total of 1.11 million additional people had fallen below the poverty line in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Yemen immediately prior to the 2008 global crisis itself.

As the 2008–09 crisis unfolded, these pre-existing patterns of economic development influenced how different parts of the region experienced the global turmoil. Non-oil exporting states were hard hit by the drop in global demand for goods such as agricultural products, textiles and garments, and other manufactured items. Simultaneously, overseas remittance levels fell as the crisis enveloped agriculture, construction and low-skilled manufacturing sectors in Europe, where many Arab migrants (both documented and undocumented) were located. Finally, financial liberalization throughout the neoliberal period had exposed many countries to potential fluctuations in foreign capital inflows, notably of tourist spending and foreign direct investment.

In the Gulf, however, the crisis was experienced differently. Gulf countries were initially shaken by a short-lived drop in oil prices from July to December 2008 (and the associated fall in global demand), as well as a pull-back in foreign capital inflows that led to a collapse of the Gulf's real estate bubbles (particularly in Dubai). But, in response, the Gulf utilized accumulated financial surpluses to support the large private and state conglomerates threatened by the crisis, launching massive programmes of spending on real estate and infrastructure projects (concentrated in Saudi Arabia and the UAE). Moreover, the Gulf monarchies were able to make use of their structural dependence on temporary migrant workers to shift the burden of the crisis onto neighbouring countries – the hiring of new workers slowed and existing workers could simply be sent home as projects were cancelled. By 2010, oil prices had begun to move upwards once more, further consolidating the Gulf's path out of the global crisis.

Taken together, these different regional trajectories of the global crisis meant that the Gulf states were able to emerge in a regionally strengthened position in the years following 2008, whilst neighbouring Arab countries faced growing fiscal and social burdens. It was in this context that mass protests first emerged in Tunisia in December 2010, spreading rapidly throughout the entire region. The first phase of these protests in 2011 saw the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and the Mubarak regime in Egypt. Governments in Syria, Bahrain, Jordan, Algeria, Oman, Morocco, Yemen and Libya were also faced with uprisings and protests

expressing opposition to autocratic patterns of rule and the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions experienced by much of the population. In this sense, the uprisings targeted both the economic policies that had been so heavily promoted by Western financial institutions over the preceding decades, as well as the political structures with which they were twinned. Not all participants in the uprisings thought about the protests in this manner, of course, but the ubiquitous slogan of *aish, hurriyah*, ‘*adalah ijtima’iyah*’ (bread, freedom, social justice) make this fusion of the economic and political spheres quite evident.



Conclusion

Despite the aspirations of those who took part in the extraordinary struggles of 2011, the extreme polarization of wealth and power in the region has not been fundamentally altered. A recent study has shown that the Middle East is now the most unequal region in the world, with the richest 10 per cent of income earners capturing 64 per cent of total income – compared to 37 per cent in Western Europe, 47 per cent in the United States and 55 per cent in Brazil.¹⁸ The figures are even starker for the ultra-rich population of the region: the income share of the top 1 per cent stands at about 30 per cent in the Middle East, compared to 12 per cent in Western Europe, 20 per cent in the US, 28 per cent in Brazil, 18 per cent in South Africa, 14 per cent in China and 21 per cent in India.¹⁹ These unprecedented levels of inequality are present both at the regional level

18 Alvarado, F., Assouad, L. and Picketty, T. (2018) ‘Measuring inequality in the Middle East 1990–2016: The world’s most unequal region?’, *The Review of Income and Wealth* (online). Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/roiw.12385> [Accessed 26 July 2021]

19 Ibid.

– between the wealthy countries of the Gulf and the rest of the Middle East – as well as within individual countries.

These high levels of inequality are directly attributable to the market-based development models of recent decades, which have remained essentially unchanged following the uprisings and which continue to be promoted by major IFIs. Such continuities were clearly demonstrated by the IFI-led Deauville Partnership, an initiative launched at the May 2011 G8 summit in France that promised up to \$40 billion in loans and other assistance towards Arab countries ‘in transition’. The core premise of the Partnership was a redoubled effort towards market opening in five target countries – Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Morocco and Libya – with goals such as ‘remov[ing] existing structural impediments’, encouraging a ‘vigorous private sector’ as ‘the main engine for job creation’, and pursuing ‘regional and global economic integration [as the] key to economic development’. In this manner, and strikingly reminiscent of how the political and economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s had opened the path to structural adjustment in the region, the post-2011 crises were viewed as an opportunity to extend the policy trajectories of past regimes. As the European Investment Bank noted not long after the overthrow of Ben Ali and Mubarak, ‘moments of political change can also represent an opportunity to reinforce or improve already existing institutional frameworks’.

Backed by initiatives such as the Deauville Partnership, IFIs have moved since 2011 to expand their position in the region with the offer of new loan agreements and other forms of assistance. Long-established institutions such as the World Bank and IMF have led the way in this process, while working alongside other institutions that have only begun operating in the region during the last decade (such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development). The evolving discussions around post-conflict reconstruction in countries such as Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq are also marked by the same kind of market-driven logic, and – as history amply illustrates – the aftermath of war, conflict and crisis (including the current global pandemic) is frequently viewed as an opportunity to rework power arrangements and accelerate economic change.

A decade on, the experience of the 2011 uprisings demonstrates that it is not sufficient to focus solely on political demands (such as new elections or governmental corruption) without simultaneously tackling the social

and economic power of capital (nationally, regionally and globally). There can be no fundamental break with authoritarian state structures under an economic system that continues to promote unfettered growth and so-called 'free markets' at the expense of social justice and equality. One of the major weaknesses of the 2011 revolts was a failure to recognize this strategic lesson. But more recent cycles of political protest – notably the 2018–21 uprisings across Lebanon, Sudan, Algeria, Morocco and Iraq – appear to have learnt from the 2011 experience, explicitly linking the challenge to autocratic political elites with the need to reverse the extreme disparities in the control and distribution of wealth. In this sense – while the aspirations of 2011 remain wholly unfulfilled – the lessons, experiences and hopes of that moment will form an indelible part of struggles to come.





Ten years into the Tunisian Revolution: The specificities and limitations of 'exceptionalism'

Ghassen Ben Khelifa



'People wanted life one day, and fate answered'¹

Metres away from the notorious Ministry of Interior in Tunis, people gather in Bourguiba Avenue to discuss the political situation. At night, orderly queues form; the atmosphere is good-natured. Neighbourhood committees are in action. During the day, there are marches by different classes and sectors, and there is a campaign to remove former officials. Everybody is talking politics, everywhere, something that was previously taboo...

Recalling these fragments of the events that followed the departure of Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, the grandeur of these 'days that shook the world' (as John Reed described the Russian Revolution) comes to mind. One decade later, many in Tunisia and beyond still wonder: was what happened in Tunisia a genuine revolution, a fleeting uprising, or a 'foreign conspiracy'? Or was it perhaps – using Samir Amin's words referring to the events in Egypt that same year – 'more than an uprising and less than a revolution'? And if the latter, how can one explain the continued protests and confrontations with the police carried out by marginalized youth in inland areas and popular neighbourhoods surrounding the capital? Is the answer simply 'Tunisia' – as argued by some Egyptians lamenting the return of dictatorship in their country, referring to a 'Tunisian exception'? What is the truth behind this 'Tunisian exception', as compared with the failed revolutions in Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria? And what about the revolution's presumed success and democratic transition?

To answer these questions, it is essential to first revisit the pre-revolutionary period.

¹ In reference to two famous verses by the Tunisian poet Abu al-Qassim al-Chabbi.



Revisiting the context of the 17 December uprising

Undoubtedly, youth unemployment and regional marginalization were the main reasons for the outbreak of the Tunisian Intifada in late 2010. The self-immolation carried out by informal street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, in the heart of Tunisia, was one expression of the increased frustration among unemployed youth in marginalized areas, which had led to a proliferation of protests in the preceding years: the Gafsa mining basin revolt in 2008 and protests in Skhira and Ben Gardane in 2010. Figures indicate a rise in unemployment rates during this period: despite attempts by the dictatorship's statistical agencies to put forward an unemployment rate of 13 per cent, youth unemployment actually reached 31 per cent at least. Such numbers reflect the failed neoliberalism of Ben Ali's regime, whose economic policy relied on increasing the number of university graduates qualified to work in the private sector and drawing in foreign investments, and on the Association Agreement with the European Union signed in 1995. Rather than manage to resolve the problem of unemployment, that agreement destroyed the textile sector and rendered nearly half a million workers unemployed.

One of the consequences of these failed developmental policies was the directing of the most important public infrastructure and private sector investments to the coastal governorates, at the expense of the interior governorates. As such, the economic choices that the French colonizers had adopted to facilitate their plunder were maintained. To a large extent, this explains the increased poverty and unemployment rates in non-coastal areas.² It also explains the 17 December revolution, which broke

² While the national unemployment rate reached 13.3 per cent, it reached as high as 37 per cent in Tataouine, in the southeast. Similarly, poverty rates remained four times higher in Tunisia's inlands when compared with the coastal areas. See Al-Arabi Sadiqi (2019) 'Regional development in Tunisia: The implications of complex marginalisation', <http://urlr.me/bnZX2>

out in Sidi Bouzid in central Tunisia, moved to Kasserine, a neighbouring governorate, then to other marginalized governorates, all the way to the impoverished neighbourhoods in the urban peripheries, where many live in very difficult conditions.

Following the early success of the Ben Ali regime (he reached power through a coup in 1987) in eliminating its main political opponents, the Ennahda Movement, the regime sought popular legitimacy through adopting developmental measures that benefited the most isolated areas. This included constructing roads, and setting up water and electricity networks. The propagandist and temporary nature of what state media called 'achievements' was soon exposed, however – as the regime maintained those very same failed 'developmental' policies. To make matters worse, Ben Ali enabled his and his in-laws' families to take over various public sector companies and their budgets, as well as to control public transactions and to deplete state-owned banks, in return for quick personal enrichment. This resulted in a semi-total accumulation of capital in the hands of a minority of intermarried families (21 per cent of the Tunisian economy, according to a World Bank report). It also helped extend anti-regime sentiment into a section of the bourgeoisie that was thereby deprived of the ability to compete in a number of profitable sectors. With rising unemployment rates among university graduates in the mid-2000s (which reached 22 per cent, according to dubious official numbers), the regime lost credibility among large segments of the middle class.

As the causes of anger in Tunisia entwined and multiplied, Bouazizi's self-immolation triggered popular protest throughout the country.

Bouazizi can be said to have represented a large country-wide social stratum: those youth who lost access to schooling and were excluded from the small and extremely selective job market. The 'illegal activity' of which the Sidi Bouzid police accused Bouazizi is a common charge in many Tunisian governorates, and is particularly leveraged against people in impoverished urban neighbourhoods. Bouazizi stands out, however, for having inhabited a mainly agricultural region that suffered (and still does) from the marginalization of small-scale farmers and the expropriation of their land for the benefit of the agrarian bourgeoisie (especially from Sfax Governorate). A few months before the Bouazizi incident, small-scale farmers from the town of Regueb held a sit-in in Sidi Bouzid, denouncing the state-owned Banque Nationale Agricole's attempts to steal their lands; the police suppressed their mobilization. One

can thus say that the uprising began with an informal street vendor and a peasant deprived of the (agricultural) means of production, who refused to give in to the rules of the market that forced him into employment and into the reserve army of capital.

The uprising soon spread to the rest of the Sidi Bouzid districts, like Menzel Bouzaiane, Meknassy, and Regueb, where others were martyred. It later spread to the neighbouring Kasserine, Siliana, and El Kef governorates, where the same social dynamics are observed: unemployed youth, deprived of the means of farming (which is crucial to the development of a region severely lacking industrial activity), who found in protesting the murder of other young men an opportunity to express their rejection of those same policies of marginalization that affected them.

These protests were soon endorsed by local activists and trade unionists affiliated with regional branches of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) – the biggest and most important trade union in Tunisia, which mainly defends middle class interests linked with public sector jobs – in an expression of the deteriorating living conditions of this particular section of the middle class. The political awareness and democratic aspirations of much of the local union leadership helped give the uprising its slogans, the most important of which was ‘Employment is a right you band of thieves!’

With the regime’s bloody crackdown, anger spread throughout the country and into the ‘democratic opposition’ of the parliamentary left, the Tunisian General Student Union (UGET), trade unionist circles, politicized lawyers, human rights defenders, and universities, and then into the capital and onto its streets. These parties and sections of society, which mainly represent an educated petty bourgeoisie, found the moment opportune for getting rid of political authoritarianism and the oppression that had been imposed on various social classes.

However, these movements were quickly quashed or encircled by the police force. What tipped the balance in favour of the uprising was, undoubtedly, that the youth of the popular neighbourhoods in the urban peripheries joined it. This marginalized social group, one of the biggest victims of the regime, with no wealth or privileges to lose, was the one that challenged the regime’s police and burnt down its headquarters. This came at a price: there were dozens of martyrs in neighbourhoods surrounding the capital, from north to south – especially El-Karam El Gharbi, the youth

of which played a pivotal role in threatening Ben Ali the day he 'fled' (on 14 January), and in Sousse and Sfax, and elsewhere.

The youthful drive coming from the popular neighbourhoods and marginalized areas increased as some labour union leaders – pressured by their memberships – began to grasp the significance of the historic juncture. The UGTT branch in Sfax called for a general strike on 12 January. The strike was a success, and the massive march and violent clashes with the police the same day were a critical turning point that shook the foundations of the regime. This was followed by a similar call by the regional offices of the same trade union for a general strike in the capital on 14 January. In the meantime, Ben Ali made a fatal mistake when he tried to pacify Tunisians with his speech on 13 January. In addition to trying to bribe some of the democratic opposition by offering them positions in the transitional government (which some accepted after 12 January), Ben Ali seemed confused when addressing the Tunisian people in the vernacular for the first time. While in his two previous speeches he had used threats and referred to 'decisiveness', now he claimed that he 'understood everyone, be they opposition, unemployed, or a businessman'. The dictator claimed that some people had 'misled' him, absolving himself of responsibility for the firing of live bullets on protesters, and he promised public liberties, not to run for the presidency again, and to hold the 'corrupt' accountable. Ben Ali followed this speech by announcing and executing a number of measures reducing media censorship that aimed to alleviate popular anger.

These miserable attempts to contain the damage and refurbish Ben Ali's image failed. The memorable morning of 14 January began with a surge of protesters into the capital. As the police force retreated, replaced by the armed forces, more people took to the streets. In an unprecedented historic scene, they filled Avenue Habib Bourguiba. There, thousands sat in front of the Ministry of Interior's headquarters, calling for the 'fall of the regime' and Ben Ali's departure. Led by lawyers and political activists, the protest lasted nearly all day, before clashes with the police arose during the funeral procession for a martyr from one of the popular neighbourhoods.

The same pattern took place in almost every city across the country: cities became hit and run battlegrounds between protesters and the police force. One moment that stood out was when protesters attacked and burned down the houses of some of Ben Ali's in-laws. In light of this explosive scene, Ben Ali's family and in-laws began to flee the country,

fearing for their lives. According to leaked interrogations with security and military officials and literature examining the events of that day, it seems that some of Ben Ali's entourage, including his in-law Marouane Mabrouk and head of the presidential guard Ali Seriati, informed him of imminent attacks on the palace. This pushed the dictator to flee with his family to Saudi Arabia, in hopes of returning soon and regaining control over the situation.



How was the revolution aborted?

The previous paragraphs indicate that the popular uprising had created confusion and division within state apparatuses, leading some of its segments to try to salvage the regime by ridding itself of its head, Ben Ali and his family. 14 January thus embodied the confusion of the comprador bourgeoisie that still dominates Tunisian society, which urgently needed stability to guarantee its own interests, which are intertwined with the European market. This class, historically concentrated in the eastern coastal areas (the capital, coastal areas, and Sfax), with vested interests in political authority and its Makhzen state,³ later adapted and was politically connected to French colonialism on every level, even after Tunisia's formal independence in 1956. Having benefited from the liberal policies adopted by the former head of government Hédi Amara Nouira, who, in the early 1970s, enabled the privatization of public sector companies following the aborted 'socialist' cooperatives experiment, this class later used its position to benefit from the Association Agreement with the European Union.

This bourgeoisie had distanced itself from productive sectors, such as those targeting the internal market, farming, and heavy industry. As indicated

³ See Salehi, S. (2017) *Internal Colonialism and Unequal Development*. [In Arabic].

earlier, the agreement with Europe nearly destroyed the country's textile industry,⁴ which the state failed to protect, and so Tunisian capitalists turned to quick profit-generating, low-technical capacity, low-cost labour sectors instead. Aiming to reduce their expenses, they became entrepreneurs for foreign capital in different parts of the production chain (like automotive and plane components, cables, etc), or in export-oriented manufacturing industries, such as the textile, chemical and food industries. They also increased their dealings with the service sector through tourism, communications, banks, commercial spaces, and oilfield services, and with some supply sectors for luxury goods, like car imports, which were monopolized by a small group. Encouraged by the state, some of these capitalists specialized in exporting raw materials, especially agrarian exports, such as dates, olive oil, and citrus fruits. In this manner, and over decades, the country's trade deficit was exacerbated. Similarly, structural economic dependency on the European Union and international financial institutions was accelerated for the benefit of financial capital in the imperial cores.

However, the bourgeoisie considered the revolution of 2010/11 a real opportunity to free itself from the grip of Ben Ali and his in-laws. But their relief and optimism were marred by concerns that the revolutionary path might become deep-rooted and irreversible.

After 14 January 2011 the youth of the interior areas (particularly Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine) commuted to Tunis and organized sit-ins before the official government headquarters in El Kasbah. They demanded the toppling of some of the remaining symbols of Ben Ali's regime, such as Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi and Minister of Interior Ahmed Friaa. The first clampdown on the sit-in there took place on 29 January, six days after it began, but the protests that were now taking place throughout the country did not stop, and protesters returned to the Kasbah on 20 February.

This time, the protesters not only demanded the government's resignation, but also the dissolution of the formerly ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), and they demanded that constituent assembly elections be held. There were also the usual demands, like holding the martyrs' killers accountable and taking measures for the development of impoverished areas.

4 An economic expert, Jamal Oueididi, notes that Tunisia lost around 55 per cent of its local industrial textile because of this agreement. In parallel, nearly 400,000 textile workers lost their source of income: <http://lexpertjournal.net/?p=3613>

In parallel, El Menzah area near Tunis, where the bourgeoisie and upper classes of the petty bourgeoisie live, became home to the 'Qubba' (dome) sit-in, where a few hundred members of the middle class – calling themselves the 'silent majority' – gathered on a daily basis after work to express support for Mohamed Ghannouchi's government. They called for restoring 'security and stability' and for holding presidential elections, rather than the constituent assembly elections that the Kasbah protesters demanded. They also rejected the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution founded by left parties, Ennahda Movement and the Labour Union, in their efforts to pressure the government.

This moment was a clear political reflection of the class struggle in Tunisia. On the one hand, the El Kasbah sit-ins represented the popular classes and marginalized groups, who lacked leadership and a clear political vision. The lower classes of the petty bourgeoisie thus found it easy to steer them. These were made up of right-wing parties (like the Islamist Ennahda, which sought to pull itself out of decades of oppression), small left-wing parties (like the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party, national democratic groups that operated secretly for years, unions, and associations), and organizations controlled by the opportunist petty bourgeoisie that were looking to increase their profits through class consociation and reformism. On the other hand, al-Qubba welcomed the traditional bourgeoisie from the coast and capital, fearing for its interests following the fall of the RCD Party that had previously simultaneously protected and constrained it, along with the upper classes of the petty bourgeoisie. The latter were more interested in stability and the relative values of 'modernity' and 'secularism' – considered to be the legacy of the former Bourguiba state, which were mainly represented then by the Progressive Democratic Party and Ettajdid Movement.

Following a massive rally on 25 February 2011, the protesters successfully dissolved Ghannouchi's government and founded a constituent assembly, which aimed to introduce a new constitution. Ghannouchi resigned two days later, only to be replaced by an old face of the system, but one who had had little involvement with Ben Ali's regime: Beji Caid Essebsi. This was a successful move by the traditional bourgeoisie, which knew how to reassure everyone: the leadership of the labour union UGTT, worried about their own corruption files, other groups who sought a return to security and calm, and especially Western embassies worried about the escalating revolutionary path. The main protagonists agreed to disperse the sit-in

and form a 'Higher Authority for the Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform, and a Democratic Transition'. This provisional commission comprised representatives of all former opposition parties, associations, and organizations that had played a role in opposing Ben Ali, as well as some independent groups. One of its main tasks was to propose a new electoral law. The commission agreed to hold constituent assembly elections in order to draft a new constitution and elect a new government – which took place on 23 October 2011.

Not only did the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie ride the wave of the revolution that was led by the popular classes, they also opened the door wide to imperialist intervention and control over the 'democratic transition'. Such intervention has been clear almost since the very beginning: after influential imperialist powers in Tunisia (France and the US) were taken by surprise when the uprising erupted, they hastened to contain it. One example of such tactics is the US Department of State's statement on 9 January 2011, which called for respecting the will of the Tunisian people. Washington saw an opportune moment to experiment in the 'New Middle East'⁵ and to 'encourage' a liberal 'democracy', as noted by Obama in his famous speech in Cairo in 2009, in order to preserve US hegemony in the region. It was therefore not surprising that Ghannouchi's government rushed, two days later, to remove Ben Ali and appoint the neoliberal Mustapha Kamel Nabli, former Senior Adviser at the World Bank, as a new governor of the central bank. Right from the beginning, Nabli blocked leftist demands to audit Ben Ali's odious debts and to refuse to pay them. It was equally unsurprising that the G8 would organize the Deauville Conference in France in May 2011. During this conference, major imperial powers sought to contain the 'Arab Spring' countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, etc) by flooding their provisional governments with loans, false promises to return their looted money, and offers of aid and investments. They also sought to reassure other subordinate regimes, which had also started to witness social and political unrest, such as Morocco and Jordan. Most alarmingly, the early embroiling of these countries in the 'reform' recipes that were proposed by global financial institutions, conditioned

⁵ This is an expression that was used by former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006. Rice also spoke of the advantages of 'creative chaos' in the region, in reference to the potential implications of an expected Israeli victory over Hezbollah, which did not happen. It is also the title of a book by former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, in which he called for a 'peace' in the region that would be based on Zionist economic hegemony. The expression is also often used synonymously with the 'Greater Middle East' that former US President George Bush Jr. mentioned during the occupation of Iraq from 2003.

on austerity measures and loans,⁶ has resulted in the negative economic, social and political repercussions that we see today.

The evacuation of El Kasbah on 3 March and Essebsi's takeover of the government in order to oversee the transitional period was the beginning of the undoing of the uprising and the abortion of its possible transformation into a revolution (or the defeat of the revolution, as some see it). In other words, this was the beginning of the victory of counterrevolutionary forces in Tunisia. Protesters from marginalized areas and impoverished neighbourhoods failed to put forward political representatives, thus paving the way for a political takeover by dozens of political parties aspiring for legality after being banned for so long by the Ben Ali regime. These included weak left-wing parties that failed to grasp the priorities of the period, instead engaging in identitarian conflicts between secularists and Islamists⁷ that had been ignited by bourgeois media outlets. Further, these parties had no influence on the balance of power as they bought into the illusion of 'change through the ballot'. From this time on, the regime began to regain its balance and reconstruct its security forces. The mass movement in the capital came to a stop: the momentum dissipated and the mass movement disintegrated into scattered and detached social protests in inland regions, focusing on local or sectoral socioeconomic questions. As the founding of the 'second republic' began, the grassroots movement retreated, making way for partisan competition and the birth of a 'civil society'⁸ that is mainly funded by foreign actors. Tunisia thus

6 This analytical paper, published by the Tunisian Observatory of Economy, gives an overview of the unjust economic conditions with which the G8 group shackled Tunisia and Egypt in Deauville: <http://www.economie-tunisie.org/fr/observatoire/analyseeconomics/actes-conference-partenariat-deauville-politiques-economiques-tunisie>.

7 Less than one month after Ben Ali's removal, questions of religion and secularism began to rise. On 14 February 2011, some Salafists protested, calling for the closure of brothels. Four days later, a Polish Christian priest was killed (it was later revealed that his death was unrelated to religious extremism), and this was then followed by protests by secularists calling for a secular state. An important part of the Islamist and liberal stream (along with some leftists at times) became involved in similar activities that ignited cultural and identitarian conflicts, at the expense of the pursuit of social and economic justice, for which the popular classes had risen up.

8 This phenomenon witnessed in Tunisia during the past decade requires a thorough, detailed study. The colonial and regional international powers have pervaded Tunisian 'civil society' through the injection of funding. The former have forced on the latter their liberal agenda, which has helped remove from the streets many movement leaders and has created a social class of 'civil society activists' who are detached from the reality of the popular classes and who receive elevated wages in return for their work on projects related to the process of a 'democratic transition'. Funders determine the priorities, such as capacity building for youth, women's empowerment, fighting extremism and radicalism, strengthening local communities' resilience and their economic integration, fighting corruption, decentralization, and local governance. For more, see Hela Yousfi's research: <http://urlr.me/1WPKz>.

moved from an uprising with a revolutionary horizon to a 'democratic transition' under imperial tutelage, which led to further dependence and neoliberalism.



Unrest under the Troika and 'terrorism' at the service of neoliberalism

The Ennahda Movement won the elections on 23 October 2011, after two decades of persecution by the regime. Undoubtedly, financial support from Qatar and political support from Turkey both played a major role in its success. The movement benefited not only from an easily spreading religious discourse, but also from its status as a victim of the regime's dictatorship. After its electoral victory Ennahda entered into an alliance with two parties affiliated with the centre-left, but which actually appeared to be closer to the centre-right: the Congress for the Republic Party (CPR) and the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (FDTL). This alliance of the three parties was called the Troika.

Ennahda continued to rule until December 2014. The most important developments during its period in power can be summarized as follows:

- At the beginning, Ennahda tried to face the vestiges of the former Rally Party RCD. It moved away from the discourse of 'revolutionary cleansing' and chose to make deals with sections of the previous regime in politics, media, security and economics.
- In parallel, the party engaged in a dangerous battle with that part of society that held onto Tunisia's acquired legacy of secularism and social wins (especially for women), by proposing a first draft of the constitution that contained reactionary articles. The movement also opened the door to Salafist currents, which took advantage of new-found liberties and the state's weakness, and it utilized these currents in its struggle against leftist and liberal opponents.

As political parties representing the traditional comprador bourgeoisie suffered from fragmentation following the dissolution of the RCD, and amidst the failure of the new liberal parties in representing the interests of the comprador bourgeoisie, some left-wing parties and the national progressive current tried to join forces as part of the 'Popular Front for the Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution' in an attempt to join up the social protests escalating in some regions. Tension soon grew between, on the one hand, Ennahda, and, on the other, Nidaa Tounes (which had been founded by Beji Caid Essebsi, reuniting the scattered elements of the RCD), which was implicitly in alliance with the national labour union the UGTT. In the meantime, the Popular Front joined up with the latter group, at times to defend liberties and women's rights and at others to refuse the new rulers' neoliberalism. However, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), historically the lead organization of the bourgeoisie, seems to have initially chosen neutrality. Identitarian and cultural questions appeared to be the core of these tensions, but in reality what was taking place was a power struggle between a new elite seeking to control state functions and an old elite that refused to give up its privileges and positions.

The new conditions greatly impacted state institutions, including the security and intelligence services, enabling extremist Salafist groups to organize, arm themselves, and carry out terrorist operations. The storming of the US Embassy by Salafist protesters following a film screening that mocked the Prophet Mohammad was a turning point, as was the assassination of Chokri Belaid, a prominent leader of the Popular Front, on 6 February 2013. Before his assassination, the leftist leader had stood out for his confrontational discourse against the Ennahda Movement and his strong activism in support of social protests. Fingers were thus automatically pointed at Ennahda's leadership, holding it responsible for his assassination.

Massive protests took place following Belaid's assassination. This confused Ennahda and pushed its Prime Minister and party leader, Hamadi Jebali, to accept opposition demands of forming a technocrat government headed by him, without approval from the head of the party, Rached Ghannouchi, who considered it a 'coup against legitimacy'. Ennahda's leadership appointed Minister of Interior Ali Laarayedh as Prime Minister in lieu of Jebali; it also approved the addition of some 'technocratic' ministers. These changes did not relieve the intra-elites tensions. Trade union and

social protests thus continued, such as protests against a tax imposed on cab drivers and goods transporters.

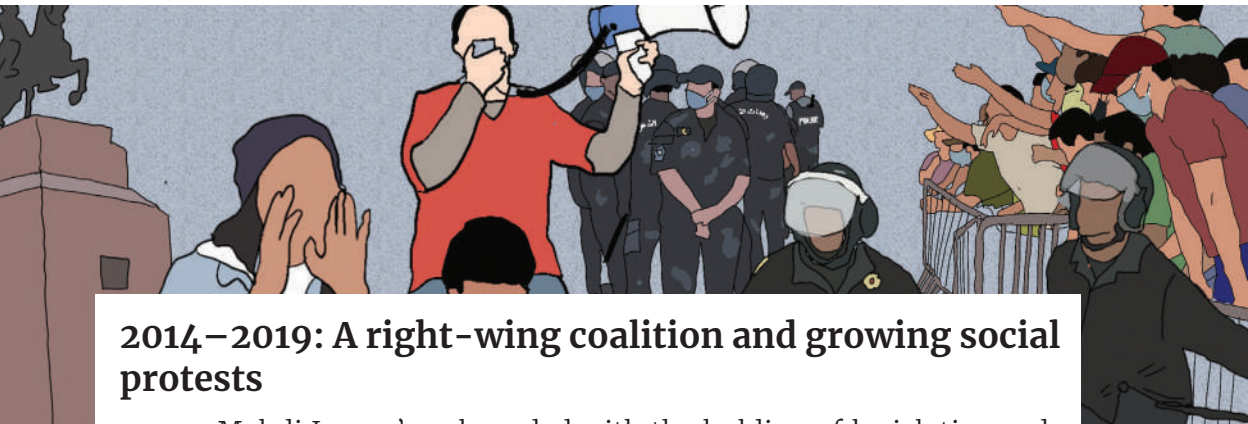
Ennahda was now facing a hostile regional environment – including al-Sisi's coup that had overthrown the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt three weeks before – and was also under popular pressure at home, in the form of the 'departure sit-in' organized by the 'Salvation Front', an alliance of Nidaa Tounes and the Popular Front supported by the 'modernist' bourgeoisie⁹ and its media outlets. The sit-in before the constituent assembly lasted for more than a month, finally forcing Ennahda to concede. Ghannouchi met with Caid Essebsi in Paris, under the mediation of some businessmen and right-wing politicians, and with the blessings of the French government, and agreed on a deal by which Ennahda gave up control of the government, in exchange for approving a consensus-based constitution and ending the constituent assembly's functions as soon as possible. Thus, through a 'national dialogue' (locally sponsored by national organizations and internationally sponsored by the G8), it was agreed that a 'technocrat', Mehdi Jomaa, a former director of Hutchinson (affiliated with the French company Total), would be Prime minister until the 2014 elections.

By concluding this agreement, which was lauded both locally and internationally as a historical achievement, the trajectory of 'democratic transition' was saved and the new constitution finally agreed upon. However, the reality as it concerned the popular classes and state sovereignty worsened. Mehdi Jomaa, who had been nominated by UTICA's president, took over, and labour strikes organized by the labour union UGTT 'miraculously' stopped, particularly in the private sector. Furthermore, alarming new laws and agreements were passed, which further instilled Tunisia's dependence on foreign capital (especially the law that privatized solar power production) and other cases, including negotiating a comprehensive free trade agreement between Tunisia and the EU. Global financial institutions and liberal civil society organizations brought pressure to bear to ensure the new constitution included certain chapters, which undermined the country's, and its people's, sovereignty.

9 In reference to the secular bourgeoisie, influenced to a large extent by Western (particularly French) culture, and which generally perceives cultural and political expressions that are influenced by Arab-Islamic discourse in a negative light.

Perhaps the most alarming of these was the chapter about the fiscal balance.¹⁰ With imperialist blessings, this short transitional period paved the way for the next phase of right-wing coalitions.

Here, one cannot ignore Naomi Klein's theory of the 'shock doctrine'. Klein explains how imperialist powers and their global financial institutions – with complicity by the local bourgeoisie – take advantage of devastating events in a given country (disasters, coups and wars) in order to put in power 'technocrats' that implement neoliberal policies that were formerly unacceptable to the people. Just as the Chicago Boys took advantage of Pinochet's coup in Chile and the military invasion of Iraq, so were assassinations and terrorism used in Tunisia to advance such policies. This raises genuine questions about the possible links between terrorist movements in our region and imperialist powers.



2014–2019: A right-wing coalition and growing social protests

Mehdi Jomaa's rule ended with the holding of legislative and presidential elections. The party Nidaa Tounes won a sweeping victory, taking the majority of parliamentary seats, with the presidency going to the party leader, Beji Caid Essebsi. Ennahda ranked second in parliament, while the Popular Front ranked third. Competitive and electoral mischief between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda gave way to what became known as the 'Two Sheikhs' Deal' (referring to Essebsi and Ghannouchi), whereby the two former opponents became allies in a government whose head was appointed by Caid Essebsi.

During this phase, the Tunisian state defeated terrorist movements (after many bloody operations, the most dangerous of which was the attempt

¹⁰ According to critics, this chapter hinders legislators who might wish to allocate a part of the budget (even if exceptionally) to help the poorer social classes.

to establish a Salafist emirate in Ben Gardane), while social protests witnessed a significant quantitative and qualitative transformation. During these years, unemployed youth sit-ins spread across both cities and governorates, demanding the state provide work and development for their marginalized regions. From 2015, however, social struggles began to change. Jemna, a small southwestern city, whose population fought an important battle, with the help of leftist groups and organizations, was a case that stood out. The people of Jemna reclaimed the oasis land that the state had previously taken over (in order to offer it to private capital), and they began to collectively manage it for the benefit of the general population. This enabled, for the first time, a discussion to take place about the state of agriculture, food sovereignty, and modes of production (or the 'developmental model' in dominant media discourse) in the country. Similarly, through their heroic battle against Petrofac, a gas production company, unemployed youth in Kerkannah Islands raised the question of employment from a new perspective, shedding light on the way energy wealth is managed and distributed. Similarly, as part of the 'Where's the Oil?' campaign, activists demanded transparency in regard to the country's fossil fuel extraction. To give another example, despite media distortion and police brutality, an ongoing battle took place in Tataouine governorate in 2017: youth there rallied in the middle of the desert in an area known as 'El Kamour', located by a road intersection through which foreign oil company trucks pass, raising the issue of the right of the local population to benefit from the natural resources in their own region, which are exploited by foreign companies. These protesters and others started to use new mobilization slogans, like 'wealth nationalization', recalling their ancestors' historic legacy and the struggle against the French colonizers.

Nonetheless, the two governments that followed the 2014 elections disregarded these demands. The regime maintained the same neoliberal choices and continued to follow the dictates of imperial powers and their international financial institutions. It continued the policies of obtaining foreign loans, implementing austerity, and engaging in the privatization of public sector institutions. The government of Youssef Chahed took troubling decisions that threatened state sovereignty and the rights of the popular classes. This included the new central bank law, which further entrenched the bank's 'independence' from the state, as well as the commencement of official EU–Tunisian negotiations over the trade deal (ALECA).

This phase was an important turning point in the class struggle in Tunisia. The popular classes had learned from previous experience and struggles that no gains can be achieved unless they directly target capital, rather than stopping at pressuring the incapacitated state institutions, which are pawns in the hands of the local comprador bourgeoisie at home and imperial powers and global financial institutions abroad.



2019: Electing Kais Saied – a change or a return to dictatorship?

Amidst the traditional left's inability to join the popular classes and politically channel their struggles, it was only natural that it would fail to gain voters' trust in both legislative and presidential elections (though it should be noted that a significant part of these classes no longer cared for elections). As their frustration with different political parties and with the entire system of 'democracy' grew, the popular classes placed their trust in those who, in their view, were against the system and were independent from corrupt parties, and whose hands were clean. Thus, a surprising turn of events occurred in October 2019: a university professor of constitutional law rose to the republic's presidency.

Beside the popular classes' frustration and search for a 'clean saviour', one may understand the rise of this stranger to politics as an expression of the 'last hope' of the conservative petty bourgeoisie, particularly those that had yearned to reclaim the 'social welfare state' since the 1970s, when the results of Tunisia's neoliberal choices began to be apparent.

As soon as he became president, Kais Saied became involved in a heated struggle against the parliament's majority, led by Ennahda, and its two right-wing allies, the Dignity Coalition (a group of culturally conservative demagogues) and the Heart of Tunisia Movement (a group of opportunists, led by the corrupt businessman Nabil Karoui). In parallel, the Free Constitutional Party, led by Abir Moussi (a Ben Ali regime lawyer) sought to inherit the leftovers of the Nidaa Tounes Party, which had collapsed

following the death of its founder Caid Essebsi on 25 July 2019, whilst competing with Ennahda against Saied.

Simultaneously, social protests continued to spread and diversify. More small-scale farmers became involved (for example in the protests at Al Houaidia and Ouled Jaballah), alongside the yearly winter clashes between the impoverished youth of the popular neighbourhoods and police forces. The winter of 2020/2021 – marking a decade since the revolution – was a notable moment of widespread unrest among popular neighbourhoods adjacent to the capital and some marginalized interior regions, which saw significant support from leftist and youth groups.

Hichem Mechichi's government further enraged Tunisians with its failure to manage the Covid-19 pandemic.¹¹ The death of dozens became daily news, amidst a collapsed public healthcare system and a government that dared not use private healthcare facilities or impose a full lockdown that would harm bourgeois interests.

This combination of anger and frustration exploded on 25 July 2021 in protests that called for the dissolution of parliament. The protests particularly targeted the Ennahda Movement, which it held responsible for the situation, burning down many of its regional headquarters. Amidst a lack of a revolutionary alternative capable of organizing this movement, Kais Saied saw an opportune moment to announce that same day a state of 'imminent threat'. Accordingly, he arbitrarily interpreted Article 80 of the constitution, dismissed the government, suspended the parliament, lifted immunity from its members, and took control of the legislative and executive branches (and even some part of the judiciary), while promising not to harm any freedoms. The state of joy and popular relief prompted by these exceptional measures (ongoing when this chapter was written in late August 2021) reflected the extent of the so-called democratic 'Tunisian exception'. Once more, it confirmed that freedom is like a mirage in the shadow of a representative democracy that is dominated by capital and imperialist powers, and that lacks any social or sovereign content.

11 After Tunisia managed to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in its first year, thanks to the serious efforts of Elyes Fakhfakh's government (prior to reopening borders to tourism), the situation experienced a terrible deterioration under Mechichi's government, seeing record death tolls and viral transmissions.



Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how the popular uprising in Tunisia that was initiated by marginalized people in interior regions and by youth in impoverished neighbourhoods on 17 December 2010 did not turn into a revolution – in the sense of a radical change of the mode of production followed by building different cultural, political and value systems. One could say that this was a revolution that began with slogans expressing popular demands and ended with political demands that mainly concerned the petty bourgeoisie, resulting in its defeat. The aborted process of turning an uprising into a revolution (or the defeat of the revolution) began the day the counterrevolutionary forces managed to disperse the protesters from El Kasbah, after the trade union bureaucracy and some left-wing parties managed to convince them to accept liberal democratic crumbs. This culminated in the 23 October 2011 elections, amidst capitalist media hegemony and under imperial tutelage, embodied by the Deauville Conference resolutions and the International Monetary Fund's recommendations. It was then that the 'revolutionary path' was replaced by the 'democratic transition path' – towards more neoliberalism and dependence on imperial centres.

What about the future? It is difficult to predict what will happen in the next phase of Tunisia's journey. Amidst a divided political landscape (including on the left), between those who have denounced the 'coup' by Kais Saied and those who view it as a path correction or a partial response to popular will that deserves critical support, implementing initiatives remains in Saied's hands alone. He gives little attention to the opinions of political parties or civil society; rather, he seems high on popular backing, convinced he is the bearer of a divine, historic task: to fulfil the people's wishes. Other than his electoral slogan 'the people want', and his political

project to change the regime from an adjusted parliamentary democracy to a localized, non-partisan and presidential democracy, Saied seems to have no vision for the economic and political decisions that are needed to save Tunisia. Amidst the tough economic and financial conditions, this opens the door to foreign intervention (especially apparent in the support from the Saudi-Emirati axis,¹² which is allied with the Zionist entity).

Moreover, the president's lack of an institutionalized political organization that is capable of feeling out society and helping him on the ground renders him almost completely dependent on the reports of state institutions and security services. Should he fail to find quick enough solutions to provide living and healthcare essentials for the popular classes, Saied might pave the way for his opponents – who have been harmed by the post-25 July situation – to overthrow him. More dangerously, this moment could be exploited to carry out a coup against him, or he might slip into tyranny and overdependence on state apparatuses to suppress those classes that see in him the country's 'last hope'.

As regards the left, it has no alternative after wasting many opportunities to take root within the masses in the past few years – unless it manages to rid itself of its elitist cultural delusions and seriously think of ways to get involved with the popular classes.

12 This support was clearly revealed in the important number of consecutive visits by senior Saudi officials to Kais Saied, and in Saudi/Emirati media celebrations of what happened on 25 July, and their incitement that aims to achieve the elimination of the Ennahda Movement.





The workers' movement, revolution and counter-revolution in Egypt

Mostafa Bassiouny & Anne Alexander

عمال
تسانية على الاجتماعية



مریخه بگرامه

Discussions of the January 2011 Egyptian Revolution rarely mention the workers' movement, focusing instead on the idea of a social media-fuelled youth rebellion. However, any attempt to understand the course of the revolution must necessarily grapple with the role of the workers' movement.

Directly after the downfall of Mubarak on 11 February 2011, workers' struggles appeared as an independent factor in the revolutionary process, distinct from the youth of Tahrir Square or social media activists or even the political forces opposing the regime. Despite the exit of protesters from Tahrir and increasing calls on Egyptians by prominent political figures for them to 'return to work', and 'restart the wheel of production', millions of workers transmitted the revolution into their workplaces.¹ Fierce battles against 'the remnants of the regime' spread throughout government institutions and across the public and private sectors.² These strikes and protests continued the wave of workers' struggles which had begun before the fall of Mubarak, spreading to the subsidiaries of the Suez Canal Company, the Public Transport Authority in Cairo, Post Offices, government institutions, military production factories, media institutions belonging to the regime and other workplaces between 6 and 11 February.

The extension of the revolutionary struggle to the workplace challenged efforts by reformist forces, whether Islamist or liberal, to confine the meaning of 'revolution' within the limits of constitutional reform and the development of electoral mechanisms. Through their struggles to 'cleanse the institutions' workers discovered the impossibility of separating the political struggle against the former ruling party from the struggle for social justice.³

1 Gamal, W. (2011) "Al-Sha'ab yurid agalat intag akhir", *Al-Shuruq*, 26 April (archived at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/23927>)

2 'Remnants of the regime' (*filoul al-nidham*) became a widely used phrase in Egyptian political life in the wake of Mubarak's fall. It generally referred to members of the ruling National Democratic Party who remained in positions of authority in public sector institutions and private companies.

3 The Arabic phrase 'tathir al-mu'assasat', was used frequently to refer to the process of removing corrupt and unaccountable managers associated with the ruling party. The word 'tathir' also has connotations of 'purification'. The process and the phrase echo the *saneamento* (literally 'cleansing' campaigns carried out by workers during the Portuguese Revolution of 1974). See Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. (2014) *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice – Workers and the Egyptian Revolution*. London: Zed Books for more details.

Sometimes this discovery led to radical results: for example, in Manshiyet al-Bakri Hospital in Cairo, workers threw out the director and elected a new one, and strove to put in place mechanisms of direct rather than representative democracy, thus improving patient care.⁴ Cairo Airport workers forced the recruitment of a civilian director for the first time (as opposed to one from the military), and local government workers in Alexandria sacked an unelected general from his post as leader of the neighbourhood council. Teachers organized one of the biggest strikes in Egyptian history in September 2011, not only to improve their own pay and conditions but also to reform the curriculum and to end the burden of private lessons falling on citizens.⁵ These examples point to the importance of ‘reciprocal action’ between the economic and the political aspects of the class struggle, as Rosa Luxemburg outlined in *The Mass Strike*.⁶

This chapter argues that this process of reciprocal action played a pivotal role in the development of the revolutionary process in Egypt. It also argues that a way to understand the counter-revolution is to see it as reciprocal action in reverse, where the political aspect of the class struggle tends towards the reproduction of tyranny and the mechanisms of repression and exploitation, as could be seen in Egypt from the autumn of 2012 onwards. This chapter will attempt to clarify why spontaneous collective action is not, in itself, enough to deepen the interaction between the economic and political aspects of a revolution, particularly in the context of a clash with the state. Revolutionaries need to win over many activists in the ranks of the working class to a political vision of their role in the revolution which recognizes the importance of deepening and intensifying the revolutionary process, especially in the course of the clash with the organs of the state, in order to open up space to empower the workers’ movement and develop its political impact. This vision differs from perspectives that propose the separation of the workers’ movement from politics and from the idea that

4 Ibrahim, M. (2012) ‘A revolution in an Egyptian hospital’, *British Medical Journal* 344: e576, https://www.bmj.com/bmj/section-pdf/187439?path=/bmj/344/7842/Views_Reviews.full.pdf

5 School teachers in Egyptian state schools often provide supplementary private lessons for a fee to eke out their meagre pay. Parents are effectively blackmailed into paying for these lessons because the schools are so poorly resourced and overcrowded that it is the only way to pass exams, but they are a huge financial burden, especially for poorer families. Striking teachers argued that private lessons could be eliminated by improving teachers’ pay and providing state schools enough resources to provide a decent education for all. Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. (2014) *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice – Workers and the Egyptian Revolution*. London: Zed Books

6 Luxemburg, R. (1906) ‘The mass strike, the political party and the trade unions’, Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/>

the role of its leadership is to protect workers from politicization. It also stands in contrast to a view of workers' strikes and protests as a weapon to be used by the opposition in battle with the regime, rather than as an integral element in the process of working class self-emancipation. This chapter concentrates instead on the challenges for the working class of expressing a political perspective as a class 'for itself', as Karl Marx proposed.



The rise of a mass political movement and its roots

The beginning of the Egyptian movement in solidarity with the Second Palestinian Intifada (uprising) in 2000 may well be the appropriate point from which to trace the events which would culminate in the revolution in January 2011. This is for two reasons. Firstly, because the flowering of a solidarity movement with Palestine came after a long period of apathy in the Egyptian street, during which forms of social and political protest had noticeably retreated, while the regime used the rhetoric of 'fighting terrorism' to control the opposition and prevent demonstrations. The second reason is the geographical spread and timescale of the movement in support of the Palestinian Intifada, which involved universities, schools, political parties and professional associations, and which organized street protests across many provinces, expanding participation beyond the political elites to popular areas. The movement's wide geographical spread and extended timespan over three years between September 2000 and March 2003 presented an excellent opportunity to develop organizational mechanisms, drawing new generations of young people into political activity.

The Palestine solidarity movement also paved the way for the movement opposing the American war on Iraq, through the connections built between political forces and the professional unions, which had interacted in order

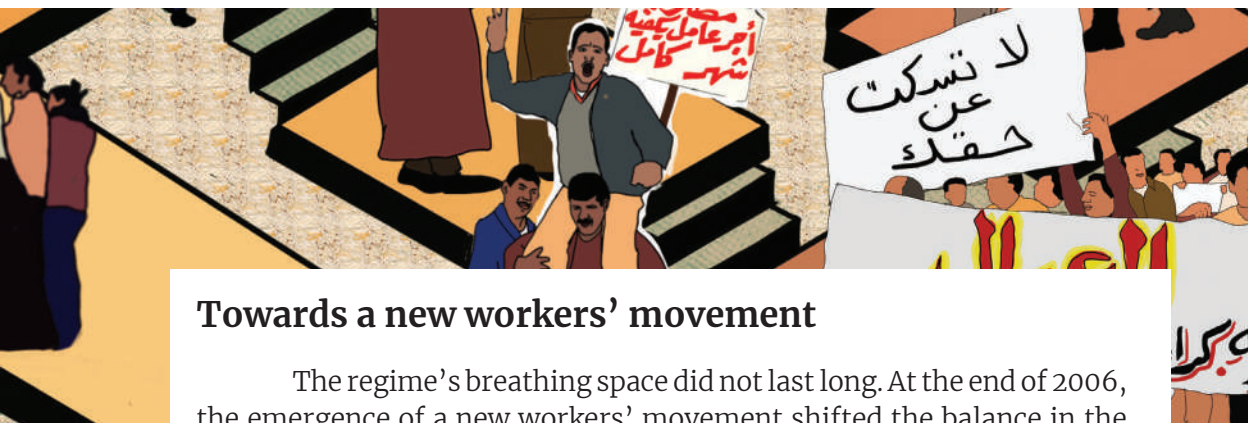
to support the Palestinian Intifada. The protest movement against the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a turning point in the development of political mobilization in the Egyptian street for two reasons. Firstly, it involved a very successful mass mobilization, especially at the outbreak of war on 20–21 March. The call by the Coalition Against the Invasion of Iraq for demonstrations at the beginning of the aggression was answered by very large numbers, with thousands demonstrating in Tahrir Square in Cairo at the first hours of the invasion. The demonstrations only ended when the security forces broke them up violently at night. On the following day, which was a Friday, demonstrations began after prayers at several mosques, the largest taking place at Al-Azhar. Although the security forces attempted to disperse them, some protesters managed to reach the outskirts of Tahrir Square, where the security forces again broke up the protest and arrested a large number of people. The regime's response then reached new levels of violence: the security forces blocked the entrance to Al-Azhar on 21 March and flooded the courtyard with tear gas, arresting large numbers of worshippers who were trying to protest. This level of violence underlined the importance of a struggle for democracy and the opening of a public space for protest and political action.

Increasing signs that Gamal Mubarak would succeed his father as president during 2004 made the project of democratic reform all the more urgent, and led to the formation of coalitions demanding democracy and rejecting the inheritance of power. The most significant of these was the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kifaya), which was formed in December 2004. In addition, other movements emerged, most importantly Youth for Change, Artists and Writers for Change and Journalists for Change.

These developments helped to integrate the groups of young people who had been associated with the mass political movement since 2000 into new groups: for example, a group defending the judges' movement for judicial independence during 2006. With the development of communication technologies, the rise of satellite channels not controlled by the state, and the growth of privately-owned newspapers during the same period, ideas of change, reform and democracy had an unprecedented opportunity to spread and have an impact.

However, during these early years the regime was able to absorb the impact of this movement, even though that movement had begun to voice criticism of Mubarak himself – a topic which had been off limits for the opposition during the entire period of his rule since 1981. In 2005, hopes for

change began to recede after Mubarak was elected for a new presidential term, and the following year, the regime managed to control the judges' protests. Then, in 2006, the regime also enacted constitutional changes that would have enabled Gamal Mubarak to inherit power.



Towards a new workers' movement

The regime's breathing space did not last long. At the end of 2006, the emergence of a new workers' movement shifted the balance in the struggle for change in Egypt. A strike by textile workers at the public sector Misr Spinning plant in al-Mahalla al-Kubra in December 2006 can be considered the beginning of a new phase in the movement for change. Founded in the 1930s, Misr Spinning is one of the largest spinning and weaving companies in Egypt; the struggles of its workers had become a reference point for the Egyptian labour movement.⁷

There had been continuous workers' protests during the years preceding December 2006, including important strikes such as those in the cement industry, the textile sector, the railways and elsewhere. However, the strike by the Mahalla workers in December 2006 marked the onset of a different trajectory in workers' struggles, brought about by qualitative changes which could be considered marking the rise of a new workers' movement. The workers at Misr Spinning in al-Mahalla began their strike on 7 December 2006, demanding payment of their annual bonuses, as specified by law for public sector firms. The strike followed a week-long 'pay strike' where workers had refused to cash their pay cheques in protest at the company's failure to add the annual bonus to their pay. This was the biggest workers' protest in terms of numbers involved since the protests by workers in the Kafr al-Dawwar Spinning Company in al-Beheira governorate in September 1994, which had ended in a clash with

⁷ Bassiouny, M. and Sa'id, O. (2007) 'Rayat al-idrab fi sama'a masr', 20 April 2014, Centre for Socialist Studies, <https://revsoc.me/our-publications/22402/>

security forces. The Misr Spinning strike continued from 7 December to 16 December and ended with negotiations that led to some of the workers' demands being met. This was in itself a transformation in the way that the state dealt with workers' protests. Generally, the state had previously relied on repression, as it had done with the workers' protests on the railways in 1986, at the ESCO textile mill in 1987, within the Egyptian Iron and Steel Company in 1989, and in other protests during the 1980s.

The ending of the Misr Spinning strike without violence by the security forces, and the meeting of some of the workers' demands, dispelled the fears that had been created by the experience of earlier protests, in which workers had been fired upon and killed, detained or lost their jobs. Workers' understanding that the state's response had changed triggered a wave of industrial action in a variety of sectors: going on strike became an everyday activity in Egypt. Strikes were also of a longer duration than they had previously been.

There are multiple reasons for this change in the behaviour of the security forces. The most important was the liberalization of the media which was taking place in this period, which allowed the news of the strike to spread more quickly. At the same time, the security forces were hesitant about direct attacks on protesters in the face of online solidarity campaigns and increased media coverage both inside and outside the country. The authorities were also divided on how to deal with strikes, as a result of contradictions and conflicts between the regime's own labour organization, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), and the Ministry of Labour.

The lengthening duration of workers' protests during this period provided a new opportunity to develop organisationally. Workers had to protect equipment and buildings from sabotage and supply provisions during their protests. Likewise, negotiations required choosing representatives. This organizational development produced negotiations committees, organizing committees, protest leaders, provisions committees and security committees. These would lay the foundations for the future development of independent trade unions, beginning with the Property Tax Collectors' Union, which was founded in December 2008.

The new workers' movement was also characterized by the wide participation of women, to a much higher degree than in previous worker mobilizations. The 2006 strike at Misr Spinning was started by women, and the nursing sector, where large numbers of women work, played a

major role. Women leaders also appeared in many other sectors to a much greater degree than had previously been the case.⁸

The period after the Misr Spinning strike in 2006 also saw the evolution of workers' demands in parallel with this organizational advance. The Misr Spinning workers' strikes provide an illustration of this qualitative shift. After the success of the 2006 strike, workers organized a further strike in September 2007 demanding the improvement of working conditions, the development of the company and action to hold corrupt elements to account. After a week of strike action, some of these demands were met. Just a few months later, in February 2008, Misr Spinning workers organized a street demonstration demanding a rise in the national minimum wage for all Egyptian workers. This was a major shift in consciousness as for the most part workers' protests had previously only raised demands related to their own company. Moreover, they tended to focus on the 'variable' portion of the wage bill (composed of bonuses and allowances), as opposed to basic pay. Thereafter, the demand for a raise in the national minimum wage became a semi-permanent fixture in the list of demands of workers' strikes in different workplaces.

The most important outcome of this strike wave was the emergence of new independent unions. In the ETUF elections of November 2006, just a few weeks before the Mahalla strike, the security apparatus and the government took the unprecedented step of excluding from office all of the major worker activists who had previously held elected positions. It was thus no surprise when ETUF stood side by side with management during the Mahalla strike in December. Workers responded by attacking the official union offices, throwing the ETUF officials out of the company and gathering signatures to a statement withdrawing confidence from the ETUF factory union committee.

The first attempts to found an independent union did not relate to Mahalla, however: they emerged out of the protests by property tax collectors which began in September 2007 and continued until December 2007, when their demands were met. This extended period of protests led to the formation of a committee to lead the movement and to negotiate in the name of the property tax collectors – effectively a trade union. Shortly after the end

8 Kassab, B. and Shahba, O. (2018) 'Al-nisa'a fil haraka al-ummaliyya al-masriyya', ed. Bassiouny, M. Cairo: Dar al-Miraya.

of the protests the tax collectors agreed to found a union as a natural extension of this committee.

The foundation by thousands of workers of a trade union outside of state control, after half a century during which trade unionism had been subsumed by the state, was a major democratic step forward. In fact, the independent unions which were formed in 2008 and thereafter were the sole mass organizations not under the control of the state. They also constituted a direct challenge to ETUF, which is one of the most important state institutions and which had been used as an instrument to control workers by successive Egyptian presidents since its founding by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1957.

It is important to note here that one of the factors which mobilized this new workers' movement during this period was the neoliberal economic policies of the International Monetary Fund, which were initiated by the regime from 1991 onwards. The Egyptian state's economic policies between 1952 and 1970 had been characterized by centralized planning, and even after the growth of the private sector and the economic changes which Anwar al-Sadat initiated, the state continued to play the central role in the economy, through its ownership of public sector projects and companies. The form of labour relations established during the Nasserist era continued to dominate the labour market in Egypt. Moreover, ETUF retained its importance for the regime as a tool of political mobilization during elections and in order to build support for important policies, ranging from the peace treaty with Israel to the policies of Structural Adjustment adopted after 1991.

These economic reforms led to the privatization of state-owned enterprises and the role of the state declined. The stable labour relations which workers had enjoyed during the previous era began to break down as market forces asserted their dominance. This development was reflected in changing practices by the workers' movement that emerged after 2006. For a long time, workers in Egypt had relied on 'work-ins' as a means of protest, occupying their workplaces without stopping production. This tactic reflected the political culture of Nasserism, where production was considered a national goal, and the factory was seen as the property of the people. By contrast, after 2006, the majority of workers turned to strike action, reflecting the impact of Structural Adjustment and its direct subjection of the production process to market mechanisms rather than national development goals. The new workers' movement can thus be

considered a delayed reaction to the imposition of the neoliberal reform programme after 1991, and the retreat of the state from the Nasserist social contract, as well as the paralysis of ETUF.



The interaction between the workers' movement and the mass political movement

The workers' movement brought the Egyptian street back to life following the retreat of political mobilizations against the regime after 2006. Although the slogans and demands of the workers' movement were not as radical as the political mobilization, which criticized the president and opposed the inheritance of Mubarak's power by his son Gamal, it deepened the practice of democracy and developed organizational and movement mechanisms which strongly benefited the political movement.

The events relating to 6 April 2008 were a turning point in the development of the mass political movement in Egypt, and illustrate the reciprocal action between the workers' movement and the political mobilization. The workers of al-Mahalla had announced their decision to strike on that day, demanding (among other things) a rise in the national minimum wage. Opposition political forces, headed by Kifaya (which united the majority of the forces pushing for change), then called for an Egypt-wide general strike on the same day. In the end, neither the general strike nor the al-Mahalla strike took place (the latter was aborted by the security forces); instead, a popular uprising exploded on 6 April against rising prices and poverty in al-Mahalla. In protests that lasted three days, crowds tore down pictures of Mubarak, and the Prime Minister was forced to visit the town and the factory in an attempt to calm the situation, offering concessions to the workers and local people.

Many of the characteristics of the workers' movement would go on to influence the revolution in January 2011: occupying public squares, organizing committees for provisions, for negotiations and to protect

facilities, and the wide participation of women. These practices were disseminated by the media and social media to the whole of society, moving organically from the domain of the workers' movement to the wider domain of the revolution.



The role of workers during the 2011 uprising and the fall of Mubarak

By the time the revolution erupted in January 2011, the workers' movement had made significant progress in organization and mobilization. Its impact on society was considerable: workplace sit-ins and workers' street occupations had become part of contemporary protest culture and the movement was considered one of the principal factors that might bring about change in Egypt. Despite this progress, because of the absence of independent workers' organizations with sufficient social weight or political experience, workers' participation in the popular uprising at the beginning of the 2011 revolution took two principal forms. The first was the opening of a 'second front', with the eruption of a huge wave of strikes and sit-ins (which continued after the fall of Mubarak through battles to remove members of the ruling party from management). The second was through the battles between the security forces and protesters in the streets, squares and popular neighbourhoods, where many workers fell victim to the bullets of the security forces.

Workers were of course among the crowds on the streets on 25 January 2011 and thereafter, but there was no distinctive workers' presence during this period. With the imposition of long hours of curfew, workers found it difficult to assemble at workplaces, which had mostly been closed by the authorities, who decreed a holiday. However, as soon as the curfew was relaxed, the workers' movement began to make its mark on the revolution. In Suez, for example, workers from more than 10 companies called for a sit-in on 6 February, including at four subsidiaries of the Suez Canal

Company, and at the Lafarge Cement and Glass Company. Workers at Telecom Egypt also announced a sit-in, while cleaning workers in Giza began a sit-in and strike, blocking one of the principal highways in the area, as did workers from Abu-al-Siba'i Spinning and Weaving Company in al-Mahalla.

This first substantial wave of workers' protests lasted from 6 to 11 February and involved widespread action, with almost no sector of the economy unaffected. The strike by Telecom Egypt workers spread to employees in the public telephone exchanges, who organized numerous protests in Cairo and the provinces. Workers in the railway workshops and in the Cairo Public Transport Authority bus garages joined the strikes and protests. Postal workers converged in protest outside the Post Office in Ataba Square in central Cairo and their movement quickly spread to the provinces. Critical workplaces such as the airport and the military production factories were likewise affected, as were some of the oil companies and textile mills in Helwan, south of Cairo, and Kafr al-Dawwar in al-Beheira province. The health sector was similarly drawn in: nurses in hospitals in Assyout, Kafr al-Zayyat and Qasr al-Aini, and at the Heart Institute in Cairo, announced strikes. Printers and administrative staff in the state-owned magazine *Rose el-Youssef* refused to let the managing editor and chair of the board (both of them close to the regime) into the building. Meanwhile employees at the state's 'Workers' University', a training centre for the regime's trade union cadres, had already declared a strike and locked up their boss, the deputy president of ETUF and a member of the ruling party.

Thus, during the days just before the fall of Mubarak, something which resembled a general strike, without a central organizing core, took place in Egypt. However, the workers' movement as a whole did not declare its support for the revolution directly. Some workers did raise slogans supporting the revolution, and workers echoed chants against the regime, but their demands were mostly economic or trade union-related. Despite this, it is impossible to ignore the process of reciprocal action between the revolution and the workers' movement. It is notable that in working class areas, where the workers' movement had emerged before the revolution, such as Suez, al-Mahalla and Alexandria, the popular uprisings were more energetic and effective.

The number of workers who were killed during the uprising provides the greatest proof of the contribution of the working class to the revolution. The workers' movement not only paved the way for revolution, it also

played a crucial role in securing its victory. It is difficult to obtain data on all of the martyrs of the revolution, but statistics shed some light on this issue. According to the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, there were 841 martyrs. Unfortunately, data about their occupations is missing for most of these people,⁹ but a committee of the Egyptian Journalists' Union collected data about 279 martyrs, and recorded the occupation of 120 of them. Of these 120, 74 were workers and the remainder were students or professionals. Available sources point to workers as forming a large proportion of those killed and injured: where the place of residence is indicated, most came from impoverished areas. The data concerning those injured during the revolution confirms the same pattern. According to the information gathered by the Association of the Heroes and Injured of the Revolution, of 4,500 people injured, 70 per cent were workers with no qualifications, and a further 12 per cent were workers with intermediate-level qualifications. School students (11 per cent) and those with higher-level qualifications (7 per cent) made up the remainder. It was workers and the poor who paid the heaviest price in blood during the Egyptian revolution, and it was their great sacrifice which made the downfall of Mubarak possible.



Organizational gains and political marginalization

The end of Mubarak's rule marked a new phase in the workers' movement. In its wake, workers' protests accelerated and broadened, with the foundation of a large number of independent unions. In addition to demands for the improvement of wages and working conditions, workers' protests called for more sweeping politicized changes, such as holding corrupt managers to account, the reopening of mothballed public

⁹ Legal Support Unit for Freedom of Expression (2012) *Daw'a fi darb al-huriyya – shuhada thawra 25 yanayir*. Cairo: Arabic Network for Human Rights Information. <http://www.anhri.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/book-2.pdf>

companies, the renationalisation of enterprises privatised during the Mubarak era, a higher national minimum wage and the right to organise.¹⁰

The wave of strikes and sit-ins during the first stage of the revolution represented a partial fusion of the social and political aspects of the revolutionary struggle. At the same time, it presented a serious threat to the forces of counter-revolution, and especially to the military and security apparatus at the heart of the old regime. These forces now worked anew to separate the political and economic aspects of the revolution. A clear paradox emerged: despite the impact of the workers' movement on the revolution discussed previously, after Mubarak's fall the workers' movement did not continue to play the same role; it did not shape the trajectory of the revolution. On the contrary, as soon as Mubarak was out of the way, attacks on the workers' movement began. One of the first decisions taken (on 24 March 2011) by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which took power after Mubarak's removal, was to ban strikes and refer striking workers to the military courts. In addition, a broad-based campaign against the workers' movement was launched across different media, labelling workers' protests 'sectional', rather than part of the general trajectory of the revolution.

Many activists from reformist liberal and Islamist currents who had opposed the former regime took part in media campaigns against workers' strikes and their 'sectional' demands. The only defenders of the workers' movement were the revolutionary left and the nascent independent unions. The majority of the revolutionary youth forces concentrated on the struggle in the squares, unaware of the potential of workers' struggles to deepen and expand the revolutionary process through confrontations with the regime inside the state institutions and companies in efforts to cleanse them of the remnants of the former ruling party.¹¹

After the parliamentary elections in November 2011 and January 2012 (which led to an Islamist government), and the victory by the Muslim Brotherhood-backed candidate Mohamed Morsi in the presidential elections in June 2012, a state of political polarization emerged between Islamist and secular forces. The secular forces interpreted the deteriorating

10 Abd al-Salam, R. (2021) 'Al-haraka al-ummaliyya fil thawra ... wa kharij', *Al-Isharaki*, 26 January 2021, <https://revsoc.me/workers-farmers/43544/>

11 The series of documentary films created by the Mosireen media collective illustrates some of the contradictions between the social impact of the workers' movement and its organisational gains, and its political marginalisation.

economic and social conditions as a sign of the Islamists' failure to manage the country, and not as a result of policies which had been implemented since the Mubarak era and continued under Morsi. For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood interpreted deteriorating conditions as signs of a conspiracy by the state apparatus against Morsi, and not as a result of his adherence to the same economic policies as those applied by the old regime which had led to the eruption of the revolution.

With the creation of the National Salvation Front,¹² and its leading role in the opposition to the Brotherhood, the retreat of social and economic issues accelerated. The Front was announced in November 2012 by a number of political forces, including reformists and elements close to the Mubarak regime, in order to resist the attempt by President Mohamed Morsi to amend the constitution. It concentrated on restoring the prestige of the state and the legitimacy of its institutions, such as the judiciary, the army and the police. Thus, despite the continuation of workers' struggles during 2012 and at the beginning of 2013, the possibilities for coordination between the goals of the workers' movement and political struggles in the streets and squares receded.

Events in the wake of the downfall of Mohamed Morsi on 30 June 2013 represented the most significant change in the revolution's course.¹³ The intensifying repression against the workers' movement was an important transformation; however, much more dangerous was the announcement by a considerable section of the independent unions of their backing for the new regime, along with a moratorium on strikes, announced in a joint agreement by ETUF and the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions. The threat contained in this announcement was not that it halted workers' protests – these continued, albeit at a slower pace – but rather that it represented a transformation of the role of the independent unions. From striving for liberation from the state's domination of the trade union movement, they now embraced the new regime, undoing the most significant of the gains made by the workers' movement since 2006.

12 Formed at the end of 2012 from the forces opposing the Muslim Brotherhood including those on the right, the left and Arab nationalists, and even some which were close to the Mubarak regime.

13 Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, then Minister of Defence in Morsi's government, removed Morsi from office on 3 July 2013, following mass protests on 30 June 2013 calling for early presidential elections. In the wake of Morsi's downfall, hundreds of his supporters lost their lives during the dispersal of their protest camps by the security forces, mostly famously at Raba'a al-Adawiyya Square in Cairo and al-Nahda Square in Giza.

This underscored the contradiction between the scale of workers' movement and the depth of its impact before and during the popular uprising in January 2011, and its political weakness after the fall of Mubarak. In seeking to explain this contradiction it is not enough to talk just about the domination of reformist forces or the constraints imposed by the Islamist–secular polarization on the political scene, even though both of these played a role in creating it. Rather, the contradiction has to be understood through an analysis of the weaknesses within the workers' movement itself, both in terms of its connections to the political domain, and in relation to questions of organization and the role of its leadership, which lacked experience and coherence.

It is important to note here the retreats which the workers' movement suffered during the 1990s, and even into the early 2000s. This period witnessed the disappearance of many experienced activists from the workers' movement and the trade unions, who were not replaced by a new generation. When the workers' movement rose again after 2006, it had lost much of the experience it had gained during preceding periods. The workers' leaders who were formed after 2006 were a new cadre which had not accumulated experience in trade union work (in the sense of engagement in the struggle for workers' interests within the workplace) or in political work. This was different to the experience of the cadre which developed during the 1980s, who were in general connected with the parties and organizations of the left. This is precisely what led to the separation between the workers' movement and politics at a general level, and in some cases generated hostility among activists in the workers' movement towards political action.

At the same time, the left, which had historically contributed to building the workers' movement, was in a state of weakness and incoherence. The organizations and parties of the traditional left had practically dissolved following the collapse of the Soviet Union, while the organizations of the new left were still at a nascent stage of development, in hostile circumstances. On the other hand, the independent unions were in the process of being established, and their organizational capacity remained underdeveloped. They had not even been able put down deep roots among rank and file workers. Thus when the revolution erupted in January 2011, while the property tax collectors' union, the health technicians' union, the teachers' union and the retired workers' union gathered in Tahrir Square in order to found the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions,

this did not mean they formed a coherent organizational body; nor did they have strong roots among the mass of ordinary workers.



Conclusion

The separation between the political and social aspects of the workers' struggle appeared at two principal levels during the revolution. Firstly, the revolutionary forces failed to win over large numbers of activists in the ranks of the working class to a political vision which centred the role of the working class in the revolution and the importance of deepening and radicalizing the revolutionary process, especially in relation to confrontation with the state so as to open up space for the workers' movement to develop its political impact. Secondly, the lack of organizational experience in the independent unions themselves created another obstacle. The model of organisation which dominated was not radical enough, and lacked democratic mechanisms rooted in the workplace and among wide sections of rank-and-file workers.¹⁴ This problem appeared despite the formation of the first independent unions in the midst of mass strikes, which provided important experiences in self-organization at the base of the workers' movement.

The weakness in these experiences lay in the lack of a political practice rooted in principles of working-class self-organization, not just restricted to the domain of economics but also encompassing the capacity for workers to emancipate themselves in the political domain. This capacity can be built through engagement in political causes – such as solidarity with the Palestinian people, or support for women's liberation, or struggles against religious sectarianism or to defend the environment. Crucially, it

¹⁴ Centre for Socialist Studies (2014) 'Al-'ummal wal niqabat: sultat ra's al-mal wa mustaqbal kifah masr min ajil al-niqabat', <https://revsoc.me/our-publications/25518/>

requires immersion in these political causes as workers, and not simply as citizens in the streets or voters at the ballot box.

During the first phase of the revolution, workers' struggles began to break down the walls which separated the social aspect of the revolution from the political. Workers' demands expanded from focusing on economic issues to confronting representatives of the regime in the workplace and in the institutions of the state. However, the spontaneous nature of this process was not sufficient to maintain the influence of organised workers over the trajectory of the revolutionary process, in the absence of an organic link to the revolutionary mobilizations which was rooted in the working class. This demonstrates the importance of political, rather than merely trade union, organization in order to ensure that the weight of the workers' movement shapes the trajectory of change.

Suggested reading

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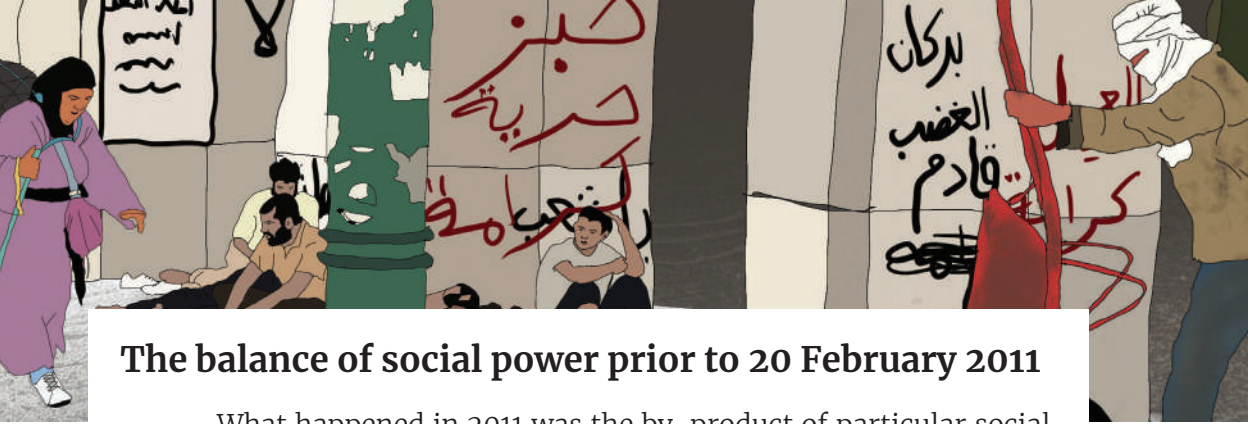


**The February 20 Movement in
Morocco:
Roots of failure and lessons for the future**

Ali Amouzai



On 20 February 2011, for the first time in its history, Morocco saw the birth of a mass movement whose political demands included reform of the country's political system. The fact that its main slogan referred to 'overthrowing corruption and tyranny' meant liberal writers could reduce the movement's political scope to a protest against structures outside the logic of the market, hence concealing the socio-economic roots of the uprising. Social struggles had emerged in parallel to the movement's protests – most prominently the struggle of small-scale sugar beet farmers in the Doukkala region (Sidi Bennour) and the struggle of the unemployed of the Phosphate Plateau (Khouribga), to which were added movements against unemployment in Rabat and strike action that proliferated across the country. However, due to a lack of convergence between these social struggles and the political movement, the regime was able to weather the revolutionary storm raging across the region. Yet the great achievement of the February 20 Movement (and of the regional revolutionary wave) was a change in the mood of the masses themselves. They realized that tyrants do not remain in place forever – a realization that gave momentum to the labour, popular and youth protests that followed 2011, if to varying degrees.



The balance of social power prior to 20 February 2011

What happened in 2011 was the by-product of particular social and political relationships between the different classes and the state. In particular, these dynamics marked the division between the propertied and the popular classes. The neoliberal policies applied in Morocco from the 1980s – through the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and waves of privatization – benefited the bourgeoisie and landowners, allowing them to expropriate a large part of the national wealth. In parallel, the agricultural bourgeoisie and large landowners increased their possession of land as state ownership receded, and subsistence agriculture deteriorated.¹

Year	1973	1980	1996
Area of state-owned land	657,188	491,927	238,015
Area of private land	362,812	498,872	747,120

Adam Hanieh has noted that ‘[by 2004] 70 percent of rural farmers came to own only 24 percent of the land, at an average of less than 5 hectares per farm, while less than 1 percent of farmers controlled 15 percent, with more than 50 hectares each.’²

Politically, the monarchy was able to repurpose opposition and to guarantee a smooth transition of power from Hassan II to Mohammed VI in 1999. Cooperation between an important part of the liberal opposition and union

1 ATTAC Maroc (2019) *In Defence of Food Sovereignty in Morocco* (1st ed.), p. 119. [In Arabic].

2 Hanieh, A. (2013) *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of contemporary capitalism in the Middle East*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, pp. 82–83.

bureaucrats guaranteed social peace for the monarchy, with a ‘social agreement’ signed on 1 August 1996.

The neoliberal transition saw the emergence of bosses as political players in their own right, whether via professional associations or direct participation in representative institutions. The bosses recreated themselves in this period, with the Confédération Générale des Entreprises Du Maroc (CGEM) established on 16 April 1995.

The neoliberal transition transformed the system of government itself, which shifted from the monarchy of Hassan II – built on a social base of large landowners and rural notables, with widespread corruption as one of the means of private capital accumulation – to the monarchy of Mohammed VI, based on large-scale capitalists, themselves colluding with imperial and Gulf capital.

By the end of the twentieth century, four decades of oppression had resulted in politically and economically devastated rural areas across Morocco. Following the defeat of the Moroccan Army of Liberation in 1958, small-scale farmers were left politically voiceless and under the hegemony of rural notables, the Ministry of Interior, and the Royal Moroccan Gendarmerie.

Likewise, the Moroccan working class was (and remains) a political nonentity; it emerged from the decades of rule by Hassan II with no political structure of its own: the nationalist bourgeoisie had held exclusive leadership over the independence struggle and the Moroccan Communist Party (PCM), which had refused to demand independence, subsequently transformed itself into a liberal, pro-monarchy party (currently called the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS)).

In the 1960s, whilst in conflict with the left of the national movement, the monarchy sought to ensure social harmony by mobilizing the top of the Moroccan Workers’ Union (UMT), thus helping to enrich the union leadership. In the late 1970s, the liberal Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) regained a section of the trade union movement and founded its own union, the Democratic Confederation of Labour (CDT). The Socialist Union of Popular Forces utilized the CDT to enter into skirmishes with the monarchy, enabling the former to achieve constitutional reforms and to seize a share of power.

The neoliberal attacks from the 1980s onwards weakened the working class, dismantled their traditional strongholds, and reduced the number of workers in public facilities as a result of privatization. Further, neoliberalism

rendered work relations fragile and highly flexible, through fixed-term contracts, outsourcing companies, subcontracting, and unpaid and half-paid internship contracts – officially approved in the Labour Code of 2003.

The union movement lost its steady membership: its leadership became increasingly dependent on the state and embedded within its institutions, in the House of Councillors, royal commissions, constitutional councils, etc. The union leadership internalized the logic of inevitability that underpins neoliberalism, doing all it could to extinguish workers' resistance and avert the threat of an uprising.

The early twenty-first century saw the depoliticization of the popular and workers' struggle, with the National Initiative for Human Development in 2005. Constituting a part of the World Bank's strategy for fighting poverty, which it had set out in the mid-1990s, this initiative aimed to cloak neoliberalism with a social character whilst curbing all forms of resistance to neoliberal policies. The initiative, which involved establishing tens of thousands of development associations in villages and cities, earned the monarchy increased popularity. These associations became the basis of the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), which was established in the summer of 2008 by Fouad Ali El Himma, a friend of the king and former Minister of State in the Ministry of Interior.

Such was the context of the balance of power when Mohamed Bouazizi set fire to himself in Tunisia in December 2010, setting off a regional conflagration. However, in Morocco the flames reached a social and political bomb that had previously been disarmed.



The myth of the exceptional Moroccan model

The slogan 'Down with the regime' was missing from the February 20 Movement protests. One explanation that has been advanced for this absence points to the difference between the Moroccan monarchy and other regimes in the region. According to this argument, the exceptionality

of Morocco's model is based on a 'policy of moderation and balanced political openness' that the political order has adopted in relation to the opposition (in varying degrees) since independence.³ However, is this actually true?

With the introduction of a consensus rotation government and the creation of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission,⁴ the massive misinformation campaign that took place between 1998 and 2004 absolved the monarchy of responsibility for four decades of oppressive rule by Hassan II. Through this process, the state, and its most repressive apparatuses, evaded responsibility for these years of oppression; the victims gave up their right to accountability and justice in exchange for financial and moral compensation. The monarchy was thus able to pride itself on applying a model of 'transitional justice' that was unique in the region.

Mohammed VI first coined the concept of 'executive monarchy' during a conversation with the right-wing French newspaper *Le Figaro*, in autumn 2001. He rejected the demand for constitutional reform raised by liberal parties in 2008, instead insisting, in a speech made on 30 July 2010,⁵ on prioritizing economic reform and building what he called a 'democratic development model' based on 'accelerated economic growth' and 'good governance'. In other words, the king focused on implementing the dictates of the World Bank.

One explanation for the democratic facade of the monarchy is the nature of the Moroccan economy itself. Unlike Algeria and the Gulf states, which have been able to avoid reliance on taxes to fund their budgets, the Moroccan monarchy has no oil and gas rents to rely on. In Gilbert Achcar's words, '[the former] feel little need to defer to a regime of representative democracy ... where a rentier state ... acquires maximum economic independence from the population.'⁶ By contrast, the Moroccan treasury relies heavily on taxes and external debts, also funded by taxes. Fiscal income represented 85

3 Hami al-Din, A. A. (2018) *February 20 and the Aftermath of Democratic Transition in Morocco* (1st ed.). Doha: The Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, p. 242. [In Arabic].

4 This is an organization that was established by Mohammed VI in 2004 with the aim of erasing the grave human rights violations of Hassan II's reign.

5 For the full text of the speech (in French), see <https://bit.ly/3uv9UiL>.

6 Achcar, G. (2013) *The People Want: A radical exploration of the Arab Uprising* (1st ed.) (trans. G.M. Goshgarian). California: University of California Press, p. 56.

percent of overall state revenues and 20 percent of GDP in 2011.⁷ Such is the economic basis of the institutional front, which facilitates alliances between the monarchy and other sections of the ruling class. To borrow from political science jargon, this enables a ‘democratic margin’, which in turn creates a false impression of a genuine political and partisan life: elections are held and the parliamentary majority produces a government, while the minority in opposition awaits the next round of elections to take its turn in government.

However, this ‘democratic margin’ involves certain red lines: it cannot question the monarchy, religion, or the issue of Western Sahara. For instance, Nadia Yassine, daughter of the leader of the religious group Justice and Spirituality [Al Adl wal Ihssan], was put on trial, accused of having proclaimed her preference for a republican system over a monarchy. Her trial lasted from 2005 to 2010. Similarly, the general secretary of the Democratic Way (a party of the radical left), stated: ‘... The Parties Law in Morocco prohibits parties from opposing the monarchy ... We therefore prefer to resort to silence; we are neither Republican nor Monarchists; we are fighting for a democratic system.’

Western Sahara is yet another red line for the Moroccan state: not only was the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (the Polisario) suppressed, the state also prohibits any stance that contradicts the official one. In his speech on 6 November 2009, the king made the following threat: ‘One is either patriotic or a traitor; there is no middle ground between patriotism and treason, and no space to enjoy the rights of citizenship while renouncing them by conspiring with enemies of the homeland.’⁸

It is this which is behind Morocco’s model of an ‘exceptional monarchy’, rather than an inherent devotion of Moroccans to the king. How then to explain the absence from the February 20 Movement protests of the slogan that was so common across the region during the 2010–11 uprisings, ‘Down with the regime’? Perhaps the most realistic explanation is the one proposed by Gilbert Achcar. He asserts the impossibility, in hereditary regimes like Morocco’s, of overthrowing the regime without also overthrowing the state: ‘People have awakened to its dangers and realized that attaining it

7 Shakribah, I. (2016) ‘Public financing in Morocco: Between stimulating growth and managing the crisis’, in *Morocco Post the 2011 Movement: What’s Changed?* (ed. Bask Manar, M). The Moroccan Center for Research and Policy Analysis. Casablanca: New al-Najh Press.

8 For the full text of the speech (in French), see <https://bit.ly/3uvoUdf>

would require a balance of powers or exceptional circumstances that were not present in any of the monarchies in 2011... And this is not the result of those systems enjoying a larger sense of legitimacy, as some superficial analyses of Western orientalist have claimed.⁹A further explanation is the destruction of the republican opposition during the 1960s and 1970s, and the crushing of the emancipatory project of the Rif revolution led by Abdel Karim al-Khattabi from 1921 to 1926.

Raising the slogan ‘Down with the regime’ in monarchies requires much more energy from a popular class that is willing to fight without fear. In such regimes, avoiding the high cost of change warrants the preparation of a class force capable of warding off the violence of the counter-revolution, and the disintegration of society into warring units. As such, the people are presented with two worst-case scenarios – authoritarianism or chaos – that is, they must choose the lesser of two evils. This is a distinctive characteristic of bourgeois opposition and union bureaucracy: they strive for political stability, fully aware that the popular classes will not stop at mere political enhancement of the same economic system.

Thus, in a discussion with *Azzaman Magazine* in 2012, Abdallah Laroui, the most prominent Moroccan bourgeois intellectual and philosopher, did not hesitate in stating that the monarchy helps guarantee the stability of Moroccan society.



The February 20 Movement and the monarchy's reaction to it

The mass movement of February 20 lasted barely a year. Its first demonstrations broke out on 20 February 2011. The monarchy then held a constitutional referendum on 1 July 2011, and elections were held in November 2011. With the formation of a ceremonial government on 3 January 2011, headed by the Islamist Justice and Development Party, the

⁹ Achcar, G. (2017) Can a people topple a system with the state still standing? *Bidayat Magazine* 16. [In Arabic].

movement evaporated, disintegrating into groups of isolated individuals and becoming a mere anniversary, commemorated each year.

In this sense, the political momentum in Morocco had long been halted by the point at which the counter-revolution prevailed in other parts of the Arab region in March 2013, notably with the civil war in Syria and the al-Sisi coup in Egypt.

As has been stated, the victory of the monarchy over the February 20 Movement is often ascribed to Mohammed VI's quick response to its demands, in his speech on 9 March 2011.¹⁰ However, this claim obfuscates reality; in fact, the regime responded to the protest movement with oppression, from its very inception. On 20 February, five charred bodies of protesters were found inside a branch of Banque Populaire in the city centre of al-Hoceima. Karim Chaib was killed under police torture in Sefrou. On 20 June, activist Kamal Ammari died under police torture, in Safi. Likewise, Mohammed Boudroua (an unemployment activist) and Kalam al-Hassani (an activist in a Rif association for the unemployed) were killed in Safi on 14 October and 27 October, respectively.

Just one day after the protests broke out, King Mohammed VI rejected the movement's demand for constitutional amendments, referring to them as 'demagoguery'. Then, one week later, he resorted to a step that has rarely been acknowledged: he got his adviser Mohamed Motassim to meet with union leaders in his home on 27 February. This meeting isolated the union movement from the February 20 Movement. This was expressed in the words of Touria Lahrach, leader of the Democratic Confederation of Labour (CDT), in a conversation broadcast by Medi1 on 23 October 2014: 'If we had no sense of citizenship, we would have taken to the streets with the protesters on 20 February. Rather, as trade unionists, we sat at the negotiating table and signed an agreement on 26 April.'¹¹ The monarchy and union leadership had learned their lesson from the experience in Tunisia, where the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) had supported the revolution; they thus joined efforts to avoid such a scenario in Morocco. The state then made a series of concessions that would have been unimaginable had it not been for the flames of the revolution then scorching

¹⁰ For the full text in French, see <https://bit.ly/3KyZTqn>

¹¹ al-Boussari, R. (2016) 'Reconstructing Moroccan trade unionism', in *Morocco Post the 2011 Movement What's changed?* (Ed. Bask Manar, M.) The Moroccan Centre for Research and Policy Analysis. Casablanca: New al-Najh Print, p. 277. [In Arabic].

the region. Public expenditure increased in 2011 by 15.9%, while the state moved to employ more than 4,000 university graduates and chose to turn a blind eye to unlicensed construction and the 'invasion' of street vendors.

The king also called for financial support and debt relief for 200,000 farmers. On 26 April 2011, he stated: 'No matter how high the financial cost that these measures require, our utmost goal is to bring small-scale farmers to the core of human and rural development.'¹² This revealed not a monarchy somehow entrenched in Moroccan consciousness, but rather a conflict in which the monarchy had to offer concessions in order to stop the protest movement.

After the king separated the movement from its presumed social base, he turned his attention to the 'constitutional battle'. In his speech on 9 March 2011, the king did not claim to respond to the demands of the February 20 Movement, but rather presented these measures as a continued consolidation of earlier 'institutional gains' and as an enhancement of the 'democratic development model'.

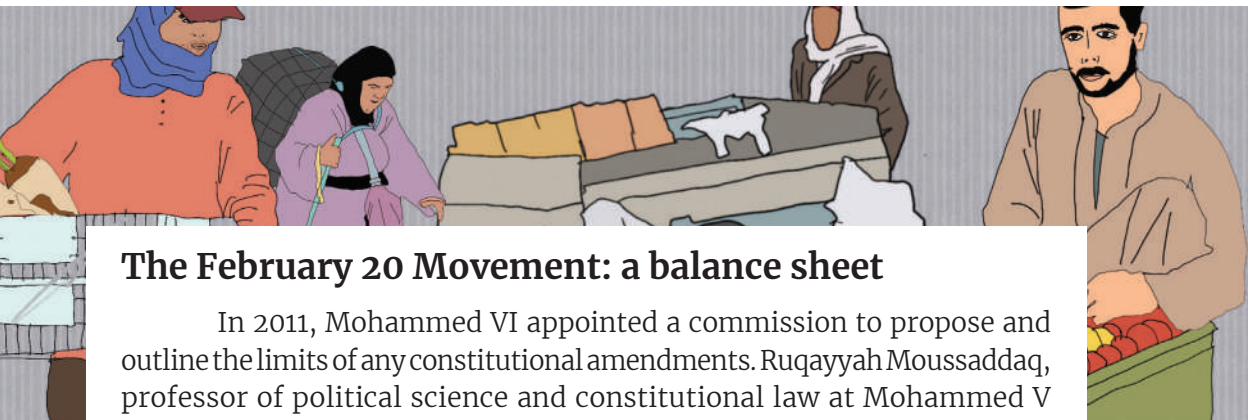
The monarchy passed the new constitution through the usual methods of mobilization and intervention by the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs, and through suppressing the demonstrations by the February 20 Movement against that constitution. As stated above, legislative elections were held in November 2011, with the Islamist Justice and Development Party establishing a (ceremonial) government. Thus the monarchy was able to claim that it had responded to popular demands, while also pandering to the US strategy on the region's revolutions, which was based on a 'smooth democratic transition' that integrated Islamists in the sharing of power.

Many hold the Moroccan people responsible for this turn of events, for it was the people that voted for the Justice and Development Party. However, regardless of voting percentages and the way in which they are calculated, elections are a mechanism that is at the heart of the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary contexts. When the masses awaken, and open their eyes to political life under conditions of prolonged political backwardness and the absence of a revolutionary force, they look for a simple political formula that directly expresses their aspirations by means of numerical preponderance. Some sections of the masses believed the promises that

¹² 'Manuscript of the royal message to participants in the Fourth National Agricultural Debate, 26 April 2011.

the Justice and Development Party made about ‘reform under stability’ and ‘fighting corruption’. In casting their votes for the Party, they sought to penalize the parties that had previously held power.

Ultimately, the February 20 Movement ended a protracted political era that had been marked by polarization between the monarchy and parties that emerged from the national bourgeois movement in the 1960s. The latter’s electoral power diminished – especially that of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) – while the radical left was weakened. In this setting, a new form of polarization was established, between the monarchy and political Islam. As in the first case, however, such a polarization did not (and does not) reflect a class conflict, but rather a political rivalry rooted in similar class dynamics. These dynamics consist of finding the best route to ensure the smooth functioning of capitalism, and the subordination of the popular classes. In this context, it was predictable that any revolutionary uprising would be met with movements representing political Islam, movements that would be ready to politically co-opt the uprising, as happened in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011.



The February 20 Movement: a balance sheet

In 2011, Mohammed VI appointed a commission to propose and outline the limits of any constitutional amendments. Ruqayyah Moussaddaq, professor of political science and constitutional law at Mohammed V University in Rabat, has offered one of the sharpest analyses of the 2011 Constitution, describing it as a ‘discretionary constitution’ and stating ‘The new constitution is a step back in our political and constitutional path,’¹³. Under the 2011 Constitution, the king’s authority is not subject to the constitution but rather to his own discretionary power; he can thus grant himself the authority to amend the constitution without holding a referendum (article 174 of the constitution).

13 Moussaddaq, R. (2018) A constitutional or discretionary monarchy. In *February 20 and the Aftermath of Democratic Transition in Morocco* (1st ed.). Doha: The Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, p. 208. [In Arabic].

However, while Moussaddaq focuses on the formal constitutional aspects, she misses, in her concluding analysis, the economic – i.e., class – implications of the 2011 Constitution. The 2011 Constitution preserves the monarchy’s economic power, and gives the king exclusive power to designate ‘strategic’ companies and institutions, and to appoint their directors. The ministerial cabinet, headed by the king, has the power to determine the ‘strategic approach of state policy’. The king’s speeches hold binding legislative force, while the government programme does not.

Article 35 of the new constitution stipulates that private ownership, entrepreneurship, and free competition are ensured. After years of implementing neoliberal policies, the monarchy thus utilized the constitutional amendments to anchor austerity in the constitution (article 77).

Moreover, the state also implemented the bosses’ demands concerning tax policies: the tax burden was decreased, particularly through the main tax imposed on corporate profits, which was reduced from an average of 30% to 10%, and which applies to 79% of taxable corporations. Once more, the government largely fulfilled the wishes of businessmen and CEOs.¹⁴

To finance the budget deficit – partly the result of this favourable tax treatment for bosses – the state was plunged into further indebtedness. The table below summarizes Morocco’s ratio of debt to GDP between 2012 and 2016:¹⁵

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Public debt	59.7	61.5	63.4	64.2	65.0

As a result of these dynamics, the neoliberal assault on public services and the working class continued to intensify. In late 2011, the state demolished thousands of clandestine slums and removed street vendors from Morocco’s public spaces. In 2012, the head of the government, Abdelilah Benkiran, refused to implement a decree on hiring unemployed university graduates, signed on 20 July 2011 by former prime minister Abbas El Fassi. In 2016,

14 For further reading, see Aqsbı, N. Between macroeconomic deficit and the democracy deficit, the Moroccan economy after 2011. In *February 20 and the Aftermath of Democratic Transition in Morocco* (1st ed.). Doha: The Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, pp. 471–72, 474. [In Arabic].

15 Ibid, p. 456.

Social Fund expenses were cut by about 15 billion Moroccan dirhams (around 1.3 billion euros).

As part of its ‘civil service reform’ project, and under World Bank pressure, since 2013 the state has proceeded to apply a neoliberal logic of austerity – a logic based on the proliferation of fixed-term work contracts, the dismantling of public sector jobs, wage reduction, and the reform of pension schemes. The ultimate goal is to replicate private sector work relations in the public sector.

These policies have resulted in social and labour struggles, but the state, in cooperation with union bureaucracies and the bourgeoisie, has managed to stem such struggles with partial concessions which do nothing to stop the neoliberal assault. Not only have these concessions been momentary, they have also been easily reversed through state countermeasures. In such a context, some of the freedoms gained have been undermined. For instance, the Press and Publishing Code that was approved on 10 August 2016 led to numerous trials based on social media posts. Journalists were arrested under falsified charges (including Taoufiq Bouachrine, Souleiman Raissouni, Omar Radi) and movements in the Rif and Jerada (2017–2018) were suppressed with crackdowns, with hefty prison sentences for those who had taken part. Furthermore, the police force killed a protester, Imad El Attabi, in Hoceima in July 2017, and they killed a participant in a demonstration of short-term contract workers, Abdellah Hajili, in May 2019. Meanwhile, a law to restrict the working class’s right to strike is currently being ratified.



The Rif Movement: A popular protest with a political character and local specificity

Popular struggle did not stop with the February 20 Movement. In the Rif region confrontations continued, in which the National Association of Unemployed Graduates played a leading role.

The Rif is unique in Morocco. Following the Protectorate treaty of 1912, the Rif was annexed to the Spanish colonial power, though a liberation movement led by Abd al-Karim al-Khattabi defeated Spain and built the foundations of a republic. Spanish imperialism was very backwards; it left the Rif as it entered it. On independence in 1956 the Rif was annexed again, to the area of Morocco that had been under French rule, which was far more developed. Pesos were replaced with francs; the Rabat government replaced the local administration.

This prompted the 1958 uprising, which the regime repressed with the use of the military and aerial bombardment. An uprising in 1984 was similarly repressed. The region remained marginalized within Morocco and the population were forced to rely on 'micro smuggling' into the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, emigration to Europe, and cannabis farming. With the tightening of migration and the stifling of the smuggling trade from 2011 onwards, the situation reached a crisis point.

The crisis peaked in October 2016, when Mouhcine Fikri, a fishmonger, was crushed to death while attempting to retrieve his fish from a rubbish truck, placed there by police. Demonstrations immediately began across the entire Rif region and continued into 2017, when they were effectively ended by the crackdown against the 20 July demonstration that year, including the trials and arbitrary sentencing of protesters, including the 20-year prison sentence given to the protest movement's leader Nasser Zefzafi and others.

The Rif protesters had demanded the development of their region (roads, healthcare, education), but due to the region's historical specificity, the movement also carried particular political implications. Unlike other struggles in Morocco, which are typically directed at the monarchy's institutional fronts (the government, parliament, and political parties), the Movement of the Rif involved a direct confrontation with the monarchy, which it held responsible for the situation. It was not the national flag that was lifted by protesters: instead, they raised the banner of the revolutionary anti-colonial Rif republic.



Quid pro quo diplomacy: Western Sahara, the Moroccan regime and the Politics of Normalization with Israel

The Moroccan monarchy presents itself as a model of political stability in a region now devastated by civil wars. In doing so, it hopes to increase the benefits of its long-standing cooperation with imperialism – primarily French and American – and Zionism.

In an October 2020 report, the World Bank criticized the delay in establishing a free trade area in the Arab region. Referring to the occupation of Palestine and the question of Western Sahara, it stated: ‘The West Bank and Gaza–Israeli conflict, and the strained relations between Morocco and Algeria, among others, impede the development of a more united front among MENA countries.’¹⁶

Regarding global imperialism, Palestine and Western Sahara are questions that were inherited from the Cold War period of anti-colonial struggles and ‘progressive’ regimes. Since that time, economic and political shifts in the Arab region and the African continent have brought regimes and elites to power that have broken with their countries’ histories of national liberation, and that have complied with global institutions and global capitalism. Those regimes, along with global imperialism, came to see the two questions of Palestine and Western Sahara as blocking the economic integration of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and the region’s own integration with global capitalism.

The Moroccan regime is fully aware of this radically changed context. The monarchy benefited from the 2008 global economic crisis, presenting itself to capital as able to operate across the continent as an exemplary ‘mediator’. It has also benefited from the 2011 regional uprisings, appearing now as

¹⁶ World Bank MENA Economic Update (October 2020) *Trading together: Reviving Middle East and North Africa regional integration in the post-Covid era*, p. 41.

a model of a politically stable regime that safeguards imperial interests, including concerns over clandestine migration and terrorism. Indeed, in the aftermath of Covid-19, the monarchy is set to benefit from the decline in global value chains and their redistribution at the regional level.

Further, the regime's mobilization of the discourse of 'territorial integrity' and ahistorical 'sovereignty', internally and externally, is an attempt to preserve these economic profits and political interests. This strategy is demonstrated in state manoeuvres with regard to Western Sahara, a central issue for the monarchy which is also at the core of regional transformations. With the downfall of the staunchest supporter of the Saharawi Republic, Muammar Gaddafi, and the Algerian regime's own crises, the Moroccan regime has assumed a commanding position on the issue.

For nearly a decade the monarchy has pursued an economic strategy of transforming Morocco into a launchpad for imperial investments in Africa. The regime utilizes Moroccan capital to shift the opinion of imperial countries on Western Sahara in its favour. Those countries prefer a stable regime that is able to guarantee their interests and their economic raiding of Africa.

Perhaps the biggest political victory achieved by the monarchy in this context was its return to the African Union (AU) in 2017, 32 years after Morocco's withdrawal from the Organisation of African Unity.¹⁷ Morocco's return received widespread and indeed unconditional support from the AU member states, reflecting the shift in the continental balance of power. At the same time, the Moroccan regime enacted a policy of developing economic relations with countries with which it previously had no links, in the hope of changing their position on the question of Western Sahara.

Additionally, the United Nations has tipped in favour of adopting the Moroccan state's viewpoint in its reports, especially as the task of holding a referendum on self-determination has faded into the background: the United Nations praises the Moroccan autonomy plan, and repeatedly emphasizes the importance of a buffer zone and the negotiation of a solution, while simultaneously rejecting changes and calling for a neutral census of refugee camp populations, and so on – all of which are frequently raised as complaints by the Polisario.

17 Founded in 1963, it was the precursor to the African Union, which was formed in 2001.

Following the Polisario's blocking of the Guerguerat crossing at the Mauritanian border in late 2020, the Moroccan regime established new 'facts on the ground', initiating a security cordon in order to guarantee smooth crossings of the border – and thereby breaching the ceasefire negotiated through the United Nations in September 1991. In response, the Polisario declared war. However, there were only very limited skirmishes, which in no way affected the Moroccan regime. Throughout this period, the monarchy took advantage of the Polisario's internal contradictions, which arise from the Front's transition from a national liberation movement into a state apparatus, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). The Polisario now has a large bureaucracy (a police force, an army, and a diplomatic corps) though this survives only through external aid, and is indeed entirely dependent on the Algerian military – changes that parallel those that took place within the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). In his 2004 book, *Eastern Cauldron*, Gilbert Achcar speaks of the decay of the Polisario, which he describes as a 'long march backwards'.¹⁸ Both the Polisario and the PLO have become a state apparatus without a territory; both seek lands in order to exercise state power while having quasi-total dependence on the so-called international community and its legitimacy.

Monarchical diplomacy regarding Western Sahara has thus become more aggressive, benefiting from imperial competition on the African continent. After decades of being blackmailed, the monarchy became the blackmailer: Rabat has taken every opportunity to call back its ambassadors to Morocco in protests over the issue, as it did with Germany in May 2021, after that country's Foreign Minister's statement on former President Trump's recognition of Western Sahara as Moroccan, and with Spain a month later, when the president of SADR received hospital treatment there. Subsequently the Moroccan monarchy used its role as an EU border guard (with regard to containing clandestine migration from the African continent) to pressure Spain by allowing hundreds of minors to migrate to the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. Because of Spain's weak position within the hierarchy of global imperialism, the regime's diplomatic gains and economic standing may translate into internal and external consolidation of the monarchy, thus surpassing the effect of the 1975 Green March. This will surely be the case if the monarchy succeeds in squeezing concessions from Spain, even if

18 Achcar, G. (2004) *Eastern Cauldron: Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq in a Marxist mirror*. (Trans. Drucker, P). New York: Monthly Review Press.

solely in the form of a diplomatic deal (of the kind signed by Britain and China in 1889, relating to Hong Kong).

Recently, Morocco's aims in Western Sahara have been combined with support from the US, with the country's normalization with Israel. The Moroccan monarchy's relations with Israel have continued since its formal independence. In his book *Lineages of Revolt* (2013), Adam Hanieh describes the development of relations between Arab states, including Morocco, in the context of the imperial strategy of transforming the MENA into a free trade and investment zone.

In October 2000, the Moroccan regime was forced to shut down an Israeli 'liaison office' in Rabat under pressure from popular solidarity with the second Palestinian Intifada. However, the power balance has now tipped towards the counter-revolutionary forces in the Arab region. Having made political gains through weathering the 20 February storm, with increased regional weight and status among the imperial powers, the regime was able to openly normalize relations with the Zionist state: it signed an agreement to that effect on 10 December 2020, under the auspices of the United States.

Never before has the monarchy achieved such an internal and external consensus as it has recently established – it flaunts its gains like Achilles. However, while Achilles had just one weakness, the monarchy has two: the first is the erupting social crisis, that it is attempting to contain, and the second is the coming global economic crisis and its implications for the monarchy's hopes of playing the role of forward guard of global capital, invading the markets and looting the wealth of Africa.



Conclusion

Imperialism and autocratic regimes benefit from the separation of popular and labour struggles. The revolutionary process of 2011 opened a window of opportunity for collective liberation in the region. The first signs of the February 20 Movement were demonstrations in solidarity with the Tunisian and Egyptian peoples in front of their respective embassies. However, even as further demonstrations broke out, there was a shift from the streets to the constitutional realm. And with the victory of the counter-revolution, this prism of international solidarity had receded into country-specific struggles.

As those great revolutionary processes enter their tenth year, it is evident that the liberation of the peoples of the region will require a combined Maghrebi, Arab and African perspective. Without such a perspective, the working and popular classes of the region will be unable to overcome the ruling classes and their regimes, which have only further entrenched their relations with capital, and their normalization with Israel.

In Morocco, social questions – unemployment, peripheral development, lack of food sovereignty, poor public services, concentration of land ownership, and inequality – are the likely detonators of future struggles. The severity of the health and economic crisis has heated the boiler; once it reaches boiling point, it will explode in the faces of those that have created this crisis – the big capitalists (or bosses) and the state.

This coming struggle may be able to take advantage of the political experience that has been developed in Morocco over the past decades. If, however, those resources are not utilized during the upcoming battles, social discontent is likely to move towards a political impasse: it will be easily suppressed, and will receive nothing but crumbs from the

bourgeois opposition, which will help save the regime in exchange for the latter meeting the bourgeoisie's demands for political reform and democratization in small doses.

A unified workers and popular front is crucial, if disaster is to be avoided. Hence, the necessity of building bonds of cooperation between various groups – trade unions, coordination committees, and movements against unemployment – in the face of bosses' attacks. This unity is critical and should be extended to other sections of working people: that is, to small-scale producers in cities and villages, to students, and so on. If this does not happen, these groups will form nothing but a passive crowd, waiting on the regime's charity or acting as a mass reserve for reactionary forces that share the regime's class aspirations: maintaining the existing socio-economic model, whilst mitigating its worst effects by resorting to intermittent philanthropy.

Not only did the 20 February Movement reveal that which preceded it; it also provides an index of a potential future. The separation of the political from both the social and economic elements in the movement was its downfall. A movement combining these three elements (political, social and economic) could make gains in terms of political freedoms, while simultaneously toppling neoliberalism and moving towards a genuine inclusive democracy. This democracy would also include proponents of republicanism, secularism, and Saharawi independence. Instead of the reformism that the liberal and religious-reactionary opposition yearn for, the ultimate aim should be to overthrow the neoliberal 2011 Constitution – and to establish a constitutional assembly through which the Moroccan people, for the first time in their history, can choose their own destiny.

Such is the task of the labour and popular vanguards, which must first attain their political independence from every manifestation of bourgeois opposition. Anyone who identifies with the historical project of liberating the working classes has an important role to play, and can themselves contribute to this grand goal.

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Saudi-UAE interventions: Arms, aid and counter-revolution

Rafeef Ziadah



The waves of uprisings in North Africa and West Asia over the past decade caught pundits and academics by surprise. According to these commentators the case for democratic change had been foreclosed long before, with an insistence on the ‘resilience of authoritarianism’ and the region’s ‘exceptionalism’ as regards global trends, including democratization. Much has been written since about the underlying causes, impact and trajectory of the uprisings. This work has largely focused on individual states. Yet one of the major outcomes of the uprisings has been the increased role of regional players in multiple states, working to stabilize the political system to their advantage. The uprisings, in both the so-called first and second waves, have held out much hope for change and articulated demands for social and economic justice. With that hope also came many setbacks, frustrations and all-out counter-revolutions; the role of regional actors has been central to these dynamics.

More specifically, a host of regional actors, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Turkey and Iran, rapidly intervened to secure their interests, undermine opponents and assert their power regionally. Instead of analysing the uprisings and their aftermath simply within individual states, a broader comparative analysis allows us to examine emerging actors and their mechanisms of intervention at a regional level. In the following analysis I focus on the interventions in Yemen and Libya after the uprisings of 2011. Although the uprisings in both states had different trajectories, a similar constellation of regional actors intervened militarily, financially and diplomatically to try to ensure the installation of leaderships favourable to them. With a focus on the UAE and Saudi Arabia, this contribution examines the various modes of intervention that were applied, including direct military campaigns, the use of proxies, financial aid and humanitarian packages – all working in tandem to shape a regional outcome that, unfortunately, has buttressed the status quo against the initial hopes of change offered by the uprisings.



Regional players

As the cascading uprisings took hold in several states, threatening individual leaders, established regional actors understood the threat, but they also saw the opportunity to intervene to shape the trajectory of the uprisings. In the wars that followed the uprisings in Syria and Libya, for example, various modes of military intervention were applied, including the provision of arms to support a range of different internal factions.

Within the array of international and regional actors vying for dominance, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who until recently have had the closest alignment on geopolitical questions, led or participated in a series of military campaigns (directly and indirectly) – most prominently in Yemen. They acted to maintain their control and to preserve the status quo, initially intervening within the Gulf Cooperation Council, supporting the regimes in Oman and Bahrain – in the latter case, deploying the Peninsula Shield Forces to back King Hamad in suppressing protests against his rule.

Often forgotten in accounts of these events is that the regime in Saudi Arabia also moved quickly to quash internal protests within its own borders, in the eastern region of Qatif and in smaller cities like al-Awamiyah and Hofuf. Organized by the Shia minority in the country, the protests were initially against the Peninsula Shield intervention in Bahrain, but they also spoke to internal grievances. In the UAE, too, internal protest arose, though on a much smaller scale: in 2011 a group drafted a petition calling for reform of the Federal National Council, including a demand for universal suffrage. The response was increased surveillance and the arrest of reform activists.

Thus, at this time, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had begun to feel the cascading impact of the uprisings, and they could see how the uprisings, especially as they unfolded in Oman and Bahrain, were emboldening internal dissent within their own borders. Motivated by a broader rivalry with Iran for

geopolitical dominance, and their desire to lessen the threat of the Muslim Brotherhood, they therefore sought to intervene in multiple ways to influence the trajectory of the uprisings.

The various military interventions conducted by Saudi Arabia and the UAE were backed by financial assistance, which had the aim of securing their foreign policy objectives, especially through aid packages to Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia.¹

Understanding the violence and the scale of the post-uprising interventions by the Saudi-UAE alliance requires a broader analysis of the region, beyond individual states, especially in the light of escalating tensions between Saudi Arabia/the UAE, on the one hand, and Iran, on the other. It is clear that the UAE and Saudi Arabia took a multipronged approach, incorporating military campaigns and the alignment of foreign aid with the interests of private capital in these states. Saudi-UAE interventions also largely mirrored the methods – both military and in regard to discursive tools – of US intervention in the region, underscoring the historical relationship of the US as the patron of these regimes, but also the international connections of the arms industry, and the circulation of military equipment and techniques, and models of counter-insurgency.^{2,3} Such norms of counter-insurgency, which were applied by the Saudi-led coalition, have been most starkly evident in Yemen. The case of Yemen also highlights the multipronged approach to intervention, which involved both applying direct military force and making use of proxies, while at the same time providing aid to areas under coalition control and using aid as a means to influence political ends.

1 Ziadah, R. (2019) 'The importance of the Saudi-UAE alliance: notes on military intervention, aid and investment', *Conflict, Security & Development* 19(3): 295–300.

2 Khalili, L. (2012) *Time in the Shadows*. Stanford University Press.

3 Stavrianakis, A. (2019) 'Controlling weapons circulation in a postcolonial militarised world', *Review of International Studies* 45(1): 57–76.



Controlling Yemen

In 2011 a popular uprising in Yemen forced Ali Abdullah Saleh to cede power after 33 years of rule. A Saudi-brokered deal was key in allowing Saleh to step down in return for immunity, to be replaced by his deputy, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi. A National Dialogue Conference (NDC) was then initiated, with the aim of establishing a negotiated power arrangement between Yemen's various stakeholders. Two years into discussion, the NDC had failed to reach a consensus and the idea it presented for a new federal map that partitioned Yemen into regions was rejected due to its shortcomings in accounting for the various economic conditions and long-standing grievances in the country. The Houthis, an armed group based in the north of the country that had been engaged in a long-running conflict with the Saleh regime, capitalized on the setbacks of the NDC. In September 2014, the Houthis moved to take over a number of army and security positions in Yemen's capital Sana'a. Following the Houthis' takeover of Sana'a in early 2015, President Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia. Under the pretext of supporting the democratic will of the Yemeni people, in 2015 a Saudi-led coalition then engaged in direct military action against the Houthi insurgency. Saudi Arabia maintained that the Houthis were supported by Iran. Indeed, the Saudi-UAE-led intervention in Yemen began when the Houthi rebels agreed to allow direct flights between Sana'a and Tehran, and when they gave Iran access to the port of Hodeidah, Yemen's main port on the Red Sea.

The Saudi-led coalition was supported by, and received logistical and intelligence support from, the US, UK and France. The coalition argued that the military campaign in Yemen would be quick and decisive. However, after six years of military action, which has caused huge death and destruction

and has created the world's worst humanitarian crisis,⁴ the Saudi-led coalition has not achieved any of its stated goals. Instead, the Houthis have been forced to move closer to Iran and the Saudi coalition's actions have left in their wake untold suffering and a fractured country, with multiple armed factions (which the coalition helped to create).

There have been numerous reports of widespread violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, including systematic attacks on civilian targets and the utilization of humanitarian aid for military purposes. Yemen has largely become a test case for direct Saudi-led military intervention, as well as a showcase for its stockpiles of arms, purchased largely from the US, UK and France. According to the Stockholm International Peace and Research Institute (SIPRI), 'Saudi Arabia and the UAE were the 2nd and 4th largest arms importers during 2013–17 respectively', with exports to Saudi Arabia rising by 225 per cent, and those to UAE by 51 per cent in this period.

The destruction of Yemen may have happened at the hands of the Saudi-led coalition, but it was enabled by two American administrations, which gave it the green light, as well as by the weapons industry in the US and Europe, which was eager to keep the lucrative trade with the Gulf states going. Indeed, while lip service was paid to the suffering of Yemeni civilians, the arms trade with members of the Saudi-led coalition never declined during this period. The Biden administration then began a review of arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, including a \$35 billion deal to sell Abu Dhabi F-35 fighter jets, but this may not have much to do with Yemen: more likely it reflects the US's desire to maintain an overall balance of arms in the region that ensures that Israel continues to have the upper hand.

Although they were part of the same coalition, it is important to note that the UAE and Saudi strategies in Yemen were not identical. The appointment of Lt. Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who was considered to be pro-Muslim Brotherhood, to the position of Vice President of Yemen triggered the UAE to change tack in the country. In the UAE's view, his appointment risked empowering the Muslim Brotherhood and its local party Islah.

4 The toll of the war in Yemen has been devastating. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has documented more than 20,000 civilians killed and injured by the fighting since March 2015. United Nations agencies and NGOs report that 3.65 million people were forced from their homes since 2015 and 24.1 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance to survive. Infrastructure has been destroyed and human rights violations have been extensively recorded.

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, continued to be mainly focused on the Houthis, and on reinstalling the Hadi government.

In addition to the coalition actions against the Houthis in Yemen, the UAE in particular also turned its fire on Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Saudi Arabia and the UAE had a division of labour which saw the UAE's fighting against the Houthis concentrated in the southern and eastern governorates. The UAE also invested in training local security forces, such as the Security Belt Forces, and it funded and trained the Shabwani and Hadrami Elite Forces in the east, the Joint Forces in the west, and the Abu al-Abbas Fighters in the southwest. (The United Nations' Yemen Panel of Experts' 2020 report noted that the UAE had operational control of these groups).

When the UAE announced a draw-down of its forces in Yemen in 2019, it switched to a strategy of indirect control, strategically utilizing forces like the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which holds the southern port city of Aden, having pushed out Hadi's forces in 2019.

In February 2020, five years after launching its military campaign as part of the Saudi-led coalition, the UAE officially withdrew from Yemen, although it continues to be formally part of the coalition and it maintains its influence on the ground. As a matter of fact, indirect engagement allows the UAE to distance itself from the bad publicity associated with the human rights abuses of the war, while guaranteeing the protection of its interests. According to the Riyadh Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Yemen and the UAE-backed STC, signed on 5 November 2019, the STC, with support from the UAE managed to guarantee inclusion in any new Yemeni government.

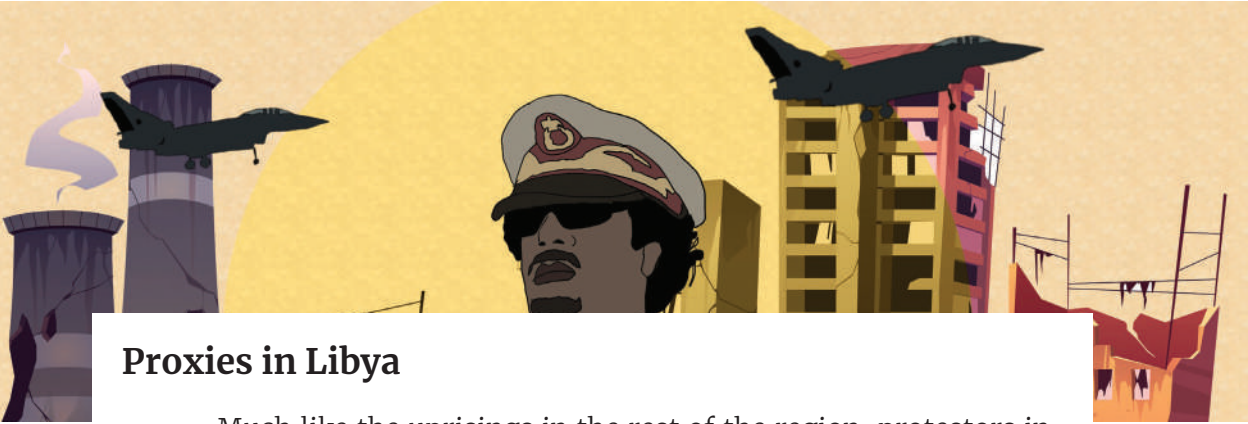
The Saudi-UAE military strategy in Yemen was largely geared towards securing the Bab Al Mandeb passage at the intersection of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. As part of this effort, the UAE's military took control of Yemeni ports on the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, including Mukalla, Aden and Mokha – as well as the islands of Socotra and Mayun (the latter being located in a strategic location in the Bab Al Mandeb strait, thus being a very important asset for the UAE). These ports are along a primary maritime trade route between Asia and Europe and a major chokepoint in global shipping. Although the UAE is now technically drawing back from some of these locations, it has maintained proxies in various regions to guard its interests, and it is building military bases on the islands to

maintain its control. In this regard, calls for Yemeni sovereignty have fallen on deaf ears.

With discussions of coalition draw-downs, and with US President Joe Biden announcing an end of US support for the intervention in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are now entrenching their control in strategic locations throughout the country. The Saudi regime has taken control of al-Mahrah, on the border with Oman, which gives it direct access to the Indian Ocean, an advantage it reportedly wants to use to build an oil pipeline from Saudi Arabia through this town. Moreover, Saudi troops are working with allied tribes to secure their control of Yemen through a network of bases.

The hopes of the protestors in Yemen, similarly to those in the rest of the region, were that they would at last be able to control their own fate, and hold free elections, and that the resources of the country would be shared equally for the benefit of the population. The Saudi-UAE alliance from the start worked to thwart these ambitions. First, by ensuring immunity for Saleh, their long-term ally, and then through their support for Hadi.⁵ In this context, it is worth remembering that Hadi's policies in his short-lived interim administration entailed further neoliberalization of the Yemeni economy and privatization of its natural resources. Thus, there was no change in the overall trajectory for Yemenis – the identity of the figureheads changed but they continued to line their own pockets. The popular uprising in 2011 offered a real possibility and hope for political and economic change for all in Yemen but the military intervention has left the country fractured among various groups that are armed and funded externally. It is best to see the talk of draw-downs and an end to direct intervention as a redeployment that will ensure indirect control of the country and a limit on Iran's influence. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE are now attempting to limit the damage to their reputations due to the war, they are at the same time vying to control strategic locations and embed their allies further in Yemen's political structures. Their attempts at a 'quick victory' have certainly failed, but they aim to reap what benefits they can from new power-sharing arrangements.

⁵ Blumi, I. (2018) *Destroying Yemen: What chaos in Arabia tells us about the world*. University of California Press.



Proxies in Libya

Much like the uprisings in the rest of the region, protestors in Libya took to the streets in opposition to extreme state repression and a stagnating economy. Emboldened by events in Tunisia and Egypt, protests were organized against the arrest of Benghazi-based Fathi Terbil, the lawyer pursuing the case of those killed in the regime's infamous Abu Salim prison. As protests escalated, the regime responded violently, with the security forces firing directly at crowds, alongside a campaign of mass arrests. However, many cities in the eastern part of the country could no longer be controlled by the military, as military forces fled or changed sides. Stockpiles of weapons were left unattended and many of the residents seized them, taking up arms to protect themselves after Gaddafi's declarations against what has been called the 17 February Revolution. The forces opposing Gaddafi locally formed the National Transitional Council (NTC) in February 2011.

With the militarization of the uprising by the regime and the fear that Gaddafi's military forces would enter the cities that had defied him, there were calls for NATO involvement. A United Nations Security Council resolution was passed establishing a no-fly zone over Libya and the use of 'all means necessary' to protect civilians. The NATO mission was couched in the language of defending civilians and the 'responsibility to protect' principle; however, those Western states calling for intervention had themselves developed relationships with the Gaddafi regime in the preceding decade. His regime had become central to the US rendition programme, and he had arrangements with the EU regarding preventing migration through Libya.⁶ As the EU turned against him, Gaddafi's main

⁶ Kamat, A. and Shokr, A. (2013) 'Libya', in P. Amar and V. Prashad (eds.) *Dispatches from the Arab Spring: Understanding the New Middle East*. University of Minnesota Press.

card was his cynical promotion of the idea that without him migrants would 'flood' Europe. Despite the rhetoric, the NATO intervention had little to do with the regime's human rights abuses: rather, upon seeing that the regime was weakened, the NATO powers perceived a chance for further geopolitical gains from an even more favourable regime than the somewhat unpredictable Gaddafi. Importantly, the intervention was pushed forwards by states like Qatar and the UAE, who participated alongside the NATO missions and manoeuvred to help secure the United Nations resolution for intervention. The Gaddafi regime was weakened by direct NATO intervention, especially by a bombing campaign against military installations and critical infrastructure, which led directly to its overthrow.

While the Libyan case is different in important ways from that of Yemen, there are consistencies in the destabilizing impact of regional actors. Emerging from the decades of Gaddafi's rule, there was no single coherent political entity to hold power and the initial spaces of the uprising where the grassroots movement had put forwards progressive demands were quickly overtaken by stronger, militarized factions. With many smaller militias vying for power domestically, regional powers inserted themselves into the process in an attempt to thwart the revolutionary demands and ensure there would be no change in the overall power distribution on the regional level. Governance was fractured between two opposing sides, each backed by different regional actors: one side backed a grouping of militias following the CIA-affiliated General Haftar, under the banner of the Libyan National Army (LNA); the other supported the United Nations-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), based in Tripoli. The GNA was supported by the United Nations, Turkey and Qatar, while Haftar's forces were supported by the UAE, Russia, France, and Egypt. Reports to the United Nations Security Council in September 2020 explained that eight countries had violated the arms embargo that had been imposed on Libya, and a United Nations Security Council report of 8 March 2021 deemed the 2011 arms embargo 'totally ineffective'. The report documented the transfer of transport aircraft, drones, surface-to-air missiles and armoured vehicles by Russia, the UAE, Egypt and Turkey.

More recently, there have been moves towards reconciliation among the main Libyan factions, but the issue of foreign military groups and arms looms large. On 23 October 2020, the LNA and the GNA reached a ceasefire agreement which required that all foreign fighters leave Libya within three

months. An interim unity government was formed, with elections to be held in 2021. Meanwhile, the UAE tried its best to arm Haftar to ensure he would have a strong position in any negotiations and future arrangements. While the UAE's (and others') hopes for an all-out Haftar victory have not materialized, he continues to control large parts of Libya's territory.

It remains difficult to assess how power arrangements will proceed in Libya. Some internally displaced Libyans have started to go back to their homes, but the local economy has largely been destroyed. A significant strand of the talks among Libyan factions is about how the economy will be organized, and, importantly, how the sharing of oil revenue will be arranged. This is among the most contentious issues, and it also goes to the heart of why the uprisings occurred in the first place: protestors sought a more egalitarian sharing of resources and distribution among the population, rather than their benefiting small coterie around ruling elites. Unfortunately, a host of international and regional actors are guiding and influencing these new arrangements, rather than the majority of Libyans.



Aid as intervention

The Yemeni and Libyan cases were clear instances of military intervention, yet in conjunction with the military operations aid was central to the Saudi-UAE alliance, with both states emphasizing their humanitarian donations and promising aid packages to secure alliances. For example, while military attacks on Yemen escalated, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE continued to be the major providers of humanitarian assistance, managing aid to areas under their control while enforcing a blockade on Houthi-controlled territories. Direct military intervention went hand in hand with financial aid packages, infrastructure investments and humanitarian aid. In fact, a focus on conflict and destruction in much of the evaluations of the uprisings in Yemen and Libya has tended to obscure

the spaces of construction and investment, which were as important in shaping geopolitical outcomes as military actions.

Well before the uprisings, states of the Gulf Cooperation Council had major investments in critical sectors across the region, including agriculture, banking and construction.⁷ The UAE, for example, has actively aligned its foreign aid with investment policies that help UAE domestic capital groups to enter regional markets, especially in the real-estate, agriculture and infrastructure sectors. As far back as 2008, the government established the UAE Office for the Coordination of Foreign Aid (OCFA) as an umbrella for UAE-based charities and organizations, largely drawing upon expertise from United Nations agencies and populated by international staff. The majority of UAE overseas assistance is earmarked for development rather than humanitarian aid, the bulk of which is in bilateral assistance to governments, including in-kind donations of commodities such as gas and oil. According to the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 'UAE foreign assistance will seek opportunities to work with the private sector, in particular, UAE-based companies, and to encourage them to trade with and invest in developing nations'.

The case of UAE aid to Egypt offers one example of the use of aid to try to shape and manage political outcomes after the uprisings, and to stabilize investment spaces. The election of the Muslim Brotherhood stalled UAE aid to Egypt (with Qatar assuming the role of main donor): both Saudi Arabia and the UAE feared the Brotherhood's overtures to Iran and its prominent role in Turkey. The coup against the Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi brought former military general, and now president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to power. This was a clear reorientation of allegiance from Qatar to the Saudi-UAE alliance. Aid injections by the UAE and Saudi Arabia have since propped up the Sisi regime. In conjunction with this aid, the UAE has moved to open up the space for private sector investments in Egypt, creating an Egypt-UAE taskforce and commissioning a private consulting firm to develop a plan for attracting private investment to Egypt. In 2014, the taskforce asked none other than Tony Blair to assist with advising Sisi on economic reform. This led to a donors' conference in 2014, sponsored by the UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Part of the conference recommendations was to secure better investment conditions, including by making changes to Egypt's investment law. This demonstrates how

⁷ Hanieh, A. (2018) *Money, Markets, and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the political economy of the contemporary Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

official aid has worked in tandem with the investment interests of the private sector in these Gulf countries.



Securing trade routes

We tend to think of the uprisings in the context of states, revolutions and counter-revolutions, and changes in leadership. However, it is also useful to consider the importance of the region to global trade in oil and commodities on the Asia/Europe route, and to look at the ways in which actors are vying to secure trade routes from the Indian Ocean through the Red Sea to the Suez Canal. This is most strikingly clear in the case of Yemen, with its strategic location and potential for any group controlling the country to block one of the most militarized trade routes in the world.⁸ Over the past decade there has been a rush to build mega ports across the Arabian Peninsula, with multiple Gulf Cooperation Council states aiming to move trade into their territories directly, away from the regionally dominant Dubai-based Jebel Ali. In addition, along with maintaining a strong foothold in key Yemeni islands, the UAE has also been developing a growing network of commercial ports across the Horn of Africa, which are frequently attached to provisions for military and police training and/or military bases. From the long-term concession at the Sokhna Port at the southern entrance to the Suez Canal, to the investment in Berbera Port in the self-declared Republic of Somaliland, an important story emerges. In Somaliland, Dubai Ports World, a Dubai-based conglomerate and international port operator, signed a 30-year concession in May 2016 for the port of Berbera, which includes the construction of a logistics park and a free trade zone. In 2018, the UAE announced it was also building a military base adjacent to the Dubai Ports World facilities there. Moreover, the UAE military has a 30-year concession agreement for the Eritrean deep-water

⁸ Jones, T. (2012) 'America, oil, and war in the Middle East', *The Journal of American History* 99(1): 208–218.

port of Assab. Not only are such ports important for commercial trade, they are also central to war-making. The Assab port was crucial to UAE's role in Yemen, being used as a springboard for its operations there. Troops were deployed from Assab to Aden, including Sudanese and Eritrean men contracted by the UAE military.

The control of this vital trade route connecting Europe and Asia has lasting implications. Regional powers are vying to block off future competition, while at the same time facilitating integration with China's proposed One Belt One Road network. By looking at these trade routes we can get a sense of how broader regional economic and military power is being constructed. The dominant mainstream developmental vision is not simply about single states: it involves linking infrastructure developments, aid and militarism in order to control the area from the Gulf and the Horn of Africa to the Suez Canal, so as to enable actors like the UAE, for example, to significantly control and impact the circulation of goods in coastal areas, including Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia and Somaliland.



The arms trade and local weapons industries

In addition to making major arms purchases and circumventing arms embargoes, since the mid-1990s the UAE has been developing a national arms industry, in cooperation with foreign companies. UAE manufactured arms are exported to allies thus contributing to the militarization of the region. Over the past decade, the UAE has made significant progress in its local production efforts, focusing on the production of armoured vehicles, ships and drones. In 2019, the UAE consolidated its defence industries under the banner EDGE, a holding company which absorbed its predecessors Emirates Defence Industries (EDIC), Emirates Advanced Investments Group (EAIG), Tawazun Holding and a host of smaller companies. Its five major areas of operation are platforms and systems, missiles and

weapons, cyber defence, electronic warfare and intelligence, and mission support. In 2020, EDGE was ranked among the top 25 arms manufacturers internationally. According to Pieter Wezeman, Senior Researcher with the SIPRI Arms and Military Expenditure Programme: 'EDGE is a good illustration of how the combination of high national demand for military products and services with a desire to become less dependent on foreign suppliers is driving the growth of arms companies in the Middle East.' This localized arms industry has, and will continue to have, an impact on the trajectory of ongoing conflicts in the region.

This development must also be seen in the light of the normalization deals with, and overtures made towards, Israel, which represent an important regional shift that is taking place due to the intensification of the circulation of weapons and surveillance technologies. The UAE's deal to normalize relations with Israel, dubbed the Abraham Accords, was certainly not the start of relations between the two states, but it will intensify them and make them more overt. Prior to the deal, in 2018, media reported on a lawsuit filed in Israel and Cyprus against Israeli spyware company NSO, for selling the Pegasus program to the UAE. At that time the UAE used the program to record smartphone conversations of UAE dissidents, and also of Qatari and Saudi royals. The UAE had already made purchases from private Israeli firms (based outside Israel) for surveillance equipment: for example, the Falcon Eye system, which integrates facial recognition technology and biometric software scans of individual faces for analysis and identification. The system receives a live feed from visual surveillance equipment controlling the road network. The company behind Falcon Eye is Switzerland-based Asia Global Technology (AGT), owned by former Israeli intelligence agent Mati Kochavi. Thus, even though, technically, connections between the UAE and Israel were banned at this time (before the formal normalization agreement), deals were nevertheless made under the radar. With the new agreement, they are due to increase. This normalization makes the repressive apparatus of the Israeli state more accessible. (It is important to note that the technology that the UAE is buying from Israel is first tested on Palestinians before being marketed to the UAE – which in turn expands its use in the rest of the region.)

While not as advanced as the UAE in terms of developing its local arms manufacturing, Saudi Arabia is clearly looking to reduce its dependence on international arms. In 2021 it was announced that Saudi Arabia will invest \$20 billion in its local arms industry in the coming years, with the

target of 50 per cent of arms purchases coming from local sources by 2030. Moving in this direction, Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI) signed an agreement in February 2021 setting up a joint venture with US firm Lockheed Martin to enhance Saudi Arabia's defence manufacturing capabilities. SAMI is owned by the Saudi state's Public Investment Fund and will own 51 per cent of the venture. So, despite the Biden administration's freezing of some arms sales to Saudi Arabia due to the war in Yemen, overall military build-up and corporate collaborations are ongoing.

This trend of military build-up fits neatly with the use of proxies by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Such locally manufactured arms fuel further conflict as these arms are gifted to proxies and/or allies across the region and beyond. Embargoes imposed in situations like Libya, and international treaties around the circulation of arms, can also be circumvented through the local control of production. Needless to say, the billions spent on weapons purchases and on the production of this local arms industry could be put to better use in a region that is marked by widespread poverty.



Future trajectories and reconstruction agendas

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have pursued an aggressive foreign policy to further their interests in North Africa, West Asia and the Horn of Africa, while at the same time repressively restricting internal dissent. In the coming years they aim to influence the reconstruction agendas in Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq, after the massive destructive toll of the wars in those countries. Although not always in complete alignment, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are gearing up to intervene to shape these reconstruction agendas and to gain both political and economic influence in these states. This will involve targeted aid packages, infrastructure projects and encouraging privatization and the involvement of UAE- and Saudi-based conglomerates in these countries' economies.

In the 1960 and 70s, the left in the region contended that one of the pillars of continued US dominance were the reactionary regimes in the Arabian Peninsula. The role these regimes have played in suppressing left movements and crushing uprisings is not new. However, the importance of their capital has grown as the region's political economy has shifted towards open markets. Their military power has likewise increased, with arms purchases and with the integration of generals from Western armies in high-ranking positions advising on military operations. At the same time, the use of proxies funded and armed to do the bidding of these states is becoming a dominant feature of their interventions, whether in Yemen or Libya. Nevertheless, their dominance is not a foregone conclusion. It remains difficult for the Saudi-UAE alliance, which has its own internal differences, to control territories, even through proxies. Indeed, just as the picture was beginning to look bleak for the various uprisings and when it seemed like coercion had succeeded, another spark of hope has emerged, in a new wave of protests. Because the status quo has not changed, and because the initial grievances of the protestors remain unaddressed, it will be difficult for any alliance, regional or international, to keep control of the region, though in trying they will continue to cause untold destruction and suffering.



A teal-toned sketch of a city street. The drawing is done with black ink lines on a light teal background. It shows several buildings with windows, some of which are dark. Power lines and wires crisscross the scene. In the foreground, there's a person or a structure that looks like a person's head and shoulders, rendered with simple lines. The overall style is expressive and somewhat abstract, capturing a sense of urban life and perhaps a sense of struggle or hardship.

The Syrian revolt and the politics of bread

Yasser Munif



In August 2012, Syrian fighter jets attacked more than 10 bakeries in Aleppo and the surrounding areas, killing 60 people in one strike and 21 in another. These horrific attacks, which targeted civilians queuing for bread, took place a few weeks after the liberation of eastern Aleppo by rebel forces. In the period prior to the attacks, fighting between the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and government forces for control of Aleppo had provoked an acute shortage of flour, which had led to the closing of most bakeries. The long breadlines in front of the bakeries that were still open meant they were easy targets for the regime of Bashar al-Assad.¹

The weaponization of bread has been an important military strategy of the Assad regime during the revolt in Syria (2011–present). This chapter examines bread as a central commodity in times of war and peace, as well as an effective political tool in the hands of the regime. It begins with an overview of the agrarian reform which was implemented by successive regimes from 1963 to 2000, and which was – and continues to be – one of the main pillars of the Ba‘th Party’s² politics of bread.³ The second section of the chapter explores the regime’s instrumentalization of bread to achieve political stability, which it sought to do by building an extensive bureaucratic network in the countryside revolving around the production of bread. The third section examines the Assad regime’s weaponization of bread during the revolt from 2011 to the present day, and the rebels’ grassroots resistance to this weaponization, using Manbij in northern Syria as a case study.

¹This chapter is based on Chapter 4 of Munif, Y. (2020) *The Syrian Revolution: Between the politics of life and the geopolitics of death*. London: Pluto Press

²A pan-Arab party founded by Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar in 1943. It advocated for unity among Arab countries. It became the ruling party in Iraq and is still in power in Syria.

³Hinnebusch, R. (2011) ‘The Ba‘th’s Agrarian Revolution (1963–2000)’, in R. Hinnebusch, A. El Hindi, M. Khaddam and M. Ababsa (eds.) *Agriculture and Reform in Syria*. University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies. pp. 3–14.



Land reform as a tool of control

The main goal of the Ba‘th Party in the 1960s was to weaken the powerful feudal class and to help Syria’s peasants to take up ownership of land. To this end, the party used a policy of land reform to create a loyal base in the countryside. Through the reform, the party sought to create complex economic, political and bureaucratic networks that would exercise control over the Syrian peasantry. In doing so it was continuing a policy that had begun during the political union between Syria and Egypt, the United Arab Republic (1958–61), under Gamal Abdel Nasser. During the short-lived Republic, Nasser had built an alliance with the Syrian capitalist classes, which he deemed essential for the success of his developmentalist project. Determined to destroy the feudal class, he began implementing a comprehensive agrarian reform. His goal was to end industrialists’ dependence on the powerful landed oligarchy, which in turn would help him build the industrial sector in Syria. Nasser put in place new laws to regulate every aspect of peasants’ lives. These laws set a minimum wage and prescribed better working conditions. In addition, Nasser required that all peasants join a labour union by 1960. However, members of unions were prohibited from engaging in any activities that could be interpreted as political, and they were denied the right to strike or to demonstrate. By regulating peasants’ lives, the Nasser regime sought to restrict their political power, and by weakening large landowners, appropriating their land, and distributing it to poor peasants, Nasser began a gradual integration of rural regions in Syria into the capitalist circuit. This developmentalist project required that peasants support the ruling coalition, with agrarian reform being a tool to achieve this end.

When the Ba‘th Party seized power in 1963, it quickly moved to implement an agrarian reform more profound than that begun by Nasser. It distributed small lots of land and created state farms that were worked by thousands

of landless peasants and small land-holders. The ideologues of the Ba‘th Party viewed agrarian reform primarily as a political tool, not an economic goal: the primary purpose of the reform was not to generate the capital necessary for industrialization but rather to build rural communities that would be loyal to the new Ba‘th regime.

The neo-Ba‘th, which ruled Syria from 1966 to 1970, represented the more radical faction within the party. It fixed grains prices and began buying peasants’ production. These policies weakened the power of merchants in Aleppo and Damascus, many of whom had previously adopted the practice of stocking grain so as to create shortages, and thus inflate prices. The Ba‘th further increased its control of rural regions by expanding the network of the Agricultural Cooperative Bank. It created new branches of the Bank in many regions, including the most remote parts of the country. The Bank was vital for peasants who needed credit to buy grain, fertilizers, and fuel to operate machinery, etc. In order to avoid the formation of independent social movements, the regime also created the General Peasants Union (GPU) in 1964.⁴ The union was led by Ba‘th loyalists, and was run as a top-down organization, with no input from members. The GPU was an effective tool for expanding the state’s reach, limiting the peasants’ autonomy, and keeping a close watch on their political activity. The peasants were thus freed from the hegemony of the feudal class only to be captured by the emergent bureaucracy of the despotic Ba‘thist state, through which it aimed to closely control agriculture. By 1965, the state was in control of most strategic industrial sectors, and the economic power of the wealthy classes was thereby undermined.

When Hafez al-Assad seized power in 1970, he jailed the neo-Ba‘th leaders and gradually liberalized the economy, reaching a compromise with the private sector at the expense of the peasants and the working classes. Nevertheless, Assad followed in Nasser’s footsteps by reinforcing state control over the country’s rural areas. While the state owned only a small part of the land, it controlled agricultural activity through the credit system, the distribution of seeds, and the purchase of grain production. The main purpose of these actions was the formation of loyal networks in the countryside, where, despite earlier reforms, the landed oligarchy still had influence. Through these actions the Assad regime built a clientelist system in which only loyalty to Hafez al-Assad (and later his son, Bashar)

⁴ Batatu, H. (1999) *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 37.

was rewarded. Bureaucrats used their institutional power to profit from this corrupt system, enriching themselves by leasing state-owned land outside of institutional channels, and seizing tribal land. These practices reproduced certain aspects of the feudal system that the agrarian reform was supposed to destroy.

These actions were not without response. Antagonism between, on the one hand, the old feudal oligarchs, Sunni merchants and poor urban classes, and, on the other hand, the beneficiaries of land reform, and Alawite parvenus, gradually increased, with urban violence erupting in Hama and Aleppo in the mid-1970s. The Muslim Brotherhood began a campaign of assassination targeting Alawite officers and supporters of the regime, culminating in the slaughter of several dozen cadets at the Aleppo Artillery School in 1979. Then, in the early 1980s, the security and military apparatuses committed horrific massacres in Hama and Aleppo, killing approximately 20,000 people, crushing the opposition to the regime, which was in part composed of a debased urban bourgeoisie.

By the mid-1980s, Hafez al-Assad had neutralized his most threatening political enemies and he believed the moment was opportune for an economic détente with the Syrian bourgeoisie. He sought to apply a new policy of privatization, which he deemed necessary because the government did not have the financial means to fund additional state farms, or even to maintain those already in existence. It allowed the private sector to take over many state farms. Then, in 2000, the regime ended the collectivist ownership of land and returned many lots to their former owners. Thus, in less than 20 years, the regime reversed the land reform of the 1960s, replacing it with a cruel arrangement that mostly benefited the middle and upper classes.



Building bureaucratic power and establishing infrastructure

The Ba'ath regime's main goal of the land reform was to maintain food security, which was essential to ensure its stability. In the 1970s the Hafez al-Assad regime was worried that the West would use the food weapon against it, by imposing a grain embargo. Through the land reform, which was a central plank in its developmentalist programme that aimed to avoid economic dependence on the West, the regime sought to ensure that Syria could produce enough wheat for domestic consumption.⁵ This economic programme initially helped the regime to maintain basic commodities at a low cost and prevented food rebellions, which had been frequent occurrences across the Middle East region, and Syria gradually became self-sufficient in wheat production, reducing its reliance on imports.

As part of this process, the Hafez al-Assad regime enacted changes at different parts of the chain of production, in order to reduce the cost of bread for consumers. The state utilized multiple strategies to encourage farmers to grow wheat, including expanding irrigation, subsidizing seeds and fertilizers, buying peasants' production at a fixed premium cost, and encouraging farmers growing cotton to turn their attention to wheat production.

In regard to irrigation, the Syrian state embarked on an ambitious hydrological programme, involving the construction of dams across the country: in 1963, when the Ba'ath Party seized power, there were no dams in Syria, but by 2001 their number had reached 160. These dams mostly provided irrigation for agriculture, with some also supplying water to households and others being used to generate electricity. The construction

⁵ The focus on wheat production was a strategic choice, since bread provides 40 per cent of the caloric intake of the average Syrian family.

of dams and other hydraulic structures was part of the process of building the postcolonial Syrian nation. But these top-down and expensive projects often led to the displacement of populations and the destruction of social textures. They increased state reach, destroyed local networks of mutual aid and replaced them with a system of Ba‘th Party patronage.

The digging of wells also formed part of the regime’s irrigation drive. During the second phase of liberalization in the mid-1980s,⁶ all restrictions on well construction were removed, with the result that their number doubled in a few years. In 2000, when Bashar al-Assad launched the third phase of liberalization, the same phenomenon occurred again. While these wells had devastating ecological effects,⁷ the quantity of water they supplied was nevertheless insufficient to counter the effect of droughts. The most damaging drought in recent history, which lasted from 2006 to 2009, had drastic impacts, leading to the loss of 800,000 jobs, which in turn triggered a massive internal displacement of small land-holders, agricultural workers, and sharecroppers, many of whom moved into informal housing and slums in the suburbs of Damascus, Aleppo, and other cities, where they joined a disposable industrial reserve army in large urban areas.

This massive displacement of the population due to drought was combined with the economic liberalization that Hafez al-Assad had initiated in the late-1980s (and which his son Bashar accelerated in the early 2000s), which increased the price of basic commodities. This intensifying capitalist logic from the late-1980s uprooted an increasing number of peasants from the land and turned them into cheap and exploitable labourers in the urban areas. As a result of these effects, the same peasants who had once formed a loyal support base for the Ba‘th Party in the 1970s and 1980s gradually became victims of economic liberalization, alongside the severe droughts of the 1990s and 2000s. Thus, the land reform, whereby peasants had gained greater power vis-à-vis landowners, was reversed, and the peasants became a class to quell rather than one to win over.⁸

6 The first phase of economic liberalization during Hafez al-Assad’s rule took place in 1971–72.

7 Aw-Hassana, A., Ridab, F. Telleria, R., and Bruggeman, A. (2014) ‘The impact of food and agricultural policies on groundwater use in Syria’, *Journal of Hydrology* 513: 204–15.

8 Ababsa, M. ‘Agrarian counter-reform in Syria (2000–2010)’, in R. Hinnebusch, A. El Hindi, M. Khaddam, M. and M. Ababsa (eds.) *Agriculture and Reform in Syria*. University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies. pp. 83–107.

Thus, while by the mid-1990s the regime had achieved its goal of producing enough wheat for domestic consumption, the economic and environmental costs were high.



The weaponization of bread and grassroots resistance

The Assad regime's politics of bread was radically transformed when the 2011 revolt erupted. In the regime-controlled areas, it maintained, as far as possible, its bureaucratic and infrastructure networks. However, one of the main challenges the regime faced was the loss of the northern regions of the country, where 70–80 per cent of Syria's wheat is produced. By 2014, the land available for agriculture had dropped from 1.7 to 1.2 million hectares due to the ongoing war. That same year, Syria's wheat production recorded its worst performance in recent years, dropping below the 3 million tons threshold, something which had happened only twice since 1995, when self-sufficiency was achieved. In 2012, Syria was forced to import on average 100,000 tons of wheat every month.⁹ The combined impact of these developments led to a steep increase in bread prices in regime-controlled areas.

In 2015, the Assad regime announced that it would focus its efforts on 'useful Syria' – the territory the regime deems vital for its survival, which includes Aleppo and Damascus, as well as the coastal areas located between the two cities. Northern Syria is outside the perimeter of 'useful Syria' and so the regime was willing to turn agricultural territories there into 'legitimate' targets. As part of this strategy, the Assad regime regularly burned wheat production in areas controlled by the opposition, and it weaponized bread against the population. The regime targeted the Rashediah food warehouse in north-eastern Syria, and began bombing lines of people queuing for bread in front of bakeries. At the same time, the Syrian army laid siege to neighbourhoods and cities controlled by

⁹ Razak, A.A. (2013) 'Syria's wheat crop is the worst in 40 years', *Al-Araby*, 24 June 2013.

the opposition, depriving them of the ability to provision themselves. Starvation was thus used as a tactic of war. Wheat, which had been used to pacify the population in the decades before the revolt, has become a formidable weapon of mass destruction since 2011 in the areas liberated by the opposition. Importantly, during the revolt, the regime has also sought to transfer large amounts of wheat from opposition-held areas to those controlled by the regime, by offering peasant wheat-producers an attractive price for their production, using a line of credit provided by the Iranian government.

In the following section, a case study is examined to illustrate the regime's war-time strategy of weaponizing bread in the liberated regions, and the revolutionary and grassroots resistance to it.

It does so by describing a few important moments along the bread cycle (which starts with production, moves to distribution, and ends with the consumption of bread) in Manbij, a city of 200,000 inhabitants in northern Syria.

For almost a year, from 2011, neighbourhood groups organized protests and creative peaceful actions in Manbij. This culminated in the flight of security and police forces from the city in July 2012, when Manbij was peacefully liberated. After liberation, these neighbourhood groups formed a revolutionary council and began working relentlessly to make their city liveable, despite the ongoing violence they faced from weekly airstrikes by the Syrian air force. During this time, the city's inhabitants reinvented all of Manbij's institutions, building new ones from the bottom up, and they came up with creative ideas to solve their many problems. The revolutionary council and activist groups in the city also began a process of de-Ba'athification, deploying a combination of traditional knowledge and decolonial practices. The experimental legal system that the city assembled in 2012–13 is one such example. It was based on the Unified Arab Law, tribal customs, vernacular knowledge, and articles debated at the revolutionary trustee council's monthly meetings.

During the 18 months during which this revolutionary episode lasted (in January 2014 the revolutionary forces were expelled from the city, when it was occupied by Islamic State (Isis)) the geography of bread in Manbij was reconfigured. It is this reconfiguration which is discussed in the following paragraphs.

The politics of bread in Manbij was not necessarily representative of other locations yet it provides an important lens for understanding the revolutionary process from below during the Syrian revolt. Producing and distributing bread outside of the regime's networks was an extremely challenging task but it was a vital one: people thereby threatened the image of the regime, which, as has been discussed above, had built its legitimacy around the production of cheap bread. The new geography of bread in Manbij and other liberated areas constituted an existential threat to the regime, which explains why the regime went on to unleash so much violence targeting wheat production, storage and consumption in the liberated areas.

Manbij is home to one of the largest flour mills in northern Syria, able to process up to 450 tons of wheat a day – enough to feed 1 million people.¹⁰ This quantity exceeds the needs of Manbij and the surrounding region. After the liberation of the city in July 2012, a base loyal to the regime continued to exist in the city, and the regime continued to provide wheat to Manbij through its extensive bureaucracy (during this initial period, it still hoped to reconquer the city quickly). While Manbij was home to dozens of brigades fighting the regime, it did not have the resources to entirely remove the entrenched state bureaucracy from the city. The revolutionary council was initially unable to obtain wheat independently at a low cost, or to pay the salaries of the flour mill workers and other public employees; as a result, it was forced to accept the regime's help and its indirect presence in the city, with its dangerous consequences. However, the revolutionary council in the city knew that it could not continue to rely on the regime's network and would eventually have to create alternative solutions. Thus, it began negotiating with nearby cities, such as Afrin and Raqqa, to build a new geography of solidarity revolving around bread. The aim was to distribute wheat equitably among the cities participating in the alliance, and to help areas experiencing shortages.

The new circuit of wheat did not always work smoothly because revolutionary councils in the liberated region, which included Manbij, had to maintain a subtle balance between specific local demands and an elusive regional strategy. For example, Raqqa's local council refused to lend Manbij its expensive equipment to fix a power cut, despite the good relationship between the two cities. The former feared that a corrupt FSA group would steal the equipment at a checkpoint located between the two

¹⁰ Reported by an anonymous informant interviewed by the author in Manbij on 11 July 2013.

cities. Manbij's revolutionary council responded by threatening to cut off the water supply to, and to stop providing bread to, Raqqa's western countryside. This put pressure on the neighbouring city, which finally lent its equipment to Manbij.¹¹

As this episode shows, the scarcity of resources and the presence of multiple military groups with divergent agendas made cooperation between various revolutionary councils a challenge. Replacing the government's bureaucratic networks with democratic ones was challenging. Revolutionary politics in these liberated cities did not scale up to the regional level easily. Many cities in the region acted like city-states during this period: despite their political affinities and shared ideologies they were reluctant to share their vital resources (including wheat). Thus they hoarded grain surpluses, instead of sharing them with other cities that needed them. In doing so they were motivated by fear of food shortages and siege by the regime. Manbij, like other liberated cities, realized that undoing decades of Assadist bureaucracy and creating new ones would be a laborious process.

One key challenge the revolutionary forces in Manbij faced in relation to the city's flour mill was the issue of manpower. The director of the city's flour mill, alongside approximately 100 employees, remained on the regime's payroll after liberation in July 2012, as part of the regime's strategy of maintaining control of vital institutions in the city. In 2013, the director and his employees threatened to leave, due to repeated disputes with various powerful actors in the city. As a result, the revolutionary council created a team of volunteers to shadow the mill's technicians and engineers, in order to gain the necessary skills to operate the mill independently. In this way, the revolutionary council sought to strengthen the city's autonomy.

Another – more violent – challenge Manbij faced during this period was the deliberate targeting of queues outside bakeries, as discussed at the outset of this article. In August 2012 the Assad regime began a campaign of airstrikes targeting bakeries in liberated cities. Manbij's bakeries were easy targets since they were few in number and their locations were well-known. In response to these murderous attacks, after deliberations with various actors in the city the revolutionary council decided to distribute bread in different neighbourhoods, to avoid gatherings in front of bakeries. It hired a large number of young men who were looking for a job and

¹¹ Reported by an anonymous informant interviewed by the author in Manbij on 11 July 2013.

assigned them to different neighbourhoods to distribute bread there. To prevent the selling of bread on the black market at exorbitant prices, the council conducted a bread census, which gathered extensive data about the number of families in every neighbourhood, and their needs. They then rationed bread accordingly. This approach allowed the council to decentralize the distribution of bread and hence to end the long waiting times in front of bakeries. However, one of the setbacks of the census approach was that new refugees were not accounted for in the census and thus could not buy subsidized bread; as a result, they were forced to buy bread on the black market at twice or three times the subsidized price. This experience demonstrates the difficulty that was encountered in erecting new networks in the liberated regions.

As the preceding discussion has shown, mills and bakeries were vital institutions under Assad's rule and continued to be vital in the liberated areas after 2011, as bread is a crucial staple for Syrians, many of whom rely on it for their survival. With the liberation of Manbij, the revolutionary council made the provision and distribution of bread a main priority. Indeed, bread and freedom are inseparable: the liberation of a city is meaningless in the eyes of many inhabitants if the living conditions worsen as a result. The revolutionary council was fully aware that its success or failure depended on whether it could provide bread at the same price as was charged in regions controlled by the regime. Likewise, the regime understood that the revolution would fail if it was unable to provide cheap bread to the populations living in the liberated areas. In this context, the revolutionary council created a special committee to examine the various scenarios and to propose strategies for making bread available at a low cost. As indicated above, through the bread census it was largely able to solve the problem of bread sold on the black market, but it faced other more intractable problems relating to the bread supply. One problem was the presence of large numbers of military brigades (including those formed by powerful families and clans), all of which consumed bread from the city's supply but not all of whom actually fought the regime. Understandably, the population in Manbij was critical of groups who took bread without fighting, terming them 'bread brigades'. Nevertheless, the revolutionary forces who were actually fighting the regime did not have the time or resources to open a new front inside the city to expel these counter-revolutionary 'bread brigades'.

Another problem faced by the revolutionary council in Manbij was the need to prevent any of the powerful military groups active in the city from controlling the mill and thus monopolizing the distribution of bread. The mill was difficult to guard since it was located on the outskirts of the city, making them vulnerable to attacks. For example, Ahrar al-Sham, a powerful jihadist group, seized control of the mill in 2013 under the pretext that the management was corrupt and lacked financial transparency. The leader of Ahrar al-Sham hoped to gain the population's loyalty by providing bread at a low cost. However, his plan backfired as the entire city opposed military involvement in civilian affairs and did not approve of the takeover of the mill. The revolutionary council and several powerful groups in the city put their differences aside and organized protests until Ahrar al-Sham was forced to leave the mill.



Conclusion

The Syrian regime achieved two goals by implementing land reform in the 1960s: it undermined the power of the landed oligarchy and it built a loyal peasant base in rural areas. It also achieved some degree of food security, which was crucial for the regime's consolidation of power. These endeavours required an extensive bureaucracy and infrastructure, made up of financial institutions, unions, grain depots, dams, irrigation systems, mills, bakeries, collective and private farms, etc. These nodes of the bureaucratic and infrastructure system were used to increase control over the population in rural areas.

During the 2011 revolt against the Assad regime, the regime reconfigured its politics of bread by adapting it to a war environment. In the regions under its control it tried to preserve bread networks as much as possible. In the liberated areas, however, as shown in the case of Manbij, the regime weaponized bread, including by turning its formidable killing machine

against hungry Syrians queuing outside bakeries and by burning wheat fields.

This chapter has also examined the myriad forms of resistance in Manbij as revolutionaries tried to create new geographies of bread. It has shown how the city was the target of frequent attacks by the regime even as the government continued to pay workers in the city's flour mill providing wheat to the mill. As discussed above, this paradox can be explained by the fact that the regime was determined to maintain the centralized bureaucracy it had built up in the past five decades. It also aimed to crush any processes that might offer potential alternatives to the regime, or that would pave the way to a post-Assad Syria. Thus, by creating alternative geographies of bread, the revolutionaries in Manbij were in fact voiding – even for a brief period – the Assadist social contract whereby land reform and cheap bread were provided in return for the population's abstention from political participation. After 2011, revolutionaries in Manbij and elsewhere demonstrated the profound meaning of autonomy, and the big challenges involved in achieving it.

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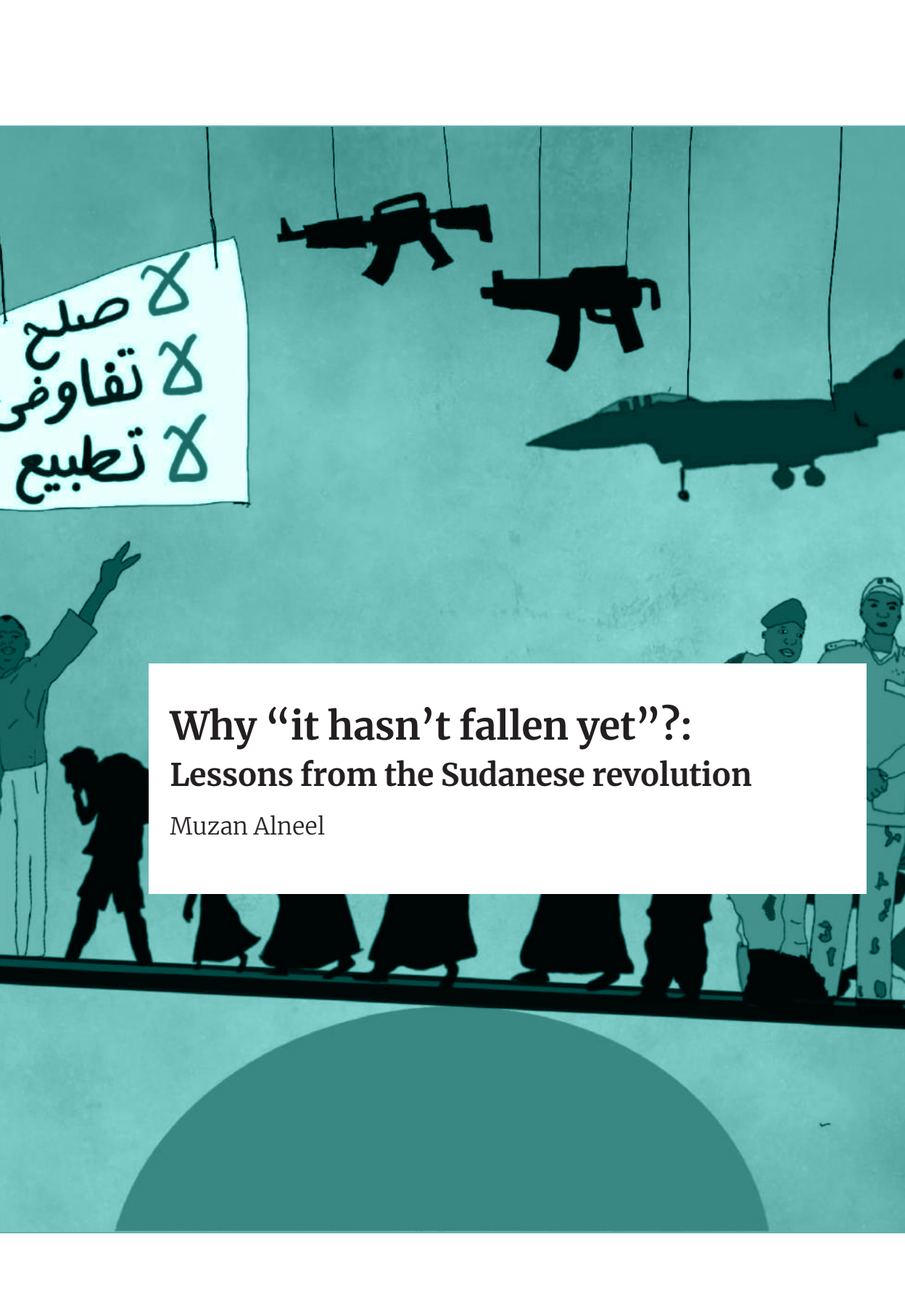
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حيه سلام عدالة

لا و لم و لن
نرضى الذل
و لا يرتزق



ثورة احبار

An illustration in shades of teal and black. At the top, three weapons (two assault rifles and one fighter jet) are suspended by thin lines. Below them, a white banner with Arabic text is held up. In the foreground, silhouettes of people are shown: one on the left with a raised hand, and a group of people in the center and right, some wearing head coverings. The background is a light teal color with a large dark teal semi-circle at the bottom.

لا صلح
لا تفاوض
لا تطبيع

Why “it hasn’t fallen yet”?: Lessons from the Sudanese revolution

Muzan Alneel



In early December 2018, protests broke out throughout Sudan against the dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir. One week into the sit-in that demanded his departure in April 2019, Omar al-Bashir was deposed – after almost 30 years of rule. However, Sudanese revolutionaries did not stop their sit-ins: they continued to rally before the General Command (headquarters of the Sudanese Armed Forces), affirming their commitment to keep protesting until all their demands were met and their desired changes were realized. On 3 June 2019, the 29th night of Ramadan, the Sudanese security forces brutally and simultaneously dispersed all the sit-ins, committing a massacre. A ‘power-sharing’ agreement was subsequently signed between the Military Council (comprising al-Bashir’s former security council, which has led the country since al-Bashir’s fall) and the opposition coalition (the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change – FFC). Under the agreement, the civilian-military government is to rule Sudan for a transitional period of three years.

Throughout the two years since the announcement of the transitional government, Sudan has experienced various political and economic changes, including signing peace agreements with different armed movements in the country, Sudan’s removal from the US list of State Sponsors of Terrorism, and the ratification of some laws and the amendment of others. At the same time, protests have never stopped: they have occurred at least twice a month during this period.

One chant which has been heard during the ongoing protests in Sudan, and which has become a prevalent part of daily life, is the call ‘It hasn’t fallen yet’: a phrase that follows the call of the December 2018 uprising ‘Just fall’ – referring to the dictatorial regime.

The phrase ‘It hasn’t fallen yet’ is a clear expression of the protesters’ rejection of the current situation in the country, and of their will to continue protesting. Other chants include ‘Whether it’s fallen or not, we’re staying here’ and ‘It hasn’t fallen yet, the rule is military still’.

To understand the meaning of these chants, one must first understand why the Sudanese believe that the regime has not yet been overthrown. One must 1) comprehend why the Sudanese rose up in the first place, and what it was they wanted to overthrow when they chanted ‘Just fall’; 2) understand the current reality of the Sudanese government and its evolution vis à vis the uprising’s objectives, as derived from the first point; and (if we are seeking both economic and social justice for Sudan);

3) think about ways the Sudanese uprising can (and should) continue to achieve its goals in the face of the counterrevolution now taking place.

This chapter seeks to address these three main points, in order to enrich the international revolutionary conversation on the lessons that can be drawn from the Sudanese revolution. Learning these lessons can help us to achieve the revolution's goals, and can also enrich worldwide struggles for a more just world.



Why have the Sudanese risen up?

In early December 2018, angry protests broke out in different Sudanese cities. The bleak economic situation, with people forced to queue for bread and fuel, had ignited a general mood of anger. Atbara city was the site of the most important protest, organized by students at Atbara Industrial School protesting the fact that *ta'amiya* sandwiches (the most common breakfast consumed by impoverished Sudanese) had become unaffordable as a result of increased bread prices. The students marched all the way to the headquarters of the ruling party, the National Congress Party (NCP),¹ and burned the building to the ground. Pictures of the NCP headquarters on fire soon circulated among the Sudanese. The building looked identical to other NCP headquarters throughout the country, along with their lavish spending, coloured green and provocatively located amidst impoverished and underdeveloped surroundings. The picture ignited hope and the possibility of overthrowing the government suddenly appeared more realistic, despite the arsenal of the security services and their crackdown on protesters.

¹ The ruling regime established the NCP in 1998. Its members came from the National Islamic Front (NIF), which led the government that ruled Sudan from 30 June 1989 until President al-Bashir was deposed on 11 April 2019.

Demonstrations spread to other cities and Sudan then entered a self-perpetuating cycle of protest: the state engaged in killings, violence, arrests, social media blackouts, and different forms of restriction and curfew, which incited further protests. At the same time, economic violence continued, in the form of sustained inflation, lack of services, and the removal of state subsidies, which was reflected in one protest chant: ‘Government of starvation, Government of impoverishment, just fall’.

Although the protesters’ anger emerged in 2018, the economic problems that catalysed it went back much further, resulting from economic policies with a long history. Some of these policies had been implemented by the National Salvation regime of Omar al-Bashir, while some had been put in place under former regimes. Ever since the coup on 30 June 1989, the Salvation government had adopted policies of liberalization and privatization, including the withdrawal of public services. Since the ruling party’s Islamic background led it to adopt an oppositional stance towards the ‘major powers’ (principally the United States and the European Union), it implemented neoliberal economic policies without being able to benefit from the aid that the global financial institutions could have offered. Liberalization empowered the National Islamic Front –the ancestor of the Bashir’s NCP–, whose cadres provided, and thus profited from, those public services that the state had abandoned, like education and healthcare. Accordingly, the regime was able to redirect revenues from the state treasury into the pockets of its party cadres.

The history of the Salvation government was marked by a series of failed economic policies and short-sighted decisions, including selling government assets, abandoning service provision, and opening the door to privatized healthcare and education. These policies provoked mass protests throughout the 1990s. Towards the end of that decade, driven by the 1998 US embargo on the country, the regime turned to Chinese companies to act as partners in oil drilling operations in the country. At the same time, the regime strove to re-join the global financial system. It entered into negotiations with succeeding US administrations to lift the economic embargo. As part of this process, Sudan accepted to enter into

negotiations with the Sudan's People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) to end the civil war in South Sudan, the longest in the history of the continent.²

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended the war initiated a period during which public funds and development grants were channelled into construction, contracting companies, oilfield services, and related projects, both Sudanese and foreign. Oil drilling increased in the South, with pipes pumping the resource to Port Sudan, on the Red Sea. An economic boom occurred, manifested in the stability of the currency and a proliferation of building and construction projects, including roads and infrastructure projects (always marred by corruption scandals and the disappearance of public funds). However, the boom was not accompanied by any development in basic service provision, public facilities, or developmental projects, and there were no serious attempts to establish developmental or service projects in the South, or to provide a national plan for economic and social justice.

This treatment of the Sudanese regions – whereby the government depleted their resources but refrained from engaging in development activities and service provision – was nothing new. Before independence in 1956, education and health services had always been centralized in Khartoum (the capital of the centralized administration) and its surroundings. Sudan's road network reflected this centre of gravity: converging on the political capital, with virtually no intercity roads not passing through Khartoum. Electricity networks and other services were no different. Following independence, governments did not change the colonial approach that prioritized securing Egypt's southern border, the sources of the Nile, and cheap agricultural exports from Sudan, while cutting public services to a minimum, limiting them to wealth-administering, rather than wealth-producing, regions.

It is not surprising, then, that the Southern population, or any other Sudanese population for that matter, would choose independence from Khartoum's colonial authority. In January 2011, as the five-year transition period laid down by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement came to an end, the South Sudan population voted in favour of separation.

² The civil war in South Sudan pitted the ruling North against the southern Sudanese. Under the banner of the SPLM, the southerners demanded greater local governance. The first round of the war began in 1955, and lasted until 1972. War broke out again in 1983, and ended in 2005, upon the signing of the Comprehensive Peace (Naivasha) Agreement.

After South Sudan declared independence, it became clear that the government in Khartoum was unprepared for this new reality. Its loss of control over southern oil led to economic collapse. In 2012 the national currency depreciated by half within one year. In response, the government immediately turned to austerity measures and announced the lifting of fuel subsidies. Protests broke out against this decision, mainly in universities and higher education institutions. Inspired by the Arab Spring, weekly marches took place, coordinated through social media networks. The protests were met with violence and arrests and within two months they stopped. The following year, in 2013, seeking to prevent continued economic collapse, the government announced the lifting of fuel subsidies for a second time. This time, however, it did so only after school break was announced – to limit student protests. The demonstrations that broke out this time occurred on the periphery of the capital, and were met with a different level of violence: live bullets were shot at protesters in the capital in September 2013, when more than 100 people were martyred within three days. The violence was perpetrated by the Janjaweed,³ the semi-governmental militia known for their genocidal massacres in Darfur, whose formation and continued existence had been partly assisted by the Sudanese generals and National Security Services.

Facing these protests against its austerity policies, the government proceeded to look for political alliances to sustain its rule. In January 2014, in accordance with a proposal by Princeton Lyman, the former US Special Envoy to Sudan, al-Bashir called for a national dialogue. His proposal envisaged an alliance between the regime and the opposition, whereby the latter would give up its attempts to overthrow the regime in return for sharing power. In Sudanese politics, this approach is known as the ‘soft landing approach’.

Lyman’s proposal failed and economic collapse continued. In response, the government continued its turn towards Gulf capital, whose need for arable lands coincided with the Sudanese regime’s need for economic support. Sudan’s subordination to the Gulf governments led to the transfer of large areas of Sudanese lands, which were emptied of their indigenous

³ The War in Darfur began in 2003. Insurgent movements that had risen up against the persecution and marginalization of the area’s population fought the Khartoum government. The government armed some Darfuri tribes to fight in its stead, later termed the Janjaweed militias. The United Nations has estimated that 80,000 to 500,000 people were murdered in the Darfur genocide, while President Omar al-Bashir stated that the death toll did not exceed 10,000.

populations, to Gulf capital, and extended to its involvement in the Emirati and Saudi war in Yemen.

Anti-government protests continued during this time. These included protests against land grabs, a two-day strike in 2016 against the lifting of subsidies on medicines, and a journalists' strike in 2017 against the confiscation of newspapers from printshops, and many others.

The previous passages have painted a picture of the economic situation Sudan entered into in 2018. During this period the regime transferred the country's resources to its internal and external allies, through attritional investments and cheap exports. At the same time, it failed to provide basic healthcare and education services to those actually producing the wealth. The regime repeated the same approach to addressing the country's economic failure: applying austerity measures and relying on citizens to treat the country's economic failure.

The uprisings by the Sudanese against all forms of austerity measures in the 10 years that preceded the December 2018 uprising confirm that lack of economic justice was, and still is, the main driving force behind the Sudanese revolution. The Sudanese rose up in revolt against privatizations, the withdrawal of state subsidies, the lack of services, and increased bread prices. It was these policies which, on 19 December 2018, drove the students of Atbara Industrial School to the streets.



How can Sudan's current reality be read?

To understand the current Sudanese reality and the incumbent regime (the transitional government), one must understand its components and makeup.

As mentioned, the Sudanese took to the streets in various Sudanese cities under the slogan 'Just fall' – a total rejection of any form of compromise

with the existing regime. In July 2018, the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) was established as a trade union, being composed of parallel unions (mostly in white-collar sectors), proclaiming its opposition to the regime-controlled official unions. In August 2018, this assembly called for a march towards the parliament, planned to take place on 25 December 2018, to demand an increase in the minimum wage. As protests broke out in early December, and then intensified, the SPA changed the destination of its march to the presidential palace, and adopted the call for overthrowing the regime. In January 2019, in the Declaration of Freedom and Change, the SPA set out its demands, and urged the Sudanese people to adopt and employ various methods of peaceful struggle to achieve them. The demands included the immediate resignation of al-Bashir and his regime, along with the formation of a transitional government, to be charged with nine tasks encompassing economic, political, and legal reforms. The declaration was signed by the SPA and four other bodies representing major Sudanese opposition alliances. They then published the declaration, and invited others to sign it too.

While the SPA was widely accepted among the protesters, who were eager for a new leadership, some of the other signatories to the declaration, including existing political parties, were less popular. The Sudanese people’s hostility towards the existing political parties was both logical and justified: throughout the country’s history, these parties have repeatedly compromised and allied themselves with the autocratic regimes they claimed to oppose, and they have repeatedly failed to realize any of their goals, despite justifying their compromises as the road to achieving them. At the same time, Sudan’s centralized and disproportionate development path has created a terrible gap between the country’s wealth-administration centres and the regions, in terms of education, political participation, and political power. The Sudanese parties thus represent the elites created by such a reality: they are agri-capital and commercial parties, alongside educated *effendi*⁴ parties. Although some parties, like the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP), have theoretically proposed approaches promoting the interests of the working classes, their effect has barely differed from that the capitalist parties and their elite political ways.

4 The term *effendi*, was used throughout the Ottoman Empire to address government officials. In Sudan, *effendis* refers to the educated people who were employed by the state after the end of the Anglo-Egyptian colonization. These groups received privileges and opportunities, and constituted the bigger part of the upper middle class in Sudan. They were well-represented politically and were the recipients of favouritism from consecutive regimes.

In this context it is clear why the protesters preferred other forms of organization, from neighbourhood resistance committees to professional organizations. The popularity of such organizations is the result of alienation from ideological organization, in favour of geographic or professional organization. This discourse naturally led to calls for the formation of a 'technocratic' government, distanced from politics (which the people now perceive as corrupt). The lack of a revolutionary vision among the protesters was the result of the absence of any revolutionary party capable of revolutionary theorization and of introducing a counter discourse.

Upon its publication, more than 20 trade union and factional bodies signed the Declaration of Freedom and Change, on 1 January 2019. More signatures were gathered over the following weeks, reaching more than 100 bodies. Nonetheless, the FFC's decision-making remained tied to the votes of the first four bodies (the SPA and the major opposition party coalitions).⁵ The SPA thus failed to play its expected revolutionary role of liberating political decision-making from the hands of the elite. Its composition and approach, being made up of white-collar individuals, and pursuing their dominant interests and class choices, were to blame for this fact. Again, this was the result of the absence of an organized revolutionary party that could deliver sound analysis to the public.

In the months following January 2019, protest marches continued in Sudanese cities and villages, demanding the fall of the regime, with a prevalent presence of Sudanese women and girls. This presence indicated, yet again, the essential role the economic factor played in instigating the uprising, as austerity measures had compounded women's already difficult conditions, whether due to dwindling job opportunities or the negative consequences of the state's disengagement from service provision.

The SPA called for the forming of neighbourhood resistance committees, drawing on the earlier experience of the grassroots committees that had been formed during the 2013 protests. The committees became the chief heroes of the uprising, conducting impressive work organizing protests on the ground. Just before announcing the one-day strike in March 2019, the SPA had called for the formation of strike committees, or resistance committees, within specific institutions. However, the scope of these

⁵ The opposition parties that signed the Declaration of Freedom and Change after its publication were the SPA, the National Consensus Forces, the Sudan Call Forces, and the Opposition Unionist Assembly.

committees’ actions remained limited to on-the-ground resistance: an implicit public consensus had been reached that committees should work at the street level to overthrow the regime, while the political leadership should devote itself to preparing a new government and arrangements for the aftermath of the fall of the al-Bashir regime.

On 6 April 2019 people across Sudan marched to the respective compounds of the Army General Command, where they announced the beginning of the General Command sit-ins, which led to al-Bashir’s fall on 13 April 2019. This signalled a new phase in the uprising. Meetings then took place between the FFC and al-Bashir’s security committee, which had deposed the former president in a coup and was now ruling the country, calling itself the Military Council. These meetings were supposed to discuss the handover of power by the Military Council, but in the days that followed, they quickly shifted into ‘negotiations’ meetings. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) supported the Military Council government through their media coverage, and sought to whitewash the image of Council members. The Council brought into its camp Bashir’s leaders of the armed forces, security service chiefs, and minister of the interior, as well as the Rapid Support Forces (the new name given to the Janjaweed).

Unsurprisingly, the protesters rejected the Military Council’s rule, but negotiations continued between the FFC and the Military Council, with Gulf governments supporting the Military Council through grants and media coverage. Ambassadors from Western countries backed a ‘peaceful transition by negotiation’, which was promoted by European and American advisory centres. In parallel, the protesters attributed the power held by the FFC negotiators to their own commitment to the sit-ins and other forms of resistance and protest. They led marches within and through cities, and shut down the streets any time the Military Council was slow to negotiate or insisted on conditions that they refused. However, during the period of the negotiations, the sit-ins faced repeated crackdowns by the security forces. On 13 May 2019, the eighth day of Ramadan, security forces attacked the General Command sit-in in Khartoum, in what would come to be known as the first massacre of the revolution.

The eighth of Ramadan massacre unleashed a wave of anger on the streets, and kindled the protesters’ all-out rejection of the Military Council. Chants of ‘100% civil’ rose against negotiation proposals at the time that offered joint rule between the military and civil leaders. There were also calls for a general political strike, to force the military to hand over power. The

political leadership of the FFC was slow to heed the calls for a strike, with some even publicly opposing the call. The street's fear that the elitist parties would give in once more to their addiction to compromise and fear of radical change was thus borne out. This coincided with meetings between the leadership of the FFC parties and EU and US government representatives, and repeated visits to the UAE. The protesters' refusal of these shady international manoeuvrings was reflected in their chants and songs, and their efforts to ensure accountability of the representatives of the political leadership through the sit-in squares and their platforms. At the time, thanks to its anti-negotiations position, the SCP managed to garner considerable public trust, at least in comparison with the rest of the FFC. However, the SCP could not escape its elitist essence and unrevolutionary policies, ultimately preferring to preserve the opposition alliance rather than side with the revolution and protect it from compromise.

The SPA call for a political strike was officially made following weeks during which grassroots organizations had been pushing for a strike. Once the strike was announced by the SPA, these organizations published statements of their readiness to strike,⁶ and they publicized the planned strike in their speeches in the sit-in squares. The political strike represented an intensified confrontation between the protesters and the Military Council. The Council arrested strikers and threatened to fire and replace them, as Gulf financial and media backing for the Council increased. The strike ultimately took place on 28 and 29 May 2019, completely paralysing the country, including its airports, sea ports, institutions, and markets.

A week later, in June 2019, the Military Council responded to the strike with a series of massacres. The security services simultaneously attacked the sit-ins across 14 Sudanese cities. Survivors' testimonies document brutal scenes of rape, torture, and murder. In some cases the bodies of the dead as well as the living were tied up, weighted down with stones, and thrown into the Nile. The massacres resulted in more than 100 martyrs and hundreds of wounded and rape victims, while the search for the disappeared is still ongoing. The Military Council then announced its withdrawal from all negotiations, stating that it would hold elections in six months; it also shut down the internet throughout the country, to ensure

⁶ At this point in the Sudanese revolution (April–May 2019), 'breaking the line' became a cardinal sin. Grassroots organizations were therefore unable to propose any ideas that contradicted the *hirak*'s leadership, which, to the public, was the SPA. Accordingly, proponents of a strike used their statements to announce their readiness for a strike, whenever the 'leadership' called for it, and urged the SPA to make such a call.

a media blackout (though the Sudanese in the diaspora helped report the massacre). This did not stop the neighbourhood resistance committees, however; they organized a march in rejection of military rule. More than 7 million Sudanese women and men took to the streets in displacement camps, cities, and villages on 30 June 2019, demanding civil rule. Thanks to the 30 June march and international popular support for the Sudanese revolution, the military retreated from its previously announced positions on holding elections and rejecting negotiations.

Nonetheless, the military continued to receive generous international backing. The Emirati and Saudi governments announced grants and loans to support the Military Council. Likewise, the African Union sent its own mediators to call for dialogue between the opposition leadership and the Military Council, which had led the massacre. Inter-state coordination of investments and interests emerged through the so-called ‘Friends of Sudan’ meetings, which began in Washington in May 2019. The attendees comprised the United States, Germany, the EU, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Ethiopia.⁷ This group supported a power-sharing approach between the civil leadership and the Military Council. Their aim was to ensure a regime that preserved their ongoing investments and to use the moment of change to open up investment opportunities that had previously been closed either due to the US economic embargo on Sudan or as a result of al-Bashir’s failure to embark on full liberalization. In essence, these states’ positions on Sudan were no different from the similar positions they held on other movements for change in the region, whether in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, or others. They can be called the counterrevolutionary states.

Official external pressure, then, was brought to bear to reinforce the very political and economic approaches against which the Sudanese had revolted. But without a revolutionary party, the guiding discourse on the street was reduced to justifying partnership with the military to spare blood and stop the violence. Likewise, public access to the details of negotiations and agreements was limited to occasional leaks, instead of official public statements, and the political leadership (the FFC) met with foreign ambassadors, delegates and mediators more than they addressed the public. The absence of a revolutionary leadership, then,

⁷ Despite its clear and constant involvement in counterrevolutionary politics in Sudan – including al-Burhan’s visit to Egypt right before the massacre – and its occasional attendance of Friends of Sudan meetings, Egypt is not an official member of that group. This can be viewed through the complex lens of the Egyptian–Ethiopian conflict over regional leadership, and Egypt’s wish to operate as the first Emirati arm in the region.

resulted in wasting the fruit of the revolutionaries' resilience in the face of the Military Council, and their defiance of the post-massacre oppression. Calls for forming a qualified technocratic government circulated, sidelining the treacherous political parties. Opportunistic actors among the parties making up the FFC promoted such discourses to obstruct analysis of their compromised positions or their international allies' interests.

Unsurprisingly, this climate produced the current government, which is a military and civil partnership sponsored by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, internationally financed, and staffed by former employees of developmental organizations. This government is therefore an expression of both the economic and political counterrevolutions. In one of his first public speeches,⁸ the first transitional Minister of Finance mentioned that the economic objective of the Sudanese revolution was to bring Sudan out of its debt crisis. This represents a complete shift and distortion of the objectives of the revolution, which were to provide economic justice for the impoverished majority of the Sudanese, and to overturn austerity measures. Debt repayment thus became the main justification for plans to further lift subsidies, float the currency, and introduce foreign investments, in a manner no different than al-Bashir's policies in his later years. The only difference between the former and the latter is the international support given to the current government. The transitional government claimed that a return to the international market and the imagined material wellbeing this would bring were dependent upon such decisions.

One part of this counterrevolutionary development is the transitional government's normalization with the Zionist Occupation, under US-Emirati pressure, which has confused the Sudanese public. This confusion stems from the al-Bashir government's use of the Palestinian cause to mobilize the masses around a jihadist discourse, and the fact that the Sudanese left failed to progressively articulate its position on the Palestinian cause, considering it a matter concerning only Islamists. Although the SCP rejected normalization, it has not tended to promote the Palestinian cause. For example, its statement condemning the meeting between Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, Chairman of the Transitional Council, and Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of the Occupying Israeli State, in February 2020, chose to focus on al-Burhan's authority, the illegality of

⁸ Dr Ibrahim al-Badawi, Minister of Finance and Financial Planning, in a meeting promoting a shared vision of the private sector and the transitional government, organized by the Sudanese Businessmen and Employers Federation, held at Sadaqa Hall on 7 December 2019.

the meeting, and its violation of the constitution, rather than presenting a revolutionary perspective on the Palestinian cause.

The implications of the absence of a revolutionary party are again clear here: it has produced a vacuum as regards progressive discourse on internal and external political questions. It has also enabled the transitional government to present development grants and debt exemptions as revolutionary economic victories – despite the impact of their crushing neoliberal conditions on most Sudanese lives. While the SCP attempts to offer a discourse that rejects liberalization, it is incapable of influencing the masses. The latter have lost trust in the party as a result of its fluctuating positions and its insistence on coalescing with reactionary parties, whose positions the SCP simultaneously critiques in its statements. In the public imagination, this kind of strategy has rendered the party a disrupter that speaks much and resolves little, and lacks seriousness. In the meantime, through their coordinating committees and different alliances, neighbourhood resistance committees have released statements and views against liberalization, but they lack political experience and have prioritized the preservation of the transitional government. Slogans like ‘Yes to reforming the revolutionary path, no to overthrowing the civilian government’ have been voices by the resistance committees, which seek to ensure the military does not seek to ride the wave of protest – as happened in the Egyptian scenario. Nevertheless, as a result of its counterrevolutionary decisions in economic and other domains, support for the civilian government has been steadily declining.

This, then, is the current situation of the transitional government. Former employees of international institutions and the leadership of the political elite, from the entire civil and armed spectrums, under the leadership of the Military Council, have been implementing investment interests and resource transfers that benefit Gulf and global capital. Like its predecessor, the transitional government’s priorities are biased towards Sudanese and foreign capitalist investors and it has withdrawn from protecting the Sudanese working class and the impoverished majority of the Sudanese people. Realizing the objectives of economic justice for which the Sudanese revolution strove is thus clearly impossible through this transitional government, as it represents counterrevolutionary tendencies. Or, as the Sudanese masses have put it, ‘it has not fallen yet!’



Possible paths for the Sudanese revolution

The revolution must continue in order to halt the economic violence being practised against the impoverished Sudanese masses. This requires drawing lessons from the Sudanese revolution, both its successes and its limitations and failures. One example of the former is the public pressure the resistance committees applied to institutions to stop the first budget law proposed by the transitional government, which intended to entirely lift fuel subsidies. After the law was announced in December 2019 the committees brought pressure to bear to suspend its implementation, and they called for an economic conference to discuss economic policies and priorities, which took place in September 2020. Simultaneously, they also created a network comprising workers in ministries and governmental institutions, economists, and neighbourhood resistance committees, as part of their insistence on a more democratic version of economic decision-making.

Consecutive marches and campaigns calling for justice for the martyrs massacred during the crackdown on the sit-ins also indicate that the Sudanese revolutionaries have learned some lessons regarding power relations in Sudan. Some actors have sought to ensure the transitional government does not criminalize the leaders of the Military Council, so as to maintain a stable environment that encourages investment. The campaigns and marches for justice are attempts to tip the balance back in favour of revolutionary objectives.

Since August 2019 there have been (increasingly serious) attempts to form organized alliances between different groups of neighbourhood resistance committees, labour organizations, and factional bodies to pursue demands against the harmful transitional economic policies. These alliances would not have developed had it not been for the lessons learned

from the recent history of elitist political leadership decisions and their predispositions. Alongside the internal organization of resistance, such alliances constitute the clearest road towards creating a principled front against counterrevolutionary policies. This could lead to the establishment of a revolutionary party, or an organization that partially plays that role.

However, such an auspicious scenario that foresees a sustained Sudanese revolution that continues until its goals are achieved must not distract from the dangers that underlie the counterrevolutionary global alliances. Overthrowing the cross-border global counterrevolutionary alliances cannot be achieved except through a cross-border global resistance. This requires consolidating global solidarity and channels of communication with communities that have been harmed by similar liberalization policies to those currently applied in Sudan. It also requires supporting all forms of resistance to autocratic regimes, especially those engaging in direct economic interventions in Sudan, with invested capitals in its resources, first among which are the Gulf countries – who are responsible for the lion’s share of counterrevolutionary interventions. At its core, cross-border solidarity is no different from ‘national’ solidarity campaigns: just as populations affected by goldmining in Sudan make alliances with those affected by oil drilling in the country, allied around their joint demand to protect their environment from the effects of extractive industries, so it is both possible and imperative to join forces with the common interests of miners in Morocco, for example, who demand safe working conditions, and with environmental activists fighting against the impacts of mining in South Africa. It is equally possible and imperative to strengthen ties and joint action between the different anti-liberalization fronts in the region, including protesters in Lebanon and Tunisia. As part of this, we must reject colonial policies that exclude indigenous communities, a challenge that the Sudanese, whose lands have been grabbed to benefit Gulf countries and Israeli investments, share with Malian protesters fighting against French colonial interventions, and with Palestinians fighting against the Israeli occupation and its lackeys in the Palestinian Authority, and other normalizing governments. These are just some examples of joint interests among peoples: they are part of a regional and global liberation agenda. Pursuing this agenda requires an economic analysis that encompasses the interests of all influential bodies in the region.

The path to realizing the goals of the Sudanese revolution thus requires an organized Sudanese working class, which has the largest stake in achieving

the revolution's goals. It also requires forming a strategic alliance with anyone engaged in anti-imperialist resistance who shares similar goals, within Sudan's borders and beyond. Only then shall it 'Just fall'.

Suggested Reading

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ما اضيعك

مو عمرة...

موتك ثورة

بناتك يا وطن

الكلوا



The 2019 Iraqi uprising and the feminist imagination

Zahra Ali



In ‘Uhud Mountain’¹ – a tall, abandoned building in Tahrir Square in central Baghdad, facing the Green Zone – young men and women protestors who had taken over the building chanted *Inryd watan* (We want a country) and *Nazel akhuz haqqy* (I am coming down to take my rights). Since the culmination of street protests in October 2019, Tahrir Square in central Baghdad, and several other main squares around the country, had been occupied by protestors. From October 25th 2019 and for a period of over year, they managed to retain control of these squares, where they established miniature ideal societies.

The 2019 uprising started as a protest movement that began mainly in the Shi’a-dominated central and southern provinces and then spread across Iraq. Despite the bloody repression of the protests by Iraq’s security forces and the militias affiliated to the Iraqi political establishment, these demonstrations grew into an uprising as the youth and the disenfranchised that had launched the first street protests were joined by individuals from diverse social, educational and ideological backgrounds and groups, such as unions, syndicates and students’ organizations.

In many ways the October 2019 uprising was a continuation of several major popular protest movements (such as the ones in 2015 and in 2018) denouncing Iraq’s sectarian, corrupt and dysfunctional political system and the absence of basic services in the country. However, in its reach, form, and visibility, the 2019 uprising went beyond previous movements. One aspect of the uprising that was unprecedented was the extraordinary and massive participation of women – especially young women.

This chapter is based on in-depth fieldwork that was conducted with women and youth networks and social movements in Baghdad, Najaf-Kufa, Karbala and Nasriyah, as well as field observations in Basra. It takes the Iraqi uprising of 2019 as a framework for thinking about how massive protests allow for an understanding of emancipation that broadens our feminist imagination, paying particular attention to the space the uprising produced.² The perspective taken here breaks with binary approaches of agency and resistance in analysing the gendered and sexual dimensions of the uprising. Instead, the chapter examines the protests as both a massive corporeal presence in the streets, and an occupation of the cyberspace

1 This tall and abandoned building had previously often been called the ‘Turkish restaurant’, but was renamed ‘Uhud Mountain’ by protestors in reference to the battle of Uhud in the time of the Prophet Muhammad.

2 See for example the perspective developed by Lefebvre, H. (1968) *Le Droit à la Ville*. Paris: Point.

that allowed for the production of a discursive, material and imaginary space. Instead of defining a model of emancipation, the chapter sees as emancipatory any action or thought that challenges the ‘order of things’ and that asserts the equality and centrality of those who are usually not considered as ‘political’ agents.

A feminist analysis of the Iraqi uprising of 2019 attempts to bring together the structural and the political: on the one hand, it seeks to analyse what kind of space is being produced by the protestors; and, on the other hand, it adopts an approach to emancipation that expands the meaning of what is ‘political’. Thus, instead of asking if women’s participation in the 2019 Iraqi uprising was ‘feminist’ or followed a ‘women’s rights’ agenda, it is more enlightening to ask if it challenged the dominant order of things, especially in the space it produced. Similarly, instead of starting with a preconceived idea of what constitutes a transgression of gender norms, an analysis of the different levels in which a mobilization is affecting social space provides an understanding of what is transgressive – and in what ways.³



Post-2003 Iraq: necropolitics and sextarianism

Iraq in the post-2003 period has witnessed a continuation and exacerbation of a process of militarization and state destruction that had started in the 1990s with the US-led coalition’s devastating bombings and the imposition of the United Nations sanctions, the harshest ever imposed on a country.⁴ While the authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussein had already put the country through almost a decade of war with Iran in

³ See for example the perspective developed by Rancière J. (1987) *Le Maître Ignorant: cinq leçons sur l’émancipation intellectuelle*. Paris: Fayard.

⁴ See Gordon, J. (2012) *Invisible War. The United States and the Iraq sanctions*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

the 1980s, and violently repressed all forms of political opposition, the United Nations sanctions constituted an 'invisible' war that plunged the country into poverty and humanitarian crisis. The 2003 US-led invasion and occupation continued this process, establishing a political system based on ethno-sectarian and religious belongings (commonly called the *muhasasa* system) and destroying what remained of a functioning state. The US administration deprived the state's institutions of their executives and employees through the so-called 'de-ba'athification' campaign, and it put into power a conservative and ethno-sectarian political elite. The post-2003 political establishment in Iraq functions as a heavily militarized kleptocratic and nepotist regime that monopolizes Iraq's rich oil resources and represses civil society opposition.

Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics⁵ is useful in the Iraqi context, within the framework of racial capitalism and a postcolonial nation-state. It allows us to understand which lives are valuable and mourn-able, which deserve the infrastructural and political means of development, and which lives are not/do not. In today's Iraq, necropolitics manifests itself in the absence of the vital infrastructure that is needed to enable everyday life to function, such as water, electricity, state services and institutions, including health and education services. It is also clear in the various forces of death that characterize Iraqi political life, from the state security apparatus to the Iranian-backed militias that repress any form of political opposition.

Since the start of the uprising in October 2019, at least 700 peaceful protestors have been killed and 25,000 injured, while many have disappeared. The repression has been conducted by various forces: state security forces use stun grenades, anti-riot tanks, military-grade tear gas, and bullets, while paramilitary groups, Iranian-backed militias and mercenaries use live ammunition and machine guns. The Iraqi government has also imposed media, internet and telecommunication blackouts, as well as curfews. Many protestors have been threatened, intimidated, arrested, beaten up, kidnapped and even assassinated.

In post-2003 Iraq, the urban public space has been deeply altered: it is militarized, privatized and fragmented. Baghdad has experienced sectarian violence and since 2006/07 has been divided by checkpoints and concrete T-walls separating neighbourhoods according to ethno-

5 See Mbembe, A. (2003) 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture* 15(1): 11–40 (translated by Libby Meintjes).

sectarian belonging. Class divisions are connected to political divisions as access to resources and wealth are closely related to membership of a network with strong ties to the political elite. The most striking separation in Baghdad is between the Green Zone, where the political elite reside, and the rest of the city's inhabitants. Public lands have been privatized to allow for the construction of shopping malls through contracts that are provided within a system of bribery and corruption. These are all features of disaster capitalism,⁶ where market fundamentalism pushes for aggressive privatization, often related to the grabbing of public lands and violent dispossession, while public services and infrastructure are dysfunctional or absent. The privatization of Iraq's urban outdoor spaces, and of formally public services, such as electricity, education and health, along with militarization and ethno-sectarian fragmentation, have altered Iraqis' everyday lives and their very ability to survive.

As is argued in feminist scholarship on war and armed conflict, militarization is deeply gendered and is crucial in defining gender norms and relations.⁷ In Iraq, militarization as a social and political phenomenon was exacerbated during the war with Iran in the 1980s, and was pushed even further after the 1991 Gulf War and the imposition of the UN sanctions. Militarization plays a central role in shaping representations and practices of femininities and masculinities as it reinforces stereotypical roles of men as 'protectors' and women as 'vulnerable'. The UN sanctions saw the emergence of new forms of patriarchy as extreme poverty pushed families and individuals to develop survival strategies.⁸

A deeply gendered ideology and politics characterize Iraq's current political regime. In fact, the post-2003 Iraqi regime is not only based on ethnic, religious and sectarian division, it is also based on sexual division; it is,

⁶ See Klein, N. (2007) *The Shock Doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt.

⁷ See for example Peterson V.S. (2007) 'Thinking through intersectionality and War', *Race, Gender & Class* 14 (3/4): 10–27; Kandiyoti, D. (2007) 'Between the hammer and the anvil: Post-conflict reconstruction, Islam and women's rights', *Third World Quarterly* 28(3): 503–517; Cockburn, C. (2010) 'Gender relations as causal in militarization and war', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12(2): 139–157.

⁸ See Ali, Z. (2018) *Women and Gender in Iraq: Between nation-building and fragmentation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

to use Maya Mikdashi's term, a sextarian regime.⁹ A revealing example is that one of the first major legal reforms that was attempted (by one of the main Shi'a Islamist political parties brought to power by the US administration through the invasion and occupation) was to abolish the Personal Status Code (PSC) – the legal framework that gathers together most women's legal rights – and to replace it with a sectarian-based PSC.

The relationship between armed violence and the imposition of sextarianism is constitutive of Iraq's regime, which extends from politicians elected to parliament to militia groups. Heteropatriarchal sectarian religious forces not only dominate the political sphere, but also the streets, through their armed groups and militias. This relationship was also very central in the repression of the October 2019 uprising, since any challenge to heteropatriarchal gender norms is perceived as a threat to the system as a whole. Through their media channels and social media platforms, the Iraqi political establishment often portrayed the uprising as 'immoral'. Protestors were often accused of being sexually corrupt, and depraved, and all kinds of rumours were spread about supposedly 'illicit behaviour' among the youth in the tents set up in the country's squares.



The October 2019 uprising: the production of space

Tahrir Square in Baghdad, and similar squares all over the country, such as al-Habubi square in Nasriyah, developed creative modes of sociability that transgressed social and political hierarchies. The protestors refused any form of alignment and instrumentalization from a group or party and, as a result, refused to designate a leadership. Tahrir Square was organized according to the principle of direct democracy: all decisions were made by consulting all of the tents in the square, and were then made

9 See Mikdashi, M. (2018) 'Sextarianism: Notes on studying the Lebanese state', in A. Ghazal and J. Hanssen. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle Eastern and North African History*. Oxford: Oxford Handbooks Online. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199672530.013.42.

public by displaying the agreed initiative or statement on the walls of ‘Uhud Mountain’ and posting it on social media. The centrality of digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram in the launch, organizing and development of the protests in Iraq show that the uprising happened in the virtual world as much as it happened in the squares. Many youngsters interviewed in Baghdad, especially young women whose families did not allow them to go to Tahrir Square, experienced Tahrir on social media – following and contributing to it through their posts on a daily basis. One such example is Maha, who was 20 years old at the time:

‘I cannot always come here to Tahrir Square, I am only allowed to come when my mother, who is fully supportive of the revolution, accompanies me. When I can’t come, I am active on social media, I post on Face and on Insta. This revolution is a revolution of values. It is our future.’¹⁰

The squares produced a material space in which protestors put forward their approach of the ‘public common’. They provided various services, from free food and medical care to educational and cultural services, and they established ‘new state forms’ by organizing public services, such as street cleaning and re-painting of the environment, as well as the restoration of public monuments and the beautification of public spaces through original art and design. The protestors insisted on providing these services for free, emphasizing that such services should be provided by the state. ‘Made in Iraq’ was also a common slogan: through it, the protestors sought to promote a national economy not dominated by foreign goods and an overreliance on the oil economy. All around Tahrir Square, markets were set up, some selling ‘Made in Iraq’ products, such as yoghurt from Abu Ghraib, fruits and nuts, as well as copperware and decorative arts and crafts.vv

Husayn, a young protestor in his mid-twenties, lived in the tents in Tahrir Square for almost three months; as a result, he lost his job (and his salary). He did all of this for the sake of the revolution. He talked about the ideal society he sought to build in Tahrir Square:

‘Leaving my job is not a big challenge for me, I have seen corruption, I have experienced poverty. And I am here for a bigger goal. [...] I am here for a *watan* (country), the revolution will give me a *watan*. Everything is provided for us here: people with money donate to us,

¹⁰ Interview conducted in December 2019, in Tahrir Square, Baghdad.

even bosses of companies. People give us clothes, food, cigarettes, everything we need to live here in Tahrir. People are cooking all the time, you see many kitchens inside the tents. We obtained things and a lifestyle in Tahrir that we didn't have in our life before the revolution. Before, we had no money, it was expensive to buy clothes, to circulate from an area to another. Here, we can go anywhere in the square freely.'¹¹

After this interview was conducted, Husayn was shot in his neck during a peaceful protest in central Baghdad that was repressed by the Iraqi security forces, in January 2020. As a result of his injury, he had to leave Tahrir Square but he carried on his activism through his posts on social media.

The October 2019 uprising challenged the forces of death (or necropolitics) in its celebration of life: the squares became a space for joyful parties, dancing, joking and playing games. Another recurrent slogan among the youth was *Inryd In'ysh* – meaning 'we want to live a good life away from armed violence and political conflicts'. These forms of 'life blossoming' involved a politics of emotion as much as they were provoked by them. Protestors set up a public beach along the Tigris river, where youngsters came to relax and play. Theatres and cinemas were also established in Tahrir Square, presenting various types of dramas (often related to social and societal problems). Common activities in the square included sitting and reading in the various free libraries available, listening to public lectures offered by writers, intellectuals and culture-lovers, and participating in debates and discussions. Painting and drawing workshops were organized and the streets, Uhud Mountain, and the tunnel around the square were covered in diverse forms of art, some showing scenes of national unity, others denouncing oppression and the killing of protestors, and celebrating women, youth and the martyrs of the protest, such as Safaa al-Sarai (see Picture 1).

¹¹ Interview conducted in December 2019, in Tahrir Square, Baghdad.

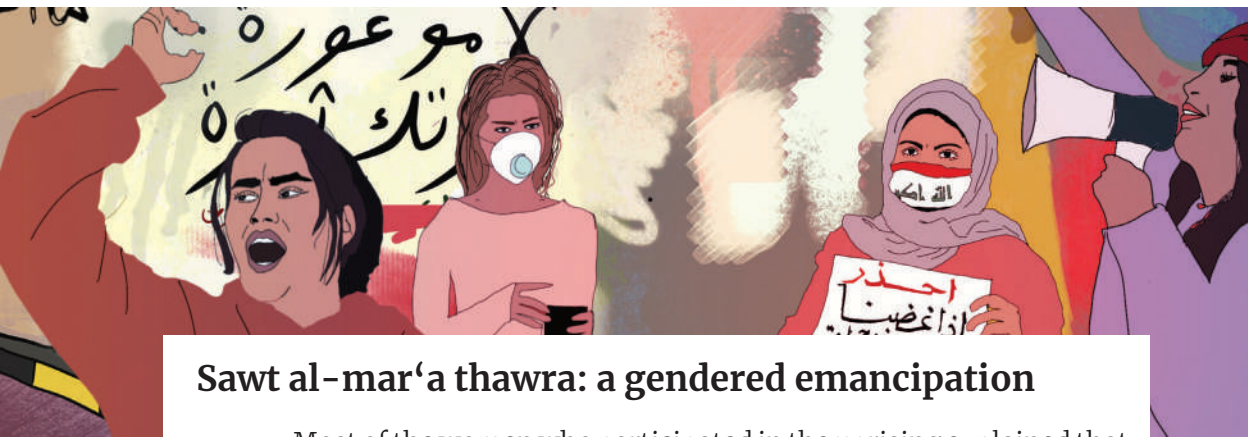


Taken by Zahra Ali in Tahrir Square, Baghdad, December 2019

The uprising produced a discursive space that challenged militarization and armed violence. Despite the bloody repression they experienced, the protestors remained committed to non-violent civil disobedience. This is remarkable as many of the young men I interviewed in Tahrir Square were former members of the Popular Mobilization Front (PMF), a paramilitary force created during the war against Da'esh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL). Many of them expressed their disappointment with the PMF for turning the war against Da'esh into a battle for the consolidation of their repressive and bloody power. *Salmiyya* (peaceful) and *madaniyya* (civicness) were terms that were used over and over again by the youth living in Tahrir Square.

The uprising also produced an imaginary space, where protestors' determination to honour the 'martyrs of the revolution' quickly became the uprising's *raison d'être*. The uprising was described by many protestors as a 'sacred battle' (as sacred as the battle of Uhud, involving the Prophet Muhammad), for which they were willing to offer their lives as sacrifice. The

protestors' martyrdom imaginary was used alongside the religious story of Imam Husayn at Karbala:¹² they viewed their struggle as a continuation of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. Moreover, the protestors used Tahrir Square as a shrine around which they performed death rituals, circling the martyrs' coffins around the Freedom monument often before heading to Wadi al-Salam in Najaf to conduct the religious funeral rites.



Sawt al-mar'a thawra: a gendered emancipation

Most of the women who participated in the uprising explained that they took part in it in order to denounce the violence that the protestors, mostly young and male, had faced. As such, they did not differ from the mass of individuals from diverse social, educational and ideological backgrounds who took to the streets or cyberspace to protest the killing of unarmed peaceful protestors. The repression of the protests was deeply gendered as the mobilization of gender and sexual norms had been central to the attempt to disqualify the uprising on the basis of its being 'immoral' and a breach of societal and religious norms.

In many ways, the attacks on women protestors and the assertion of heteropatriarchal gender and sexual norms unleashed by Iraq's political establishment can be understood as what Deniz Kandiyoti has called 'masculinist restoration':¹³ as women gain visibility and take up space, they are put back in their 'place' by these attacks. Women were also attacked on social media: the hashtag *#بناتك يا وطن* – *Banatek ya watan* (Your young women, oh country), which was the slogan of the women's protest of 13 February 2020, was turned into *#عاهراتك يا وطن* – *Aheratek ya watan* (Your

¹² The killing of Imam Husayn is central in Shi'a Muslims imaginary: it represents the fight for justice and resistance to tyranny and oppression.

¹³ Kandiyoti, D. (2014) 'Contesting patriarchy-as-governance: Lessons from youth-led activism, *OpenDemocracy*, 7 March 2014.

whores, oh country). Women mobilized against these attacks: through messages displayed on the wall of the tunnel leading to Tahrir Square, and through placards held by young women during the protests, such as one reading 'Women of the October revolution are revolutionaries not whores' (see Picture 2). The slogan *Sawt al-mar'a thawra* (A woman's voice is a revolution) became central in the protests after these attacks were launched.



Taken by Zahra Ali in Tahrir Square, Baghdad, December 2019

Along with slogans praising the Iraqi nation, the young women and men who participated in the protests openly addressed sexist discourse. For example, gender mixing (*ikhtilat*) during the protests was condemned by several Islamist political leaders, including the very controversial leader Moqtada al-Sadr.¹⁴ By forbidding gender mixing and designating women's voice as *'awra* (belonging to the private), Islamist political groups sought to define women's participation in the protests as a breach of religious

¹⁴ Leader of the Sadrist Islamist movement formed after the invasion and occupation of 2003, which is one of the major Shi'a Islamist forces in Iraq.

norms. Protestors mocked these declarations through many slogans, such as *La mu 'awra sawtech thawra* (No it is not shameful, your voice is a revolution). Another challenge to male-dominated discursive space was the praise of one of the early martyrs of the protests, Safaa al-Sarai, referring to him as Ibn Thanwa (Son of Thanwa), in reference to his mother Thanwa – instead of referring to him by reference to his father's name, as is usually done. Ibn Thanwa is now a name that is commonly used to refer to revolutionaries and many protestors use their mother's name instead of their father's names.

Despite these examples of gendered dissent, the October 2019 uprising did not include a feminist or women-centred agenda. How then do we make sense of women's massive participation in the protests? This apparent contradiction is not specific to the Iraqi context: it was also the case during the Arab uprising, – and perhaps all recent protest movements in the region.¹⁵ The absence of a gender-specific agenda can be seen as revealing of the ways in which popular protests tend to homogenize slogans and demands, and thus end up being class- or gender-blind. However, looking at body politics and space can provide another reading of the absence of a clear feminist agenda. It can be argued that it was in its concrete enactment of equality, in the massive presence and mixing of bodies, that gender norms were challenged by the 2019 uprising. Women's massive participation and presence constituted in and of itself a challenge to the sextarian social order.

Bodies are indeed central to the process of citizenship-making, in which gendered bodies become signifying agents of collective action and transformation, as was clear in the *Banatek ya watan* (Your young women, Oh country) women's protest that was organized in February 2020 as part of the uprising. While this protest was a demonstration of young women's support for the uprising, and of alignment with its main slogan, *Inryd watan*, women's massive corporeal presence, along with male protestors (often acting as human shields around their march), challenged sextarianism. In this sense, women's massive corporeal presence signified an anti-sextarian citizenship, as well as a rejection of necropolitics and a celebration of life in the post-2003 Iraqi context. Many of the protestors – both men and women – in Baghdad's Tahrir Square expressed the fact that women's presence meant 'life': it signified the support of the entire

15 See Hasso, F. and Salime, Z. (eds.) (2016) *Freedom Without Permission: Bodies and space in the Arab revolutions*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

society for the uprising. Departing from the notion of ‘resistance’, women’s corporeal presence produced an alternative material and discursive space. Furthermore, by not limiting themselves to mobilizing specifically as women, women deployed an emancipated self.



Conclusion: Expanding the feminist imagination

The 2019 Iraqi uprising produced an alternative discursive, material and imaginary space to the dominant post-2003 space characterized by militarization, privatization, and patriarchal domination. In this space lines and hierarchies between demands addressing government and electoral politics and slogans such as ‘the right to have curly hair’ are blurred. It was both in the collective corporeal occupation of outdoor spaces as much as in the presence in cyberspace that the lines and hierarchies between what are often deemed ‘political’ and ‘societal’ were challenged. It is in this sense that the practices and mobilizations of the uprising can be described as emancipated and political.

The *madaniyya* (civiness) put forward in the uprising involved ordinary people establishing a peaceful miniature society that was accepting of various aesthetics and forms, that provided essential services, and that was open to diverse opinions and beliefs. The space created by the uprising was thus a challenge to necropolitics. It offered the blossoming of different ways of living, and an enjoyment of social life disconnected from utilitarian consumption. It was in many ways similar to how Henri Lefebvre has described the Paris Commune: the 2019 Iraqi uprising was a big celebration, a space where life was enjoyed.¹⁶

The gender and sexual dimensions of the uprising were central, and the sextarian and heteropatriarchal repression of the political establishment

¹⁶ See Lefebvre, H. (1965) *La Proclamation de la Commune. 26 mars 1871*. Paris: Gallimard.

was challenged in many ways: from anti-sexist slogans to women's marches. Women's massive corporeal presence in itself represented a questioning of sextarianism, which relies on sectarian and sexual divisions. Women did not differ from men, or from members of different social groups (based on class, education or profession), in justifying their participation in the uprising by reference to the goal of 'honouring the martyrs'. All of this can be seen as revealing both the existence of gender and sexual divisions in Iraq, as well as emancipated forms of dissent that are not simply bound to women's identity as women.

Suggested Reading

Ali, Z. (2021) 'From recognition to redistribution? Protest movements in Iraq in the age of "New Civil Society"', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, doi:10.1080/17502977.2021.1886794.

(2018) *Women and Gender in Iraq: between Nation-Building and Fragmentation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lefebvre, H. (1965) *La Proclamation de la Commune*. 26 mars 1871. Paris: Gallimard.

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The new Algerian revolution and Black Lives Matter: A Fanonian perspective

Hamza Hamouchene



Born in Martinique but Algerian by choice, Frantz Fanon (1925–1961) wrote about the Algerian revolution against French colonialism, and about his political experiences on the African continent.¹ Despite his short life (he died at the age of 36 from leukaemia), Fanon's work was prolific, ranging from books and papers to speeches. He wrote his first book *Black Skin, White Masks*² two years before Dien Bien Phu (1954) and his last book, the famous *The Wretched of the Earth*,³ a canonical work about the anti-colonialist and Third-Worldist struggle, one year before Algerian independence (1962), at a moment when African countries were gaining their independence. Fanon was a radical intellectual and a revolutionary who devoted himself body and soul to the Algerian national liberation. His ideas were always influenced by practice and were transformative; they went on to inspire anti-colonial struggles all over the world, shaped Pan-Africanism and profoundly influenced the Black Panthers in the US.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon wrote: 'Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it'.⁴ This statement is particularly relevant in the light of the explosion of revolts and uprisings now taking place all over the world, including in the Arab countries, where a second wave of uprisings (following the first wave from 2011) is breaking, from Algeria to Lebanon and from Sudan to Iraq. As part of this general convulsion, six decades after the publication of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Algeria is witnessing another revolution, this time against its national bourgeoisie. What would Fanon say about the new Algerian revolution? What can we learn from his reflections and experiences?

This chapter looks at the 2019–2021 Algerian uprising, as well as wider struggles for economic and political justice, through a Fanonian lens, seeking to shine a light on Fanon's genius, the timeliness of his analysis, the lasting value of his critical insights and the centrality of his decolonial thought to the revolutionary endeavours of the wretched of the earth.

1 This is an edited version of another book chapter in *Fanon Today: The Revolt and Reason of the Wretched of the Earth* (edited by Nigel Gibson, Daraja Press 2021).

2 Fanon, F. (1986) *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press.

3 Fanon, F. (1967) *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin Books.

4 Fanon, F. (1967) *The Wretched*, p. 166.



Fanon and Algeria from colonialism to independence

Before looking at the 2019–2021 uprising in Algeria, it will be helpful to quickly survey Algeria’s journey from colonialism to independence, and Fanon’s place within it.

The colonial period was characterized by expropriations, proletarianization, forced sedentarization, exploitation and brutal violence by the French colonial power.⁵ Algerians declared their war of independence on 1 November 1954. There followed one of the longest and bloodiest wars of decolonization, which saw a massive involvement of the rural poor and urban popular classes (lumpen–proletariat).⁶ Official estimates report that a million and half Algerians were killed in the eight–year war that ended in 1962, a war that has become the foundation of modern Algerian politics.

Arriving at Blida psychiatric hospital in 1953, where he treated both colonial torturers and indigenous victims, Fanon came to see colonization as a systematic negation of the other and a refusal to attribute any humanity to them. He would later describe thoroughly the mechanisms of violence put in place by colonialism to subjugate the oppressed people.

His experiences at Blida led Fanon to resign from the hospital in 1956 and to join the national liberation front (FLN). Thereafter he was active in the fight for freedom, writing articles in support of the struggle and travelling across Africa on FLN missions.

Fanon had high hopes for revolutionary Algeria. His illuminating book *A Dying Colonialism (L’An Cinq de la Révolution Algérienne)*⁷ shows how

5 Lacheraf, M. (1965) *Algérie, nation et société*. 2nd ed. Algiers : Casbah–Editions.

6 Bennoune, M. (1981) ‘Origins of the Algerian Proletariat. *Middle East Research and Information Project*’. Volume: 11, MER94.

7 Fanon, F. (1965) *A Dying Colonialism*. New York: Grove Press.

liberation does not come as a gift: it is seized by the masses with their own hands, and by seizing it they are themselves transformed. For Fanon, revolution is a transformative process that will create new souls. For this reason Fanon closes his 1959 book with the words: 'The revolution in depth, the true one, precisely because it changes man and renews society, has reached an advanced stage. This oxygen which creates and shapes a new humanity – this, too, is the Algerian revolution'.⁸

Fanon did not live to see his adoptive country become free from French colonial domination: he died less than a year before Algeria achieved independence on 5 July 1962.

In the years following its victory against French colonialism, Algeria's revolutionary experience and its attempt to break from the imperialist-capitalist system were defeated, both by counter-revolutionary forces and by internal contradictions. The revolution harboured the seeds of its own failure from the start: it was a top-down, authoritarian, and highly bureaucratic project (albeit with some redistributive functions that significantly improved people's lives). This lack of democracy was concomitant with the ascendancy of a comprador bourgeoisie that was hostile to socialism and staunchly opposed to genuine land reform.⁹ Fanon, especially in the chapter 'The pitfalls of national consciousness,' from *The Wretched*, foretold this development: he identified the bankruptcy and sterility of national bourgeoisies that tended to replace the colonial force with a new class-based system replicating the old colonial structures of exploitation and oppression. In Algeria, this national bourgeoisie, closely connected to the ruling FLN, from the 1980s onwards renounced the autonomous development project that had been initiated in the 1960s and 1970s, ushering in an age of deindustrialization and pro-market policies, at the expense of the popular strata. In this context the national bourgeoisie offered one concession after another to the West, initiating blind privatizations and projects that would undermine the country's sovereignty and endanger its population and environment – the exploitation of shale gas and offshore resources being just one example.¹⁰

8 Fanon, F. (1965) *A Dying Colonialism*, p. 181.

9 Bennoune, M. (1988) *The Making of Contemporary Algeria, 1830–1987: Colonial upheavals and post-independence development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

10 Hamouchene, H. and Rouabah, B. (2016) 'The political economy of regime survival: Algeria in the context of the African and Arab uprisings', *Review of African Political Economy* 43(150): 668–680.

In Algeria today, oil money is used to buy social peace, as well as to strengthen the state's repressive apparatus. Like Tunisia, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, Gabon, Angola and South Africa, among others, Algeria follows the dictates of the new instruments of imperialism, such as the IMF and the World Bank. The ruling classes in Algeria have trapped the country in a predatory extractivist model of development where profits are accumulated in the hands of a foreign-backed minority, with the majority of the population dispossessed.



Rationality of rebellion: the Hirak and the new Algerian revolution

The contemporary reality in Algeria confirms Fanon's prescient warnings about the rapacity and divisiveness of national bourgeoisies and the limits of conventional nationalism. However, Fanon also makes clear that the enrichment of this profiteering caste will produce 'a decisive awakening on the part of the people and a growing awareness that [promises] stormy days to come'.¹¹ This may be what we are seeing in the second wave of the Arab uprisings (as well as other mass protests around the world), which began in 2018. The popular masses in all of these countries are rebelling against the violence of the political regimes that offer them growing pauperization and marginalization, and that are enriching the few at the expense and damnation of the majority.

In Algeria, the uprising was triggered by the incumbent president Bouteflika's announcement that he would run for a fifth term, despite suffering from aphasia and being generally absent from the public scene. Beginning on Friday 22 February 2019, millions of Algerians, young and old, men and women, from different social classes, rose up in rebellion. Historic Friday marches, followed by protests in professional sectors, have

¹¹ Fanon (1967) *The Wretched*, p. 134.

united people in their rejection of the ruling system and their demands for radical democratic change. This popular movement (*Al Hirak Acha'bi*) has two emblematic slogans: 'Yetnahaw ga' (They must all go!) and 'Lablad abladna oundirou rayna' (The country is ours and we'll do what we wish).

The events that took place in Algeria between 2019 and 2021 are truly historic. The Hirak is unique in its huge scale, peaceful character, and national spread, including in the marginalized south, and it has seen massive participation from women and young people, who constitute the majority of Algeria's population. The Algerian people are once again affirming their role as agents of their own destiny. Fanon's words (speaking of the anti-colonial struggle) are apposite here: 'The thesis that men change at the same time that they change the world has never been manifest as it is now in Algeria. This trial of strength not only remodels the consciousness that man has of himself, and of his former dominators or of the world ... [it] renews the symbols, the myths, the beliefs, the emotional responsiveness of the people. We witness in Algeria man's reassertion of his capacity to progress'.¹²

In line with this description, the liberatory process that is taking place in Algeria has unleashed an unequalled amount of energy, confidence, creativity and subversion. The evolution of the movement's slogans and forms of resistance is demonstrative of processes of politicization and popular education. The re-appropriation of public spaces has created a kind of *agora* where people discuss, debate, exchange views, talk strategy and perspectives, criticize each other, or simply express themselves in many ways, including through art and music. Indeed, cultural production has taken on another meaning, being associated now with liberation and seen as a form of political action and solidarity. Instead of the folkloric and sterile productions promoted under the suffocating patronage of authoritarian elites, we are now seeing instead a culture that speaks to the people and that advances their resistance and struggles through poetry, music, theatre, cartoons, and street-art. Once again, Fanon's words are relevant here: 'A national culture is not a folklore ... It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions ... which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people... It is around the people's struggles

¹² Fanon (1965) *A Dying Colonialism*, p. 30.

that African–Negro culture takes on substance and not around songs, poems or folklore'.¹³



The struggle of decolonization continues

The Hirak's demands are for independence, sovereignty, and an end to the pillage of the country's resources and the oppressive socio-economic conditions under which Algerians have lived for decades. In this, Algerians are making a direct link between their current struggle and the anti-French colonial struggle of the 1950s, as reflected in the popular chant 'Generals to the dustbin and Algeria will be independent'. They see their efforts as a continuation of the decolonization process, rooted in the anti-colonial struggle against the French and against the neo-colonial ruling regime. As part of this process, Algerians are reaffirming their own place as the true heirs of the martyrs of the liberation, who are referenced in protest chants: 'Oh Ali [La Pointe] your descendants will never stop until they wrench their freedom!'; 'We are the descendants of Amirouche and we will never go back!'

Algerians are laying claim to the popular and economic sovereignty that was denied to them when formal independence was achieved in 1962. It becomes clear that the colonialism which Fanon analysed six decades earlier has not entirely disappeared. Instead it has metamorphosed, camouflaging itself in sophisticated forms and mechanisms: debt; structural adjustment programmes; 'free trade' treaties; association agreements with the EU; predatory extractivism; land grabs; agribusiness; immigration laws and deadly borders; 'humanitarian' intervention and the responsibility to protect; international cooperation and development; racism and xenophobia; etc. All these constitute forms of domination and control deployed to safeguard the interests of the powerful globally.

¹³ Fanon (1967) *The Wretched*, pp. 188–189.

Fanon predicted this: ‘The people who at the beginning of the struggle had adopted the primitive Manichaeism of the settler – Blacks and Whites, Arabs and Christians – realize as they go along that it sometimes happens that you get Blacks who are whiter than the Whites and the hope of an independent nation does not always tempt certain strata of the populations to give up their interests or privileges’.¹⁴

What we are seeing now is the struggle by the Algerian people to tear away the interests and privileges of the ruling class.



Counter-revolution: the reactionary role of the army and of foreign powers

As with any revolution, counter-revolutionary forces have mobilized to block change in Algeria. The counter-revolutionary campaign currently under way in the country is supported from abroad. Regionally, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are using their money and influence to halt potentially contagious waves of revolt in the region. At the global level, France, the US, the UK, Canada, Russia and China, along with their major corporations, who see a potential threat to their economic and geostrategic interests, are all supportive of the Algerian regime. This context allows us to make sense of the regime’s budget law of 2020 and the new multinational-friendly Hydrocarbon Law.

When it comes to the political level within the country, the counter-revolution has been embodied by the military hierarchy. After Bouteflika’s overthrow, the military has maintained de facto authority. This is in keeping with the military’s position since independence in 1962: during this whole period, Algeria has been ruled by a military regime, either directly or indirectly. Nevertheless, protests have continued. While the brutal repression of past uprisings and the cruelty of the civil war in the

¹⁴ Fanon (1967) *The Wretched*, p. 115.

1990s explain the current popular movement's reluctance to directly confront the army, the people are nevertheless determined to peacefully demilitarize the country, as reflected in the chant: 'A republic not a military barrack'. So far, the army has not fired any bullets, but it has continued to justify various repressive measures. The Military High Command has also rejected every roadmap for genuine dialogue proposed by the movement.

Once again, Fanon's words are prescient:

In these poor, under-developed countries, where the rule is that the greatest wealth is surrounded by the greatest poverty, the army and the police constitute the pillars of the regime; an army and a police force which are advised by foreign experts. The strength of the police and the power of the army are proportionate to the stagnation in which the rest of the nation is sunk.¹⁵

Algerians know what the military are capable of but, despite the trauma of the 'black decade' (the civil war of the 1990s), they are still bravely insisting: 'A civilian state not a military one!'



Class struggle, organizing and political education

Despite the odds stacked against it, and the state's efforts to divide, co-opt, and exhaust it, the Hirk has maintained an exemplary unity and peacefulness. This is demonstrated in slogans such as: 'Algerians are brothers and sisters, the people are united, you traitors.' The movement is youth-led and relatively loosely organized. There are no clearly identifiable leaders or organized structures propelling it. It is a popular uprising that is mobilizing mass forces from the middle classes and from the marginalized classes in urban and rural areas. Unlike Sudan, where the Sudanese Professional Association has played a leading organizing role, in Algeria organizing is done horizontally and mainly through social

¹⁵ Fanon (1967) *The Wretched*, p. 138.

media. The general strike in the first few weeks of the uprising, which was instrumental in forcing Bouteflika to abdicate and in shaking up alliances within the ruling class, was organized spontaneously after anonymous calls on social media. While such amorphous, non-structured and leaderless dynamics and movements can generate large inter-class mobilizations, and have the advantage of not offering an easy target for repression, or for the co-option of leaders, they are nevertheless extremely vulnerable, and can manifest fatal weaknesses in the long run.

What can Fanon teach us when it comes to class struggle and organizing?

Class struggle is central to Fanon's analysis. The Lebanese Marxist, Mahdi Amel, pointing to Fanon's insights on how the revolutionary praxis differentiates and changes its meaning and direction after independence, writes: 'While it [revolutionary violence] was before independence, essentially a national struggle, after independence it becomes a real class struggle' through which the masses discover their true enemy: the national bourgeoisie.¹⁶ So from a strictly national level, the fight moves to a socio-economic level of class struggle. Fanon urges us to move from a national consciousness towards a social and political consciousness when he says, 'If nationalism is not made explicit, if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley'.¹⁷

However, Fanon invites us to 'stretch Marxism' as a way of understanding the particularities of capitalism in the colonial and postcolonial world. To borrow Immanuel Wallerstein's words, Fanon 'had rebelled, forcefully, against the ossified Marxism of the communist movements of his era', asserting a revised version of the class struggle breaking with the dogma that the urban, industrial proletariat is the only revolutionary class against the bourgeoisie.¹⁸ Fanon thought of the peasantry and the urbanized lumpenproletariat as the strongest candidate for the role of historical revolutionary subject in colonial Algeria. And here, Fanon meets Che Guevara when both point out that in colonised countries, revolution begins in rural areas and moves to the urban towns. It is launched by

16 Hamdan, H. (1964a) 'La Pensée Révolutionnaire de Frantz Fanon'. *Révolution Africaine*. N72.

17 Fanon, F. (1967), p165.

18 Wallerstein, I. (2009) 'Reading Fanon in the 21st century', *New Left Review* 57: 117–125.

the peasantry, which embraces the proletariat rather than the other way around as in the case of European capitalist, and even socialist, countries.¹⁹

In a nutshell, class struggle is essential provided we clearly identify the struggling classes. In this spirit, it's crucial to determine the revolutionary classes (and their alliances) in the current uprising. We need to go beyond 'workerism' and embrace a much broader conception of the proletariat in its contemporary expressions, namely the unemployed youth, the urban/rural working people, informal workers, peasants, etc. It is these classes that have nothing to lose but their chains, which makes them potentially revolutionary.

In his chapter 'Spontaneity: its strengths and weaknesses' in *The Wretched*, Fanon expressed concern that if the lumpen-proletariat is left on its own, without organizational structure, it will burn out.²⁰ In order to avoid this in the present situation in Algeria, Fanon's words are worth attending to: 'The bourgeoisie should not be allowed to find the conditions necessary for its existence and its growth...the combined effort of the masses led by a party and of intellectuals who are highly conscious and armed with revolutionary principles ought to bar the way to this useless and harmful middle class'.²¹ Fanon insisted on the necessity of a revolutionary political party (or perhaps an organized social movement) that can take the demands of the masses forward, a party/structure that will educate the people politically, that will be 'a tool in the hands of the people' and that will be the energetic spokesman and the 'incorruptible defender of the masses'.

For Fanon, reaching such a conception of a party/movement necessitates first of all ridding ourselves of the bourgeois notion of elitism and 'the contemptuous attitude that the masses are incapable of governing themselves'.²² Fanon abhorred the elitist discourse on the immaturity of the masses and asserted that in the struggle, they (the masses) are equal to the problems which confront them. It is therefore important for them to know just where they are going and why. To this end, he argues that we have to work out new concepts through ongoing political education, enriched through mass struggle. Political education for him is not merely about political speeches but rather about 'opening the minds' of the

19 Hamdan, H. (1964b) 'La Pensée Révolutionnaire de Frantz Fanon'. *Révolution Africaine*. N71.

20 Ibid.

21 Fanon (1967) *The Wretched*, p. 140.

22 Fanon (1967) *The Wretched*, p. 151.

people, ‘awakening them, and allowing the birth of their intelligence’.²³ He wrote: ‘If building a bridge does not enrich the awareness of those who work on it, it ought not to be built and the citizens can go on swimming across the river or going by boat’.²⁴

For Fanon, everything depends on the masses, hence his idea of radical intellectuals engaged in and with people’s movements and capable of coming up with new concepts in non-technical and non-professional language. For him, just as culture has to become a fighting culture, so too must education become about total liberation. These principles should be heeded in Algeria’s current revolutionary moment.



The shadow of Fanon: the new Algerian revolution and Black Lives Matter

In 2020, a global revolt against white supremacy started in the streets of Minneapolis in the United States, following the murder of George Floyd, a 46 year-old Black man, by a policeman who knelt with his knee on his neck for almost eight minutes. Like Eric Garner before him, George Floyd’s last words before he died were ‘I can’t breathe’. The words of Fanon when he discussed the Vietnamese anti-colonial struggle may be recalled here: ‘It is not because the Indo-Chinese has discovered a culture of his own that he is in revolt. It is because ... it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for him to breathe’.²⁵ The ensuing global rebellion and show of solidarity with Black Americans reflect the conviction that we can no longer breathe in a system that dehumanizes people, that enshrines super-exploitation, that dominates nature and humanity, and that generates massive inequality and untold poverty. Thus,

²³ Fanon (1967) *The Wretched*, p. 159.

²⁴ Fanon (1967) *The Wretched*, p. 162.

²⁵ Fanon (1986) *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 167.

revolts against this system are now taking place on all continents and in all regions. However, if these episodic and largely geographically-confined acts of resistance are to succeed, they need to go beyond the local to the global; they need to create enduring alliances in the face of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. Transnational solidarities and alliances are needed to emancipate the wretched of the earth. I would argue that both Algeria and Fanon can, once again, be a linkage and a nodal point in these struggles, as they were in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the first two decades of its independence, Algeria became, as Samir Meghelli has described, ‘a critical node in the constellation of transnational solidarities’ being forged among revolutionary movements around the world.²⁶ During this time, Algeria was a powerful symbol of revolutionary struggle and served as a model for several liberation fronts across the globe. The Algerian capital became a Mecca for revolutionaries. As Amílcar Cabral, the revolutionary leader from Guinea-Bissau, declared in 1969: ‘the Muslims make the pilgrimage to Mecca, the Christians to the Vatican and the national liberation movements to Algiers!’

The movement for African American liberation also found inspiration in Algeria. According to Meghelli, in the heydays of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, ‘just as Algeria looked to Black America as “that part of the Third World situated in the belly of the beast” so, too, did much of Black America look to Algeria as “the country that fought the enslaver and won”’.²⁷ Through both the popular film *The Battle of Algiers* and Fanon’s writings, Algeria came to hold an important place in the ‘iconography, rhetoric, and ideology of key branches of the African American freedom movement’,²⁸ which viewed their struggle for civil rights as connected to the struggles of African nations for independence. An observer at the time wrote: ‘If *The Wretched of the Earth* is the “handbook for the Black Revolution,” then *The Battle of Algiers* is its movie counterpart’.²⁹ The writings of Fanon and his analysis of the Algerian war revealed many parallels between the experience of colonial domination in Algeria and

26 Meghelli, S. (2009) ‘From Harlem to Algiers: Transnational solidarities between the African American freedom movement and Algeria, 1962–1978’, in M. Marable and H. Aidi (eds.) *Black Routes to Islam*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 99–119.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Covington, F. (1970) ‘Are the revolutionary techniques employed in *The Battle of Algiers* applicable to Harlem?’ In T.C. Bambara (ed.) *The Black Woman: An anthology*. New York: Penguin. p. 245.

the racial oppression Blacks had suffered for centuries in America. *The Wretched* became a 'Black bible' (according to Eldridge Cleaver), selling some 750,000 copies in the United States by the end of the 1970s. Dan Watts, editor of *Liberator* magazine, declared: 'Every brother on a rooftop can quote Fanon'.³⁰

Two of the most important figures in the movement for African American liberation, Dr Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, likewise drew on the Algerian experience. King was visited in New York by Ahmed Ben Bella, one of the FLN leaders and the first Algerian president, in October 1962. During the meeting Ben Bella underlined the close relationship between colonialism and segregation. In 1964, Malcolm X made a visit to Algeria, during which he toured the Casbah – the site of the 1957 battle of Algiers. On his return, responding to allegations that a Black 'hate-gang' based in Harlem was calculatedly committing crimes against Whites, he declared: 'The same conditions that prevailed in Algeria that forced the people, the noble people of Algeria, to resort eventually to the terrorist-type tactics that were necessary to get the monkey off their backs, those same conditions prevail today in America in every Black community'.³¹

The lessons from these experiences of anti-racist and anti-colonial internationalism should be heeded today. We need to revive the ambitious projects of the 1960s that sought full emancipation from the imperialist-capitalist system. As part of this, it is essential that we rediscover the revolutionary heritage of the Maghreb, Africa, West Asia and the Global South, developed by great minds like Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Thomas Sankara, Walter Rodney and Samir Amin, to mention just a few. Building on this revolutionary heritage, being inspired by its insurgent hope and applying its internationalist perspective to the current context is of utmost importance to Algeria, to the Black Lives Matter movement, and to other emancipatory struggles all over the world.

30 Zolberg, A. and Zolberg, V. (1970) 'The Americanization of Frantz Fanon', in P.I. Rose (ed.) *Americans From Africa: Old memories, new moods*. Chicago: Atherton. p. 198

31 Meghelli (2009) 'From Harlem to Algiers'.



In guise of conclusion

The progressive forces in Algeria and beyond have a huge task confronting them: the task of putting the socio-economic issue at the centre of the debate around alternatives, and of injecting a class analysis into the broad movement. It is incumbent upon them, and more specifically upon the radical and revolutionary left, to elaborate new visions that go beyond resistance to the current predatory offensive of capitalism to question the imaginary of development and modernity itself, with its lifestyle based on overconsumption and its globalization that places the majority of the world in a subordinate position.

Fanon's advice on the need to invent and make new discoveries, and not to blindly imitate Europe, is instructive here. The struggle of decolonization, Fanon tells us, must challenge the dominance of European culture and its claims of universalism. Decolonizing the mind includes deconstructing Western notions of 'development', 'civilization', 'progress', 'universalism' and 'modernity', which represent a *coloniality of power and knowledge* whereby ideas of 'modernity' and 'progress' were conceived in Europe and North America and then implanted in Africa, Asia and Latin America in a colonial context,³² becoming part of the apparatus supporting land confiscations, resource plunder, and the domination of 'other' peoples in order to 'civilize' them.

In the conclusion of *The Wretched*, Fanon wrote:

Come, then, comrades ... We must shake off the heavy darkness in which we were plunged, and leave it behind. The new day which is already at hand must find us firm, prudent and resolute.... Let us waste no time in sterile litanies and nauseating mimicry. Leave this

³² Mignolo, W. (2012) *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe... Come, then, comrades, the European game has finally ended; we must find something different. We today can do everything, so long as we do not imitate Europe, so long as we are not obsessed by the desire to catch up with Europe... For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man.³³

Fanon did not offer us a clear prescription for making the transition after decolonization to a new liberating political order; he viewed it as a protracted process that must be informed by praxis and, above all, by confidence in the masses and in their revolutionary potential to develop a liberating alternative. In this vein, it is of paramount importance for the revolutionary and emancipatory movements now active in Algeria, among African Americans, and across the world, to continue the tasks of decolonization and delinking from the imperialist-capitalist system in order to restore our denied humanity. Through resistance to colonial and capitalist logics of appropriation and extraction, new imaginaries and counter-hegemonic alternatives will be born.

Suggested Reading

Fanon, F. (1986) *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press

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Rouabah, B (2019) 'Reclaiming the Narrative of the Algerian Revolt'. *Africa is a country*, 26 April [Online]. Available at: <https://africasacountry.com/2019/04/reclaiming-the-narrative-of-the-algerian-revolt> (Accessed: 14 September 2021).

³³ Fanon (1967) *The Wretched*, pp. 251-255.





Lebanon and Iraq in 2019: Revolutionary uprisings against 'sectarian neoliberalism'

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اول مرة اعرف زويد

كلهم يعني كلهم #ظاهران - التبريد

ثورة اكتوبر



لا لسرقه
أموال الشعب

Lebanon and Iraq's October 2019 uprisings have their roots in previous cycles of concomitant – albeit separate – mass mobilizations, which reached a peak in 2015. On 16 July 2015 protesters assembled in the city of Basra in southern Iraq to demonstrate against power cuts, contaminated water, youth unemployment and corruption. During the demonstration, 18-year-old protester Muntazar al-Hilfi was killed. This spurred a wave of mass protests¹ that quickly spread across the country, reaching the capital Baghdad, with thousands of people chanting the famous slogan *Bismil deen baguna al-haramiyy*² (In the name of religion the thieves have robbed us). A day later, on 17 July 2015, some 1,215 kilometres away, residents of the city of Naameh in southern Lebanon blocked the road leading to the main landfill site in the country, due to a garbage crisis that was polluting most of Beirut and Mount Lebanon. As in Iraq, the protests quickly spread to the capital, Beirut, where thousands of protesters gathered in Martyrs' Square chanting *Kellon ya'ne kellon* (All of them means all of them), in a clear condemnation and rejection of all sectarian leaders.

These simultaneous waves of mass protests in Lebanon and Iraq were not new.³ In both countries, the year 2011 had formed a turning point, with mass protests erupting in the context of the Arab Uprisings. But the 2015 mobilizations marked an important juncture in the history of collective action against the regimes in Iraq and Lebanon: so-called 'civil society' campaigns were formed, and ran for municipal and parliamentary elections.

In October 2019, Lebanon and Iraq once again came under the spotlight. The famous 2011 chant *al-sha'b yureed isqāt al-nizām* (The people want to topple the regime) echoed again in new protests across both countries. Iraq and Lebanon officially entered the second wave of Arab Uprisings that had started to unfold in late 2018, beginning with Sudan and Algeria.

What do Iraq and Lebanon have in common beyond a regional/cultural proximity? They are both governed by a political and economic regime that can be best described as 'sectarian neoliberalism', a peculiar mix of

1 Majed, R. (2020) 'Contemporary social movements in Iraq: Mapping the labour movement and the 2015 mobilizations'. Berlin: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. Available at: https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/images/publikationen/Studien/Studien_10-20_Social-Movements-Iraq.pdf [Accessed 7 July 2021]

2 See Majed, R. (2020) 'Contemporary social movements in Iraq'.

3 See Yehya, M. (2017) 'The summer of our discontent: Sects and citizens in Lebanon and Iraq'. Carnegie Middle East Center. Available at: <https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/06/30/summer-of-our-discontent-sects-and-citizens-in-lebanon-and-iraq-pub-71396> [Accessed 7 July 2021]

identity-based power-sharing, known as consociational democracy, and a fierce neoliberal economic system that relies heavily on rent, financial capitalism, and the deregulation of labour markets. In this context, the uprisings in Lebanon and Iraq were targeting the complex state structure in each country. At the same time, unlike other Arab countries, the regimes in both countries do not have one clear ‘head’ that can be toppled; rather, multiple sectarian leaders thrive through religious ideology or practices of sectarian clientelism and nepotism, and derive their political power from their allegiance to regional powers, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. This geopolitical set-up, in addition to the legacy of sectarian violence and the rampant socioeconomic and environmental crises, led Lebanon and Iraq to erupt in 2019. In both countries, these new uprisings were quickly dubbed *thawra* (revolution) – and marked a new chapter in their histories.

The October 2019 uprisings started initially with mobilizations around socioeconomic and governance issues. In Lebanon, following a week of wildfires which ravaged several parts of the country, and in the context of an unfolding financial crisis, the government’s decision to introduce new taxes on 17 October – including the infamous WhatsApp tax – served as the spark that ignited this new *thawra*. In a similar vein, the Iraqi *thawra* erupted following two main events in late September 2019: the mobilization of unemployed university graduates, and the demotion of General Abdul Wahab al-Saadi, a well-respected lieutenant general who had played a key role in defeating Islamic State (Isis). With anger growing against the Iraqi government, calls for protests on 1 October marked the start of what has been called *Thawrat Tishreen* (the October Revolution). In both Iraq and Lebanon, the protesters managed to oust the Prime Minister, and caused a political deadlock that the regimes then tried to deal with through the formation of a so-called ‘technocratic’ government. Unfortunately, in both countries, this massive revolutionary wave was halted by the global COVID-19 pandemic and rapid financial deterioration.

The following discussion is divided into three parts. The first discusses whether these uprisings were ‘revolutions’ or ‘revolutionary’ in the first place. The second focuses on the internal contradictions of these revolutions, looking at the rhetoric of corruption, national unity, technocratic politics and individualism. Finally, the third part discusses the shift from the utopia and high hopes of late 2019 to the dystopia and pessimism of early 2020, with the arrival of COVID-19 and the deepening of the financial and political crises.



Revolution, revolutionary, or not? Rethinking our conceptual toolbox

The one-word chant *Thawra, thawra* (Revolution, revolution) filled the squares and the streets of most cities in Lebanon and Iraq in October 2019, when hundreds of thousands took to the streets to declare the start of what they saw as a revolution. The clarity of that liminal moment convinced people that what they were witnessing was revolutionary. However, pundits did not all agree with this description, with many adopting a more sceptical position. The debate that erupted in 2011 around the accuracy of the term 'revolution' in reference to the events then unfolding in the Arab region resurfaced once more in 2019. During the first wave of uprisings, some scholars and intellectuals warned us that these were not revolutions but merely revolts, upheavals, uprisings or 'refolutions'. Others declared these events 'revolutions without revolutionaries'.⁴ It might be true that these events do not fall under the traditional definition of 'revolutions' found in social movement literature; however, it is important to think of them in terms of revolutionary processes,⁵ rather than as events that either succeed or fail. It is also important to take into account the temporal aspect that governs the definition of revolutions. Revolutions are often referred to as such only in retrospect, once they have succeeded in overthrowing a ruling class or regime. This process can take years, if not decades, and frequently fails. Even the most celebrated revolutions did not unfold without cycles of ebbs and flows, and were decades in the making. For example, the widely celebrated French Revolution took around eight decades, and several rounds of conflict and counter-revolution, before

4 Bayat, A (2017) *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, www.sup.org/books/title/?id=26257 [Accessed 7 July 2021].

5 See Achcar, G. (2013) *The People Want: A radical exploration of the Arab uprising*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. See: <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520280519/the-people-want> [Accessed 7 July 2021]

the First Republic was established. Even the Russian Revolution of 1917 can be understood as a broader political process that started in 1905 and that had several episodes before the final blow was struck against the tsarist regime in 1917. Therefore, in thinking about the events of October 2019 in Lebanon and Iraq as revolutionary uprisings our theoretical and conceptual toolbox needs to be updated to make room for ‘finding the revolutionary in the revolution’.⁶ Hence, it is important not to dismiss or downplay the role of these experiences as long-term processes shaping and transforming the political imaginaries of people in their everyday lives. It is this utopian and revolutionary potential of seeking and imagining an alternative – beyond sectarian, dictatorial or capitalist realism – that needs to be centred in our understanding of these historical moments. After all, sociologist Jeffrey Paige was right to say that ‘revolution has a future even if many theoretical definitions of revolution do not’.⁷ In that sense, we should not get bogged down in the highly normative, fixed and sometimes misplaced debates about whether these are revolutions or not; and more importantly we should surely not shy away from adopting the term ‘revolutionary’ in referring to the historical developments in Lebanon or Iraq since 2019. By using the words ‘revolution’ and ‘revolutionary’ we will, first, be honouring the experiences of millions who believed in the revolutionary potential of the moment in question, who themselves called the events a ‘revolution’, and who considered themselves to be revolutionaries – even if it was just for a short moment. Moreover, we will also be pushing for a theoretical rethinking of the meaning and form of revolution under twenty-first century neoliberal capitalism more broadly. This is therefore not a call to move away from theoretical debates about what revolutions constitute, but rather to rethink our conceptual toolbox and adapt it to the realities of the twenty-first century neoliberal era. This is particularly important in the case of Lebanon and Iraq, as it can help us to understand how these revolutionary moments had considerable internal contradictions: rejecting the sectarian-neoliberal system while at times also adopting its discursive and ideological pillars (as discussed in the next section).

⁶ Paige, J. (2003) ‘Finding the revolutionary in the revolution: Social science concepts and the future of revolution’, in J. Foran (ed.) *The Future of Revolutions: Rethinking radical change in the age of globalization*. London: Zed Books. pp. 19–29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19



Fighting sectarian neoliberalism with its liberal political culture?

Revolutionary moments are often imbued with contradictory features and dynamics. Thus, it is possible for people to fight against sectarian neoliberalism while also adopting its main liberal clichés and slogans. A closer look at the 2019 revolutions in Lebanon and Iraq reveals such contradictions. Does the discourse of nationalism and 'co-existence' necessarily imply a condemnation of sectarianism? Is the problem one of corruption per se or of neoliberal capitalism? Can technocratic political demands be revolutionary? Can individualism and a rights-based approach pave the way for a revolution, or are these reformist approaches that serve to reproduce a status quo? In what follows, these trends will be scrutinized, especially in terms of how they reflect the remnants of a political culture fostered by decades of sectarian capitalism.

Nationalism versus sectarianism?

Waving the national flag and singing the national anthem were common, and sometimes predominant, in public squares across Lebanon and Iraq in 2019. This fixation on the Lebanese or Iraqi national identity as a way to express a rejection of sectarian and ethnic divisions, and to highlight 'co-existence' and 'national unity', was not new or exceptional. The focus on a national identity and patriotism has been observed in many other countries (such as Algeria and Egypt) where the national question remains central in shaping the political imaginaries of revolutionaries. In other countries, such as Syria and Libya, protesters adopted the modified independence flag to mark a rupture with the dictatorial regimes (of the Ba'ath Party and of Muammar Gaddafi) and their associated flags. This play on the relationship between the flag, the national anthem and the regime has unfolded in most squares and streets across the Arab region since 2011.

In Lebanon and Iraq, though, protesters have often adopted a nationalist approach not in order to express the legacy of a national struggle, pride

in a strong nation, or a rejection of a certain flag associated with the regime, but rather to illustrate their quest to establish a genuine nation, through their attempts to overcome sectarian divisions. However, is nationalism necessarily the opposite of sectarianism? Decades of literature on sectarianism and nationalism show that these two phenomena are often two sides of the same coin. In Lebanon and Iraq, nationalism has often been deployed with a sectarian connotation, in contrast to many national liberation struggles, in which nationalism represented a political ideology that was in opposition to colonization or occupation. The history of the region provides a nuanced account in this regard. To give two examples: Arab nationalism has historically been associated with Sunni overtones; and Lebanese nationalism has often entailed a Christian connotation. However, it remains common for ordinary members of society to use a nationalist discourse in order to signal their rejection of sectarianism. Seen in this light we can say that the uprisings in both Iraq and Lebanon have clearly attempted to address the question of sectarianism through raising the demand of an “imagined nation” as a remedy for the problems the countries face.

In Iraq’s 2019 uprising, the main slogans in the squares were ‘The people want to overthrow the regime’ (the famous chant of the 2011 protests across the Arab region), and *Nreed watan* (We want a homeland). This was coupled with chants and banners denouncing sectarianism and asserting the fraternity between Iraqi Sunnis and Shias. By demanding a ‘homeland’⁸ and rejecting sectarianism, the protesters were signalling a desire for a modern state that would be able to serve its citizens and provide a sense of belonging beyond sectarian and ethnic fragmentation.

In Lebanon, a similar process of re-imagining the ‘nation’ beyond sectarian fragmentation was observed. Squares quickly filled with the national flag, and the Lebanese anthem was repeatedly heard on loud speakers. While the main slogans also included the famous ‘The people want to overthrow the regime’, a more custom-made slogan was added: *Kellon ya’ne kellon* (All of them means all of them), signalling a rejection of the sectarian power-sharing system and denouncing all leaders, regardless of their sectarian belonging. Like in Iraq, the rejection of political sectarianism was expressed through a desire to get rid of all sectarian leaders and to

⁸ See Ali, Z. (2019) ‘Iraqis demand a country’, *MERIP: Middle East Research and Information Project*, 292/3 (Fall/Winter 2019). Available at: <https://merip.org/2019/12/iraqis-demand-a-country/> [Accessed 7 July 2021]

build a 'country', a 'state', and a 'nation' that will protect its citizens and treat them equally and justly.

However, sectarianism was not the only problem that needed to be tackled in the two countries: a dire economic situation also loomed over the scene. Therefore, the discourse of national unity and co-existence was coupled with slogans about the economic situation, often in the form of 'anti-corruption' rhetoric.

Corruption or sectarian neoliberalism?

A trend that appeared in both revolutions, and that seemed to contradict the radical side of the moment, was the predominance of a liberal discourse around 'corruption'. Of course, corruption is a major problem in Lebanon and Iraq. However, the alarmingly high rates of youth unemployment, the deregulation of labour markets, the expansion of the informal sector, the politics of austerity, the lack of development in productive economic sectors, the heavy reliance on imports for basic needs (such as food and electricity), the debt crisis, and the reliance on financial capital (the banking sector) or oil rent are hardly the result of corruption only. These are clearly indicators of a deeper crisis in the neoliberal capitalist system that has, in the case of Lebanon and Iraq, intersected with a sectarian political system and a heavy militarization of some political parties to create a sort of 'mafia state', where ruling elites have acted to ensure the state and its spoils serve their economic interests and those of the business and banking cronies that sustain them.

The flourishing of such an oligarchy that controls the state and uses it for its own benefits, shielded from accountability or the rule of law, has allowed for patronage networks and the politics of clientelism to strive and shape what has been called the 'politics of non-state welfare'.⁹ In this context, revolutionaries in the streets of Lebanon and Iraq who were protesting unemployment or financial crisis were also – even if indirectly – protesting neoliberal capitalism and its local version of neoliberal sectarianism. However, the protesters' framing remained mainly fixated on anti-corruption, and did not address the structure of the economic system. More and more, the crisis was reduced to the corruption of a few 'bad leaders' who needed to be replaced by better and more ethical technocrats. Shaped by an NGO lingo of anti-corruption that fails to tackle

⁹ See Cammett, M. (2014) *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

capitalism as a root cause, this trend obscured the more radical drive of the first few days of the protests, which called for the complete overhaul of the system, rather than merely the replacement of corrupt politicians.

Seen from this perspective, the major challenge for the uprisings in Iraq and Lebanon now is to move beyond liberal politics and simultaneously to re-target the struggle more precisely against the two pillars of the sectarian-neoliberal regime: keeping the focus on the demand for socioeconomic justice beyond neoliberal capitalism, while also rejecting the intertwined system of sectarian power-sharing and identity politics.

Technocratic politics and leaderlessness

The popular demand for a technocratic government that emerged in the aftermath of the resignation of the prime ministers of Lebanon and Iraq became a life vest for the two regimes. How did the protesters that wanted to uproot the whole system end up demanding from the regimes to form technocratic governments?

This third contradiction in the 2019 uprisings in Lebanon and Iraq revealed itself in the schism between the radical demands of a complete overhaul, on one side, and the widespread celebrations of leaderlessness and technocratic political demands, on the other side. Given the state of affairs in both countries, political organization and political leadership came to be equated by wide sections of society with corruption and criminality. A new generation had grown to perceive party politics as bad, and to distance itself from political organization or leadership aspirations. For most people, being patriotic and honest meant staying away from politics. This 'anti-politics' approach, although rooted in an aversion to conventional politics, translated in many cases into a rejection of all types of organizing or leadership. This resulted in a deep contradiction during the initial days of the uprisings, when the popular will to oust the regimes was at its highest, while the popular capacity to provide a political alternative was clearly weak. This crisis of political organization led the masses to raise demands that at times sounded anarchist (rejecting any rule or leadership), and at others liberal (the demand for the formation of a technocratic government).

Here again the demands fell short of addressing the radical and revolutionary potential of the moment. This situation needs to be understood as a consequence of the weakness of leftist political organization and the cooptation of unions and syndicates. The revolutionary fervour was thus

guided by political trends that diluted the revolutionary political path, instead of strengthening it. Unlike in Sudan or Tunisia, where unions and leftist organizations managed to scaffold the initial revolutionary moment (despite the later counter-revolutionary developments), the revolutions in Lebanon and Iraq erupted at a time when such organizations were too weak to lead the way.

Given the weakness of unions in both countries, road blockades were a widely used tactic to indirectly bring the country to a halt, thus imposing a de facto general strike. The imposed closure of businesses and institutions allowed for huge crowds to mobilize in the streets and created a revolutionary moment. Similarly, the student movements played a crucial role in sustaining the uprisings in both Lebanon and Iraq, through their calls for strikes and mobilization. However, despite the huge collective efforts of hundreds of thousands who gave their best to ensure the success of this revolutionary moment, the lack of organization and leadership, and the decades of de-politicization and NGO-ization in Lebanon since the early 1990s, and in Iraq since 2003, created a political ceiling for the uprisings that was much lower than the popular aspirations that animated them.

My revolution or ours? In search of a collective 'we'

The articulations and changing dynamics of the uprisings in Iraq and Lebanon remind us that neoliberalism is more than a question of financial structures: it is also an ideological manifestation. Hence, the contradiction between the collectiveness of the revolutionary moment and the individualism of the political framings that emerged from the collective action are emblematic of the neoliberal age. This was noticeable in how some of the major political initiatives during this period were largely framed by an individual subjective outlook. For example, a key electoral campaign that grew out of the 2015 mobilizations in Lebanon, and that was active in the 2019 uprising, was *Beirut Madinati* (Beirut, my city). Instead of emphasizing a collective 'our' that rethinks the city as a shared space for all, the name emphasizes an individual relationship with the city. Similarly, in the aftermath of the financial collapse in 2019, activists in the Lebanese uprising sprayed graffiti on the windows of banks, saying 'Give me back my money' – not 'Give us back our money'. While the collective anger against the banks was clear, the political culture that shaped the activism of this period was still a product of the very system it was fighting against.

Many campaigns also emphasized a legal and rights-based approach that seems to be detached from the realities of both Lebanon and Iraq. In both countries, the post-war sectarian-neoliberal setting flourished in the context of a weakening of the legal and judicial systems. The language of 'rights' therefore does not occupy a central space in the political imaginaries of people who have learned not to trust the legal pathway. However, several prominent political movements and campaigns have centred individual 'rights' as the locus of their activism. Examples include the political campaign that ignited the uprising in Iraq under the slogan *Nazel akhod haqqi* (I am mobilizing to take my right), and the political group *Li haqqi* (For my right) that was very active in the Lebanese uprising.

This emphasis on individual rights in political organizations and campaigns speaks to the longing for an imagined state where the rule of law is respected. However, as suggested earlier, the pervasiveness of a neoliberal culture that enshrines individualism and individual rights seems to be at odds with the progressive politics of collectiveness embodied in the revolutions' squares – even if only for a short time.



From utopia to dystopia: liminality, COVID-19, and counter-revolution

'We did not want to sleep because the dream we were living while awake was much nicer.'

This is how the experience of living the early days of the 2019 thawra was described by a young man from the Chouf-Aley region of Mount Lebanon.

The liminal¹⁰ experience of revolution as a dream-like feeling of 'temporal limbo'¹¹ or a stark break from the previous 'normal' led the protesters to believe that this was a moment that was full of possibilities. The rapid transformations in people's everyday lived experiences in Lebanon and Iraq, and the spontaneous emergence of a 'communitas', where togetherness and comradeship reigned in the squares, was hard to miss in the early days of the revolution. Cooperation and camaraderie, meetings in tents, public political discussions, and a festive mood shaped life in the squares. However, this was disrupted by the heavy violence and repression of state apparatuses and their connected militias. While the repression backfired at first, leading more people to mobilize in outrage at the targeting of protesters, by the end of 2019 the revolution in both countries had started to enter a deadlock, with a lack of political alternatives, an inability to continue the strikes, and a repositioning of the regimes after the initial shock they had received in October 2019.

As 2020 started, a series of highly exceptional circumstances aligned to halt the revolutionary process: a global pandemic, a deep financial collapse, and, in Lebanon, the massive explosion at the port of Beirut, which shattered both the city and its inhabitants. These outside circumstances were added to the cooptation and counter-revolutionary wave that had deepened by the end of 2019. The formation of technocratic governments became the ancien régimes' way to continue governing, despite the difficulty of this task after October 2019 in both countries.

However, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region came not only as a public health threat, but also as a counter-revolutionary turn of events. The squares were forcibly emptied and street mobilizations were halted. The state used the opportunity to crack down on dissent under the pretext of preserving public health. It became difficult to sustain the uprisings, despite the deepening of the political and economic crises. The sudden move from the intense communal experience of the revolution to the intense isolation of COVID lockdowns led to a general feeling of defeat.

The utopia of the early revolutionary days was quickly overshadowed by the dystopia of the pandemic and what followed. The downward spiral of both

10 For more discussion on liminality in the context of Lebanon, see Majed, R. (2020) 'Living revolution, financial collapse and pandemic in Beirut: Notes on temporality, spatiality, and "double liminality"', *Middle East Law and Governance* 12(3): 305–315.

11 Ryzova, L. (2020) 'The battle of Muhammad Mahmoud Street in Cairo: The politics and poetics of urban violence in revolutionary time', *Past & Present* 247(1): 278.

countries into economic misery made the possibilities of organizing more difficult. In Lebanon, the Beirut port explosion of 4 August 2020, described as the third biggest non-nuclear explosion in history, devastated the city and led to a massive wave of migration out of the country. Furthermore, a series of political assassinations in Iraq, and to a lesser extent in Lebanon, underlined that political opposition carried with it a real threat of death at any moment. However, now that the pandemic is starting to recede, and as the political deadlock and financial crises are deepening, the revolutionary processes that started in Lebanon and Iraq in October 2019 are bound to continue, albeit in new shapes and forms.



Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the revolutionary uprisings of October 2019 in Lebanon and Iraq can only be read as part of a broader revolutionary process that started to unfold in 2011, and that intensified in both countries in 2015, before reaching the eruption point of 2019 as part of the second wave of uprisings in the region. While these uprisings might not fall under traditional definitions of revolutions – since they have not overthrown the regime as a whole – it is important to think of them as part of a revolutionary process. This is not only because we should avoid limiting revolutions to temporal events or qualifying them as political dichotomies (in which they either succeed or fail), but also because it is crucial to rethink the meaning and shapes of revolution under twenty-first century neoliberal capitalism globally.

The chapter has discussed the internal contradictions that characterized the uprisings in Lebanon and Iraq in 2019, with the dominance of a liberal discourse of national co-existence, anti-corruption, individual rights and technocratic politics that fell short of the radical potential of the initial moment of eruption. The analysis has suggested that one important consequence of the sectarian-neoliberal system that governs both

countries, and that therefore favours individual interlocutors, has been the weakness of political organizations or trade unions: in other words, the structures that could serve as a scaffold supporting the transition to a new political system. Such organizations are also needed to challenge the two-pole regimes in the two countries, where sectarianism and neoliberalism feed into each other to reproduce more of the same.

With the recent spread of COVID-19 in both countries, the emergence and organization of a lost 'we' is a priority in order to defeat a system that is clearly unable to protect society, either from economic disasters or from health pandemics. New forms of organizing, whether in the workplace or at the neighbourhood level, and organizations that bring together the unemployed, migrant workers, domestic workers and informal workers, are all crucial in order to build a stronger movement that can move beyond sectarian neoliberalism as both an economic structure and an ideological apparatus that shapes our political imagination and delimits our political possibilities.

It is only by linking our struggles together, within our societies and across the colonial boundaries of the nation-state, that these revolutionary uprisings can prevail. Thus, it is by standing in solidarity with Palestine, supporting Amazon workers in the US, and defending the rights of refugees and migrant workers or the ambitions of the feminist movement, that the Lebanese and Iraqi uprisings will reach their full revolutionary potential, both ideologically and politically, beyond sectarian neoliberalism.





Afterword

Laleh Khalili



In his preface to the first edition of *The Black Jacobins*, the great Trinidadian historian and revolutionary C.L.R. James writes:

In a revolution, when the ceaseless slow accumulation of centuries bursts into volcanic eruption, the meteoric flares and flights above are a meaningless chaos and lend themselves to infinite caprice and romanticism unless the observer sees them always as projections of the sub-soil from which they came. The writer has ... not only to analyse, but to demonstrate in their movement, the economic forces of the age; their moulding of society and politics, of men in the mass and individual men; the powerful reaction of these on their environment at one of those rare moments when society is at boiling point and therefore fluid.

This collection of essays recounts the fluid, evolving, thwarted, or suspended revolutionary movements in the Arab world – from the first upheavals in 2011 to the more recent wave of revolts in the latter years of the 2010s. The authors' thoughtful analyses convey something of the unpredictability and fluidity James writes about so eloquently. It is still too early to discern the longer-term effects of these waves of revolt. Rima Majed echoes this view in her account of the revolutionary processes in Iraq and Lebanon: 'even the most celebrated revolutions did not unfold without cycles of ebbs and flows, and were decades in the making.'

These essays collectively make clear that the context in which the revolutionary movements emerged was one of imperial intervention; regional interference by counterrevolutionary states; bloated bureaucratic states unleashing spectacular violence; co-optation of most organized political or socioeconomic parties or unions; environmental degradation; a public abandoned to its own devices by exploitation and austerity; and domestic and international deployment of divisive strategies to fragment the population.

External intervention is an underlying theme in all of the pieces. Sometimes this intervention arrives in the guise of the Washington Consensus and globally imposed programmes of austerity and economic liberalization – as we see in the pieces by Hanieh, Amouzai (on Morocco), or Bassiouny and Alexander (on Egypt). Intervention can also occur via free trade deals with richer treaty partners. Ben Khelifa describes the devastation of the textile industry in Tunisia after Ben Ali's government entered into an association deal with the European Union. Often, regional economic interference –

frequently by the counterrevolutionary Gulf states, rich in oil and poor in scruples – can devastate local economies. Hanieh and Ziadah's accounts of the 'developmental' plans of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in Yemen, Egypt and elsewhere, and Alneel's discussion of the fire sale of Sudanese arable lands to Gulf states, are another aspect of the workings of foreign intervention by regional capital. Military incursions and both hot and cold wars have also shaped so much of the recent histories of Arab states: whether it is the United States' regular wars waged against Iraq and its interventions alongside coalition allies in other states, the civil war in Lebanon, simmering conflict between Morocco and Western Sahara, assaults by Israel against neighbouring Arab countries, vicious domestic counterinsurgencies waged by various states, the dizzying amounts spent by Arab states on military equipment, or the escalating interventions by Gulf states to foreclose the possibility of cascading revolutionary movements.

In all of these states, sclerotic postcolonial governments have adopted so many of the colonial *ancien régimes*' characteristics, security and bureaucratic apparatuses, and methods of dividing (so as to conquer) their restive populations. These states represent the national bourgeoisie of which Frantz Fanon warned so urgently, as Hamouchene reminds us. Foremost among the methods of control used by these states is the weaponization of ethno-cultural and regional differences, and the transmutation of these differences into durable political and economic structures that not only generate conflict but, more significantly, become conduits for new modalities of capitalist exploitation. The striation of populations into sects (see Majed on Iraq and Lebanon); the violence against vulnerable minorities (for example, the Moroccan state's violence against Amazigh and Sahrawis, analysed by Amouzai); the creation of favoured minorities (as Munif shows for Syria); the polarization between secular and Islamist forces (recounted in several of the essays here); and the devastating effect of conflicts between regions and groupings in Libya and Yemen (about which Ziadah writes) are all parts of this process.

Another perceptive point made by all of the authors is that the increasingly authoritarian states are fully embedded in webs of capitalist accumulation across the globe. The attachments of these states to the US empire can vary. Whether rhetorically against the US empire (as Hanieh perspicuously shows for Syria and Libya) or full-throatedly defending their alliance with the US and Europe, these states have nevertheless become fully permeable to the

depredations of global capital and the attendant organized abandonment of peoples and the environment that characterizes catastrophic late capitalism.

The subsoil from which these revolutionary movements have emerged has more similarities than differences. They have encountered massive obstacles from within and from without, sometimes because of the weaknesses immanent in the movements themselves, and always because the reactionary forces in the region and beyond have single-mindedly worked to impede these movements, using a range of strategies – not least among them violence. Fourate Chaha's beautiful and affecting illustrations capture something of the hope and violence of these revolutionary moments, what C.L.R. James calls 'the fever and the fret' of this juncture.

In these essays, we see movements that have mobilized different categories of peoples: peasants of the Rif in Morocco and workers in Egypt's factories (in the accounts by Amouzai, and Bassiouny and Alexander); women in the squares of Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, Tunisia and further afield (as Zahra Ali, Rima Majed, Muzan Alneel and others show us); and students and unemployed youth in Syria, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia (as described by Munif, Hamouchene and Ben Khelifa). Alongside more familiar tactics of street protest, work stoppages and general strikes, innovative forms of dissent have characterized these successive waves of protest: takeovers of public spaces and squares (in almost all cases); road blockades (in Tunisia, Lebanon and Iraq); desert sit-ins (in Tunisia); rural protests (in Morocco and Syria); and mutual aid through community bakeries outside the purview of the state (in Manbij in Syria).

The takeover of public spaces has been particularly crucial in these revolts and it is therefore no surprise that autocratic regimes have been eager to shut down these spaces and to terminate public access to and control over them. In this they have been aided by the COVID pandemic. Quarantines and epidemiological measures have historically functioned as a way for the state to not only expand the domain of public health, but also to deepen its security apparatuses. Even setting aside the global inequalities that have been starkly outlined by global vaccine apartheid, we have seen the pandemic itself used as an alibi for draconian border closures, the expansion of police powers, the deepening of surveillance and data-gathering, and for driving the public out of the streets. In effect, any excuse is invoked to expand policing and to deepen militarization. A passage by Frantz Fanon, quoted by Hamouchene, is relevant here:

In these poor, under-developed countries, where the rule is that the greatest wealth is surrounded by the greatest poverty, the army and the police constitute the pillars of the regime; an army and a police force which are advised by foreign experts. The strength of the police and the power of the army are proportionate to the stagnation in which the rest of the nation is sunk.

The authors of these pieces, however, also point to internal weaknesses plaguing these movements: the absence of independent unions in some places has led to fragmented revolutionary forces and a working class that is difficult to mobilize in a coherent and decisive way. Fossilized and conciliatory political parties, on the one hand, and leaderless (or decapitated) and often transitory movements, on the other hand, have prevented the emergence of robust, dense, lasting political movements that can weather the assaults made against them. Sometimes the protests have challenged sectarianism by invoking a narrow nationalism, sometimes they have pushed against Islamists in power by supporting autocratic factions. On occasion, liberal slogans against corruption have occluded the structural inequalities and economic injustices that characterize everyday forms of capitalist exploitation. The incompetence and venality of these states have sometimes been countered by a call for technocratic – rather than democratic – governance. And again and again, violence has characterized state responses to popular anger and grievance.

In the face of counterrevolutionary foreclosures of protest from within and without, the authors point to a few spaces of possibility. Unanticipated spontaneous conflagrations have been crucial in igniting these successive waves of protest. As all of the authors indicate, economic grievances have always been at the core of the struggles, which have often taken on a political shape. The materiality and necessity of bread; the demand for jobs, economic equity and political accountability; the anguished and angry cry against the purloining of Arab countries' resources by capitalists at home and abroad – all show a possible path to the future. The intensifying acknowledgement that capitalist exploitation not only devastates communities and working classes but also the environment now shapes the strategies of many movements across the global South.

Perhaps the most hopeful suggestion across the range of these essays is a call for regional and global solidarities. Solidarity with peoples trapped under the bombs of their own and outside interventionist regimes, with the Palestinian people, and with emancipatory movements the world

over, is crucial to the long struggle against capitalism and its executive committee, the authoritarian state. Hamouchene draws from Fanon's writings about Algeria – and indeed Fanon's life itself – to remind us that in an interconnected world, where capital's webs entangle us across borders, forms of solidarity also have to be cross-border and trans-regional. We need to learn from one another, connect our struggles to one another, and – while being alert to the way the Third Worldist emancipatory movements of the 1960s were assaulted, co-opted or domesticated – we need to be 'inspired by [their] insurgent hope and [to apply their] internationalist perspective to the current moment' (Hamouchene).



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The decade 2011-2021 witnessed waves of revolutionary uprisings in North Africa and West Asia that were undoubtedly among the most unforgettable historical events. Not only they shattered many racist stereotypes and debunked many myths about the region but like most revolutionary situations, they released enormous energy – a collective effervescence, an unparalleled sense of renewal and a shift in political consciousness. However the various people’s movements, spanning a dozen countries, found themselves pitted against entrenched authoritarian and counter-revolutionary forces bent on suppressing them. This book revisits these historical moments with some of the finest scholar-activists, participants and witnesses from those very contexts. While challenging a number of misconceptions about the region, its people and their revolts and uprisings, the various contributions in this collection reflect on some of the key achievements and shortcomings and draw lessons for the future.

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