

## **Western and Eastern perspectives of the Arab Spring: the cases of France, Kuwait, Britain and United Arab Emirates (UAE)**

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The series of popular events that began in late 2010 have already and definitely marked the region's modern history and caught international attention to the Arabs' thirst for democracy and better governance. The media coverage of the revolutionary processes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya has been well researched and extensively discussed. However, the perceptions of this series of major political events and its impact on the views of Arab politics in neighboring regions – as in the European democracies or the Gulf monarchies for instance - has so far been neglected by scholars of comparative studies.

This exploratory paper is a first and modest contribution to this issue. It begins with a brief review of the academic discourses that used to prevail on the matter of autocracy and democracy in the Arab world prior to the Arab spring. Then follows an analysis of how the Arab spring was received in Western Europe, using France and Britain as examples. Then we will see how the Arab spring has affected the Gulf monarchies, using Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates as cases. The article will finally attempt to conclude on how this Arab spring might have changed Western and Eastern mutual views and how this could have an impact on global co-existence.

### **Revolutions in the Arab World? How academia had it wrong**

In order to understand why this Arab revolutionary dynamic for democracy was not expected, we will briefly review the two main academic approaches that have theorized the lack of democracy in the Arab world. Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> C., these two schools – though not being the sole ones to address the issue – have been the major and rival forces that have defined the academic debate on Arab states' autocratic nature and structural incapacity to democratize. These two discourses have in turn, until recently, fed the journalistic narrative on Arab politics. These two schools are the cultural approach and the political economy approach.

The cultural approach, as promoted by various figures such as Bernard Lewis, Bertrand Badie and Elie Kedourie, argued that the Arab world was incapable of producing true democracies because its Arab political culture and Muslim civilizational heritage have *par essence* been foreign to some of the philosophical foundations of democracy (e.g. the separation of religious and political powers) and hostile to the Western powers which have developed and embodied this political tradition.

The political culture approach initially emphasized that societies that were predominantly Arab were marked by various forms of primordialism (sectarianism, tribalism, or even linguistic: Arabs vs. non-Arabs, etc.) that impeded the development of a modern social contract between equal citizens and a neutral modern state. Islam provided furthermore the ultimate sacred revelation where God, neither a human being nor a people, was the true and legitimate sovereign. Free-thinking was consequently not possible in a Muslim polity, and political and philosophical evolutions could

easily be seen as an innovation (*bid'a*), a dangerous monstrosity that a virtuous Muslim community shall not tolerate. Even among the intellectual elites, argued Bertrand Badie and Elie Kedourie, a democracy appeared as a 'degenerative' form of political system. They alleged that Arab thinkers and '*Ulamâ* (the religious scholars) had traditionally been hostile to it since both the Arabs and Persians had been significantly influenced by Plato's works – especially The Republic and The Laws - which advocate for the rule of the learned and wise and warn against the danger of crowds and lay persons.

Renowned scholars from various fields such as religious anthropology, post-colonial studies or political economy have participated in the deconstruction and critique of this political culture approach. The works of Clifford Geertz, Edward Said and Lisa Anderson, to name but a few, have significantly delegitimized this scholarship demonstrating how generalizing, ethnocentric, teleological and deterministic it is. The cultural approach to Arab politics has nevertheless known a renaissance after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent Western concern with the 'Muslim mind'. This influence was particularly evident in politics (especially during the Bush administrations) and with the commercial success of Samuel Huntington's The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order and Bernard Lewis' writings (Huntington's main source on Islam). Lewis' post-9/11 books have become influential 'best sellers' well beyond the United States, with revealing titles such as The Assassins (2002), What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East (2003) and The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror (2004). From this controversial scholarship stemmed the simple idea that the Arab was a Muslim, and a Muslim was an enemy of democracies.

The other main academic tradition that explained the lack of democracy in the Arab world was the political economy approach. Since the 1970s, it has primarily focused on the idea of rentierism. The concept of a rentier state was originally crafted by political economists of the Middle Eastern and Northern African (MENA) such as Robert Mabro and Hussein Mahdavy. They tried to understand the deep transformations of the MENA states whose revenues were largely emanating from oil exportations. More generally 'rentier states' have been defined as polities that receive most of their revenues from abroad, on a regular basis, for the exploitation of a national resource, such as oil and natural gas in Libya for instance, or for a service, like tourism in Tunisia. Some rentier states could also be dependent on cumulated rents, like Egypt, with revenues from tourism, natural gas and the American aid for regional stability and peace with Israel, or like Yemen, which depends on oil and gas exports as well as foreign aid for its war on Al-Qaida partisans and Shiite rebels.

Most political economists of the MENA region, such as Lisa Anderson, Hazem Beblawi, Giacomo Luciani or Dirk Vandewalle, have explained the regional lack of democracy by the 'rentier state paradigm'. On the one hand, since the rentier State receives sufficient rent revenues and does not need to tax its population, it is under no obligation nor even supposed to be accountable to its citizens. In other words, from its fiscal autonomy structurally stems its political autonomy. On the other hand, the rentier state is protected from democratic aspirations from its society, because the

economic redistribution policies tend to depoliticize the citizens. Often summed up by the reversed American revolutionary motto “*no representation without taxation*”, this literature essentially relies on the idea that the redistribution of the rent revenues and the absence of taxes are known and accepted trade-offs that enable the authorities to rule almost freely, without any real popular demand for participation. This literature generally concludes that rentier states will not liberalize nor democratize as long as their political economy remains characterized by rentierism. More cautiously, during the mid-1990s, at a time of low oil prices and revenues, the economist Giacomo Luciani admitted that a durable budgetary crisis (due to low rent revenues) could lead an Arab rentier state to deeply reform itself in the long term. But the Arab spring happened during a period of comfortable oil and gas prices in 2010 and the revolutionary movements of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen have been initiated by domestic (local and national) factors and an Arab regional dynamic. In other words, none of the two academic theoretical frameworks could theorize or forecast these Arab revolutionary dynamics, nor were they able to explain them. An unexpected dynamic that should logically provoke a revolution of Arab political studies and which should more generally transform the perceptions of the Arab world beyond its borders.

### **France & Britain’s common reactions: Surprise, Slow response, Support but Suspicion**

The Arab spring was unexpected, not only by academia and ordinary citizens, but by journalists and politicians as well. Both France and Britain, the former colonial powers of Tunisia and Egypt respectively, have been slow to perceive the democratization potential of the growing crowds demonstrating in Southern Tunisia and in Cairo. French authorities reacted initially to the Tunisian popular movements with a *laissez-faire* policy and formally expressed the concern that the right to demonstration shall be respected and order preserved. After this brief period marked by media under-coverage and quasi-indifference, public opinions in France were surprised by the resolute commitment of the Tunisian youth and the violent state crackdown that followed. The French and British Media had begun to closely follow the developments in Tunisia and Egypt; the popular slogans for freedom and dignity as well as the epic scenes of street fighting and camel raids that Al-Jazeera English reported live made the headlines of European newspapers and TVs. A number of influential British and French bloggers and the websites of the newspapers *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent* among others, began to allocate the Arab events the main editorial space and to report live the events in the Arab world.

In France, the opposition and the public opinion supported the Tunisian uprising and began to criticize Michelle Alliot-Marie’s (then Minister of Foreign Affairs) diplomatic posture, and stiffly reacted to her proposition to “*share the French (repressive) expertise*” with President Ben Ali’s regime and her project to sell teargas to Tunisia during the repression<sup>1</sup>. Under heavy critique and accusations of business relations with Tunisian supporters of Ben Ali, Alliot-Marie had to resign as

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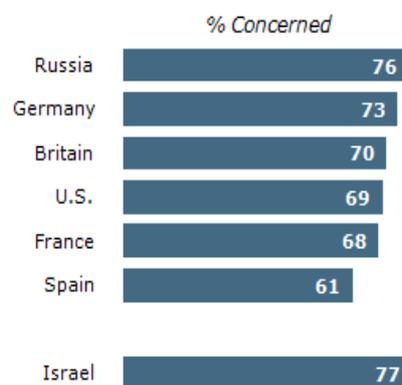
<sup>1</sup> See <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/05/world/la-fg-france-scandal-20110205>

Foreign Minister on 27 February 2011<sup>2</sup>. Before that period, Prime Minister David Cameron had been under severe critique in the Britain for placing armament exports at the heart of his long-planned visit to the Gulf monarchies in late February 2011<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile President Ben Ali was gone and President Mubarak had stepped down - the first time in modern Arab history that autocrats quitted due to a civilian revolt rather than a military coup. When it was announced that Mubarak agreed to step down, the above-mentioned interactive information websites were submerged of moving messages of joy and celebration from many French and British citizens. Europeans who did not know these countries but who had lived the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions online, *par procuration*.

The British and French political reactions to Qaddafi's crackdown in Eastern Libya were comparatively fast, more coordinated and asserted. However, the public opinions were much less enthusiastic for the subsequent military intervention that has increasingly polarized the public opinions in both countries while it became clear that NATO was more engaged and aggressive in its air operations than the UN resolution had authorized. If virtually noone took the stance to defend the Qaddafi regime, the idea that France and Britain were leading the fight against the regime because of geostrategic considerations – namely oil – was increasingly discussed. Another fear also emerged and seems to have cast a shadow over the popular European solidarity towards the Arab peoples that fought for their freedom: the fear of islamism

A poll realized by the Pew Research Center in July 2011 shew indeed that in both France and Great Britain more than two thirds of the population was concerned about the risk of rising 'Islamic extremism'. In contrast, a majority of Arabs (55%) polled in October 2011 for the University of Maryland expressed that they were "*more optimistic about the future of the Arab world in light of the Arab Spring*"

#### Widespread Concerns About Islamic Extremism



Source Pew Research Center 4 July 2011

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.tsr.ch/info/monde/2984680-michele-alliot-marie-jette-l-eponge.html>

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/feb/22/david-cameron-uk-muslims-democracy?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487>

## **Kuwait & UAE: different systems, different political cultures, different reactions**

The Gulf monarchies are often considered as a homogeneous group of conservative small ‘petro-monarchies’, though they display important differences in terms of institutional setting and political cultures. The State of Kuwait is a Parliamentary Monarchy with a constitution that is legally binding to all Kuwaitis – including the Head of State or Emir – and which has vested great powers into the Parliament. The political influence of the British Parliamentary experience is undeniable in this former territory of the British Empire, though the legal strikes, regular demonstrations and the system of the legal framework itself denote a more French influence.

To the contrary, the United Arab Emirates is a loose federation of seven emirates based on tribal lines. There, a remarkably effective rentier state, a sharp security apparatus and Arabian social-political traditions of consensus building and conflict resolution behind closed doors that give the President of the federation great liberties over federal politics and strategic affairs. In spite of these differences, the populations and then the diplomacy of both Kuwait and the UAE have shown a common support for the dynamic of the Arab spring in Tunisia and Egypt, widely seen as peaceful and legitimate demonstrations for a better governance and more democracy.

On the rest of the Arab spring, there were two main differences with Europe: Kuwaitis and Emiratis (two mainly Sunni Muslim countries) felt that Bahrain’s Shiite-led demonstrations were dangerous for the region’s stability, and the protests in Yemen – which is close geographically - were given logically more attention in the media of the Gulf region. The two Gulf nations appeared also similarly divided on the issue of the international intervention in Libya. More generally throughout the Arab world, a plurality of Arabs (46%) in the five countries polled by the Maryland University’s 2011 Arab Public Opinion Survey considered that, retrospectively, the international intervention was a mistake. A probable factor of homogeneity of the Arab public opinions was the major role played by Pan-Arab TV news networks, and especially Aljazeera.

According to the University of Maryland’s survey, the Qatari network was the preferred source of international news among those polled (53%), far ahead of Al-Arabiya (14%) and MBC (12%). Beyond these public opinions convergence, the *state* reactions from Kuwait and the UAE were significantly different and reflected their different systems and political traditions.

In Kuwait, spontaneous demonstrations of support for the Arab spring or against the country’s corruption could erupt without initially creating much surprise nor any crackdown from the authorities. This led to demonstrators breaking into the Parliament’s building on 16 November 2011 and defiantly chanting that “*the people wants the fall of the Prime Minister*”. Only then did the government react by threatening to jail the demonstrators that would break the law and/or jeopardize the national security<sup>4</sup>. In the UAE, demonstrations are not legal and none was held, except those in support of the ruling family. During the summer, five Internet activists who had written negatively about the Emirati political system and encouraged people to protest were arrested and charged with committing acts that pose a threat to state security. They were eventually pardoned months later by the President, a few days ahead of National Day on 2 December.

## **Conclusion**

We have seen that different political traditions within the Arab world have led to different state reactions towards the Arab spring, thereby contradicting the idea of a single and homogeneous Arab

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/17/kuwait-protesters-storm-parliament>

Muslim political culture. A political culture that was supposed by many to be anti-democratic until the Arab spring invalidated this theory. Within the Arab world, the diversity of state reactions seems to owe more to the diversity of national political frameworks and cultures, as illustrated with the cases of Kuwait and the UAE. Interestingly, Kuwait seems to have displayed a similar pattern of state reaction to that expected from a European democracy towards domestic defiance, authorizing demonstrations and the public expression of discontentment, since it shares more with the European political tradition than with other Gulf states, and especially the United Arab Emirates.

Despite their different political settings and traditions, our four case studies from Europe and the Arab world have nevertheless all shown an overall *popular* support for the Arab spring, identified with peaceful demonstrations and legitimate demands. An important role in the rapprochement of the views between and among Europeans and Arabs seems to have been played by the transnational media. Remarkably, the Aljazeera Network (with both Aljazeera Arabic and Aljazeera English) has been perceived in the Arab world and in Europe as a reliable source of information on the Arab spring. This positive trend for mutual understanding and global co-existence could also be reinforced by the increasing use of the Internet in the Arab world<sup>5</sup>, thereby gradually closing a critical technology and information gap with Europe.

Finally, the fear of islamic extremism that appears to be widespread in European societies is not surprising given the above-mentioned writings on Arab and Muslim politics. But the failure of this academic literature to comprehend, theorize or forecast the democratization dynamics of the Arab world announces that there is now plenty of room for a new scholarship, based on less ideological and less politicized grounds. This too, should significantly help to improve the mutual understanding and global co-existence between European and Arab Muslim nations.

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<sup>5</sup> According to the University of Maryland's 2011 Arab Public Opinion Survey, over a quarter of users said that they acquired access to Internet only in the past year, while a total of over 40% said that they had acquired use over the past three years. There is also a marked increase in the percentage of Arabs who identify the Internet as their main source of international news, with 20% saying that the Internet is their primary source of international news, against 8% in 2009.