

Unrest in the Arab World: Four Questions

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ABSTRACT

This essay addresses four questions that the “Arab spring” has raised with respect to academic scholarship and policy advice. Why did scholars fail to predict the recent developments? Should we throw the work on Middle Eastern authoritarianism in the garbage bin of academic misinterpretations? In which ways can we support the move toward democracy in the region? Is there a “new Middle East” in the making? In critically examining the scholarly debate about the resilience of Arab authoritarianism, it rejects demands requesting both the predictive power of academic analyses and their direct applicability in foreign policy-making. The continuing interpretation and re-interpretation of the relationship between Islam and politics have absorbed our analytical capacities at the expense of a closer inspection of societal change. In putting the recent events into their international and regional context, the essay tries to give a tentative answer to the question whether we are witnessing a new Middle East in the making.

The “Arab spring” seems to challenge a number of scholarly truisms prevalent in the Middle East studies community. The rather quick fall of Tunisia’s Ben Ali and the subsequent resignation and arrest of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt took many by surprise. Some of my students, for instance, asked with a smile whether it still makes sense to read the literature in their curricula, alluding to the strong focus on Middle Eastern authoritarianism when discussing domestic politics of the region. A number of critical media commentaries put the scholarly expertise of area experts in doubt who apparently have not been able to predict the recent course of events. A wind of change has not only moved across the Middle East but also seized public debates and university lecture rooms, raising crucial questions for the scholarly establishment. Personally, I have repeatedly been confronted with four questions to which I would like to give preliminary and far from comprehensive answers in this

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essay. Rather, these answers are spontaneous responses to questions that will continue to preoccupy us in the near future. I will start with the “failure” of Middle Eastern scholarship to predict the recent events. Then I will address the validity of scholarly work that so strongly

has focused on the resilience of authoritarianism in the region. The third question turns to the ways in which to support processes of democratization in the region. And I conclude with a tentative answer to the question whether we are witnessing a “new Middle East” in the making.

1. Why did Scholars not Predict the Recent Developments?

This question addresses the very purpose of academic work in assuming that scholarly analysis would lead to prediction. Indeed, in applying a scientist view to the field of Middle East studies, this question seems to be justified. However, the Arab spring was not the first historical event taking historians, social scientists, and other scholars of the humanities by surprise. In 1989, I was preparing for my MA thesis in political science at Hamburg University in Germany. None of my teachers predicted the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent demise of the Soviet Union. On the contrary, even the overwhelming majority of German scholars – and students – took the coordinates of Cold War politics for granted. Most of us never expected to live in a unified Germany, without even mentioning the predictions regarding the speed in which the erosion of the “iron curtain” took place. Of course, the economic difficulties of the “Second World,” the developments of the OSCE process in Europe, as well as the problematic successions after the death of General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev in the Soviet Union were interpreted by some as indicators of change. However, the concrete direction of this change was still not predictable.

Generally speaking, it is the very nature of history – at least in our modern understanding – to be contingent. The scholarly “explanation” of historical events, therefore, only is possible in retrospect. The concrete path of history, however, is totally open to the future and hard to predict. Consequently, it is the scholar’s main task to observe the “real world” and to analyze how it comes into play. In focusing on the remarkable resilience of authoritarian rule in the Middle East, this was precisely what many experts on the region have done. To be sure, this does not exclude speculations and extrapolations based on the historical analysis a scholar has done. Accordingly, many scholars interpreted the attempt to

turn Egypt into a hereditary presidency as a sign of internal rifts in the Egyptian regime. We also should remember the many academics who warned U.S. policy-makers that the complete dismantlement of Iraqi state structures will lead to an internal security vacuum that would take years to be resolved. Likewise, some academic studies and policy research notes suggested the fragmentation of Islamist organizations and movements in instances of shifts in political rule. The behavior of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist organizations in Egypt's current political transformation shows the validity of these assumptions, as does the general expectation of many scholars that in states such as Syria and Libya a similar, relatively smooth replacement of the incumbent leadership as in Tunisia and Egypt would be unlikely to take place. Upon closer inspection, the record of Middle East scholarship appears not as poor as the almost hasty critique of its lack of predictive powers suggests. Certainly, nobody predicted the occurrence and precise form of an Arab spring in 2011. In this respect, history proved to be utterly contingent. Yet, scholarly work on the Middle East has assumed some of the features, which we can observe in the Arab spring today and it will help us undoubtedly to understand better the current unrest in the region.

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2. Should We Throw the Work on Middle Eastern Authoritarianism in the Garbage Bin of Academic Misinterpretations?

This is a question about the value of scholarly work over time. Indeed, the Arab spring might have devaluated some conclusions about the nature and future of Arab regimes. Yet, personally I expect the bulk of studies on Middle Eastern authoritarianism to be still relevant for some time to come. Let us first recall the very purpose of this scholarly enterprise: what has this field of study tried to explain? Although the fall of Ben Ali and Husni Mubarak was certainly surprising, should we not perceive the durability and relative stability of their authoritarian rule in light of several “waves of democratization” to be even more puzzling? In Tunisia, Ben Ali took over power in 1987 by forcing out his predecessor Habib Bourgiba, who had ruled the country for more than thirty years. In Egypt, Husni Mubarak inherited structures of a regime that was created following the coup of the “Free Officers” in 1952. Two countries, five presidents and no electoral change of rule in more than fifty years – this feature, prevalent across the region, badly needed an explanation. Contrary to the “waves of democratization,” which could be ob-

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served in Eastern Europe, Latin America and Asia, the Middle East largely remained the domain of utterly authoritarian regimes. In the global context of political change, the region seemed to be an exception characterized by political stagnation when measured with respect to its systems of government.

Thereby, the academic debate aimed to identify those factors that have had a stabilizing effect on the authoritarian and often despotic nature of Middle East politics. In principle, two major paradigms to understand authoritarian rule have characterized the debate. On the one hand, culturalist understandings blamed Islamic and/or Arab culture for being the core obstacles to democratization and social reform. A number of scholars and media pundits tried to explain the observed political stagnation with reference to Islam. They questioned in principle the compatibility of Islam and democracy predicated on the almost axiomatic assumption that in Islam religion and politics are inseparably joined together. Acknowledging the apparent variations within Islam, another culturalist camp singled out Arab culture as the main obstacle to democratic rule. This group emphasized the patriarchal nature of Arab political culture and the roles in which tribal formations, extended families and kinship-ties have played in Arab politics. On the other hand, a structuralist approach identified the region's historically specific incorporation in both the international political system and the global economy as conducive to authoritarian rule. This international conditionality of Middle Eastern politics was acknowledged by the analytical concept of the rentier state. The main argument here runs as follows: By achieving huge economic rents at the international level, the rulers of oil-rich states and/or regimes important to international security concerns did not need to establish effective representative political institutions. Receiving their material foundations and political legitimacy primarily from the international system, Arab states were able to establish a clear separation between rulers and ruled, between state and society, and to hold societal demands for popular representation at bay.

The continuing expressions of public unrest in the region strongly support the explanatory validity of the argumentation based on the structures of the international political economy of the region in two ways. First, there is apparently nothing that prevents Muslims and Arabs from engaging in revolutionary movements and demanding societal reforms in a democratic way. The demonstrators who gathered on Cairo's Tahrir Square were not constrained by their faith in Islam, nor

did the alleged traits of a specific Arab culture prevent them to join together in pluralist and egalitarian ways. Secondly, the institutional obstacles on the way to democratic representation, the specific coalitions of forces representing the various regimes, have not just disappeared with the authoritarian leaders at their top. At least in Tunisia and Egypt, deposing the autocrats was surprisingly easy, getting rid of the firmly entrenched structures at the base of these autocracies, however, still needs a long way to go. For our understanding of the struggles ahead many of the previous studies about Arab regimes might be valuable sources that point to the necessity of a fundamental reform of the political economy of the Middle East.

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3. In Which Ways can We Support the Move Toward Democracy in the Region?

In light of the ongoing resistance against democratic change of both incumbent regimes and the more general societal structures on which Middle Eastern authoritarianism has rested, the above-mentioned question concerns the value of scholarly knowledge for policy advice. In my opinion, it is not the task of scholars to tell politicians what to do. However, decision-making in complex situations can be informed by scholarly insights. Area experts are able to tell politicians something about the potential implications of their actions. With regard to the Middle East, western policy makers often face a real dilemma, that's to say they must make a choice between two bad alternatives. Therefore, it almost seems to be impossible to conduct "pragmatic" policies toward the region without simultaneously raising accusations of applying double standards.

Looking at these accusations from a mere analytical point of view, the double standards of western politics are often linked to the fact that western governments operate within two conflicting normative frameworks. On the one hand, international politics still works with strong references to Westphalian norms, ultimately protecting the rights of states vis-à-vis other states. Although the "society of states" does know what the rules of conduct, which organize in principle the anarchical state system, are the ultimate point of reference in international politics still is the institution of sovereignty. On the other hand, humanitarian norms that dominate the configuration of rule and the political discourse in democratic societies increasingly infiltrate the discursive realm of international politics. These

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norms, however, aim at protecting the rights of individuals and often clash with the historically established rules of state interaction. Authoritarian rulers like Husni Mubarak played perfectly according to the rules of international politics, at the expense of humanitarian norms.

The fairly reasonable politician at the international level was a dictator at home. In Libya, the UN resolution tried to strike a compromise between these two normative frameworks with rather questionable success. The norm of non-interference with regard to the incumbent regime contradicts the formal humanitarian purpose of the intervention: the protection of civilians could have been best achieved by an immediate change of the Gaddafi regime. Consequently, politicians must decide according to their own judgment of both norms and interests. Scholarly work can inform them in this task, but it cannot provide politics with the right judgment for the moment.

Turning again to the insights of political economy, we must acknowledge that democracies do not exist as a set of norms and political institutions alone. The principle of “one man one vote,” the ideal of a citizen’s independent decision-making about who gets the right to rule, has also economic foundations. It is my contention that the absence of these foundations was one of the core factors in consolidating authoritarian rule. The recent uprisings are visibly directed against the incumbent regimes, but they are at the same time manifestations of the stifling character of the political economy of the region. The economic resources of the Middle East have been used and allocated in unproductive ways. Corruption is not only a means of enrichment for authoritarian regimes and their cronies, it also developed into a general mechanism that characterizes the distribution of resources in society at large. Personal relationships dominate merits and the individual economic success is due to the building up and maintenance of personal ties at the expense of productive and innovative competition. From the perspective of political economy, Egypt has not only one but countless numbers of Mubarak.

This mechanism of economic exchange has drained the resources of Middle Eastern societies for decades and predominantly excludes the young and increasingly better educated population from economic life. More than 60 percent of the region’s population is below 30 years of age. While the median age of EU countries such as Germany or Denmark is above 40 years, the average Egyptian is 24 and the median age in Yemen is only at eighteen. The current unrest in the Arab

world is, therefore, about both economic and political exclusion, as it is about the successful moves toward democracy. This combination of economic and political exclusion will lead to a demand for change in the structural setting of the political economy of the region. Thus, it is good advice to avoid that democratization is turned into a means of protecting the established exclusivist system of resource allocation. This demands more free exchange of people and goods with the global system rather than international donations and financial assistance. Against this yardstick, we must measure western policies of democracy promotion in the coming years.

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4. Is There a “New Middle East” in the Making?

Certain media commentaries have tended to portray the Arab spring as a new Middle East in the making. Yet what does determine the political geography of a region? In which ways can we differentiate between an old and a new Middle East? At a structural level this could be done in observing fundamental geopolitical changes. In terms of agency, new players might indicate the emergence of a new Middle East. The last section of my essay will briefly examine both geopolitical shifts and changes in agency.

In geopolitical terms, the Middle East is first and foremost a colonial invention. The region’s name refers to territories under Ottoman and British control on the “road” from London to India. British colonial politics adopted this name in the early twentieth century for an area located at the crucial interface of the communication lines of the British Empire. After the end of colonialism, the region retained its name but with altering geopolitical connotations. Within the framework of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union penetrated the region. As part and parcel of U.S. containment policies, the Middle East increasingly became associated with international energy politics and the security of the Israeli state. The end of the Cold War further stressed the interconnection between international and regional politics. The independence of the states in Central Asia and the Transcaucasus led to an enlargement of the region into the “Greater Middle East.” The new regional paradigm tried, firstly, to integrate the energy politics of the Caspian Sea area with the Gulf region. Secondly, the term Greater Middle East refers to the international and transnational politics of Islam. In short, without losing its territorial core, the geopolitical notion of the Middle East has decisively

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been altered according to developments in international politics. Viewed from this angle, future developments might push the Middle East further toward the east. The rising powers of Asia, China and India largely fuel their economic engines with energy supplies from the region. In Sudan, China and India took over the oil production from western companies, which were constrained by

both the threats of Sudan's civil war and human rights campaigns against them in light of their economic complicity with the Bashir regime. Moreover, the most substantial part of the work force in the Arab Gulf states is of Indian origin; a relationship whereby the Indian diaspora might gain much more influence on Middle Eastern politics in the future. Consequently, alterations in the international system might contribute to the emergence of a new Middle East. However, these international alterations have not triggered the contemporary popular unrest in the region.

This brings us to the question whether we can observe new actors engaged in transforming the region. At the state level, Turkey's new regional foreign policies probably impact more generally on Middle Eastern politics. For decades, Turkey followed rather a "hands-off" approach toward its immediate neighbors in the south, in principle subordinating its own Middle Eastern foreign policies to the strategic interests of its partners in the West. Although we can trace back this new activism and more conscious neighborhood policy to the previous prime minister and president Turgut Özal, Turkey's new foreign policy approach to the region only has taken momentum since the coming to power of the AKP government in November 2002. In the framework of Turkey's EU accession process, the incumbent government has transformed Turkish foreign policies and pushed the reform of Turkey's political, legal, and economic institutions forward. Having its roots in the Islamist spectrum of Turkish politics, some observers even have perceived Turkey under AKP rule as a kind of model for the democratization in the Muslim world. The Arab spring has shown that the Turkish experience, in parts, indeed can play a role as a point of reference for the various reform aspirations of Arab societies. The historical path dependency of these reform processes and the exceptional EU context of Turkish politics, however, strongly limit the applicability of the "Turkish model." In addition, in the cases of Syria and Libya, the Arab spring also indicated that Turkey's new foreign policies of "zero problems" might

face the same dilemmas as western policies in general when its regional partners disintegrate.

Looking at the society level, the Turkish experience might be able to tell us more than in the realm of state politics. Turkey's change in foreign politics and its democratic transformation is closely linked to the rising influence exerted by

civil society actors. In scholarly work and in the media, there has been a strong focus on the emergence of a pluralist civil society in Turkey comprising various organizations that represent a broad range of issue-oriented interests. Yet, probably most important is a "classical" component of modern civil society often less emphasized in contemporary studies: independent entrepreneurship. The political transformation of Turkey was preceded by a fundamental transformation of its economic sector. Already the Kemalists, although reluctantly, abolished the statist approach that characterized the state ideology of the Turkish republic until the 1980s. In the recent past, Turkey developed a productive, innovative, and socially diverse entrepreneurial class with large segments not representing big business, but local and regional businesses, which provide employment also outside the major cities. Today, Turkish economy relates simultaneously to global, regional and local markets, thereby providing a mechanism of economic integration on all levels. In short, Turkey has been able to develop a political economy that is the fundament for both its new regional foreign policy and its domestic process of democratic reforms.

Without necessarily endorsing liberal ideals of "economy first," it would be suggestible to move the focus of scholarly work more toward the economic structures – their opportunities and constraints – which are behind the Arab spring. Instead of producing series of articles about the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, we need to know more about the potentials of the countries – entrepreneurial class. Captured by the alleged importance of Islam, many observers have disregarded large fields of societal interaction in which religion, if at all, only plays the role of a dependent variable. The continuing interpretation and re-interpretation of the relationship between Islam and politics have absorbed our analytical capacities at the expense of a closer inspection of societal change. These changes of Arab societies have provided the fertile ground out of which the Arab spring evolved. Thereby, neither Arab culture and Islam nor international politics can serve as a

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sufficient analytical frame of reference. On the contrary, we must get rid of these grand narratives to try and better understand the region as a whole. Of course, there are overarching cultural, political and economic structures that condition the ways in which Middle Eastern states and societies interact. However, they only represent some general factors in diverse national and local settings, each of which have developed along specific historical paths. This path dependency is visible in the very different expressions from democratic transition to relentless state suppression to civil war that the Arab spring so far is living. If there is a new Middle East in the making, it will be a more disaggregated region as the Arab spring so aptly suggests. To contribute to this disaggregation process of the Middle East seems to me the major task of contemporary scholarship.