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The “Arab Spring” in the Discourse of the Western Media

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The “Arab Spring” in the Discourse of the Western Media

by

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Abstract

In order to examine the dominant discourse that defines the relationship between Occident and Orient, this thesis uses the Western media's writings on the Arab Spring as an analytical lens. Drawing on techniques of the critical perspective outlined by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1979), this work seeks to challenge the essentialization of the political culture of the Middle East and North Africa in the Western Media through its analysis of four case studies: the "Arab Spring" terminology, the role of Social Media, the contention between Islamism and secularism and the role of women in order to examine the dominant discourse utilized by the Western media to describe the events of the "Arab Spring". The attitudes adopted by the media towards the "Arab Spring", as well as the rhetoric used to describe its events, illustrates the West's attempts to manage and maintain control over the region through the construction of a "regime of truth". Methodologically, this essay seeks to show how common themes in media representations of events can be used as an analytical tool to reveal how discourses are constructed and perpetuated. This paper will underscore how the media, through these discursive methods, managed to essentialize and marginalize the political actors of the Middle East and North Africa.

Introduction

The “Arab Spring” refers to a diverse collective of protests, demonstrations, uprisings, rebellions and revolutions challenging authoritarianism, corruption, economic despondency and exploitation. The wave of insurrection, which began in the twilight of 2010, engulfed the Middle East and North Africa in political upheaval. Utilizing means both violent and nonviolent and achieving a variety of success outcomes, the many distinct demonstrations were all united by a common call—‘*ash-sha’b yurid isqat an-nizam!*’ (‘The people want to bring down the regime!’). By rising up against authoritarian regimes and calling for liberty, democracy, human rights and economic opportunity on their own terms, the peoples of the “Arab World” re-centered the discussion of ‘Arab’ politics and restored global belief in the potency of human action. The deeply entrenched despots that had for so long characterized politics in the Middle East were challenged, if not unseated, fundamentally altering the political landscape across the region and undermining the Western perception of the “Arab Exception” to democracy.

The thesis of “Arab Exceptionalism” holds that in the “Arab World” there is a “tendency of cohort states sharing cultural and/or ethnic commonalities to be resistant to democracy”.¹ In other words that by virtue of the region’s cultural connections to Islam and other persistent factors, it is incapable of incubating successful popular self-rule. From this assumption, a corollary emerges which associates being Arab with “a condition of ‘non-democracy’”.² It tends to perceive the Middle East as “a single historical unit, with its cultural commonalities more salient in explaining regional politics than the varied, internal characteristics of individual

¹ Iliya Harik, “Democracy, “Arab Exceptionalism,” and Social Science”, *Middle East Journal* 60, no. 4 (2006): 680.

² *Ibid*, 680.

states.”³ This idea is rooted in the cultural thesis proposed by Max Weber, who emphasized the determinism of culture (such as those embedded in religion) on economic and political outcomes, which could therefore inhibit or facilitate emergence of capitalism and modernity. Weber believed that the development of bourgeois capitalism—and democracy, its logical outgrowth—was tied to the specific rationalism fostered by Protestant Christianity.⁴ Though Weber does articulate that individuals within non-Western cultures could express this “spirit of capitalism” he believed the societies as a whole were in some ways inhibited from bourgeois development. In *Sociology of Religion*, he writes, “Islam, in contrast to Judaism, lacked the requirement of a comprehensive knowledge of the law and lacked that intellectual training in casuistry” necessary to produce rationalism.⁵ Due to this ‘lack’ of rationality, Islam was perceived as being, at best, disconnected from the paths to modernization and, at worst, diametrically opposed to it.⁶ In these culturalist, or essentialist perspectives, culture is seen as “important, determinative, and at least semi-primordial—that is, so deeply rooted in history, religion, and social organization as to be highly resistant to change”.⁷ Political Islam was perceived to be “a throttle on the development of a liberal democratic culture” in the Middle East due to the incompatibility of Islamic traditions with democracy, which is a derivative of the Western cultural experience that separated the political and the religious spheres of authority.⁸ Furthermore, Islamism itself was perceived as

³ Rex Brynen, Pete W. Moore, Bassel F. Salloukh and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, *Beyond the Arab Spring: Authoritarianism and Democratization in the Arab World*. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2012), 96.

⁴ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and “The Spirit of Capitalism”*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 1992). 27-28.k

⁵ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 270.

⁶ *Ibid*, 270.

⁷ Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 96.

⁸ Timo Behr, “EU Foreign Policy and Political Islam: Towards a New Entente in the Post-Arab Spring Era,” *The International Spectator* 48, no. 1 (2013): 23.

producing an “uncivil civil society” and thus incapable of fostering a Western-style democratic experience.⁹

The culturalist thesis has persisted throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, with notable essentialist works including Raphael Patai’s *The Arab Mind* (1973), Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations* (1993) and Bernard Lewis’ *What Went Wrong?: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (2002).¹⁰ Based in ideas that portray the region as monolithic and characterized by violence, subordinate to archaic religious or tribal directives and/or unable to free itself from the legacy of authoritarianism, the essentialist perspective has been criticized for its tendency to qualitatively interpret anthropological data. A quantitative analysis empirically undermines the extremes of the essentialist thesis; for example, the emergence of democracies in Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia and Indonesia or the democratically oriented demonstrations that compromise the “Arab Spring”. Irrespective of these facts, many of the premises that support this notion and the conclusions that derive from it continue to be propagated by the Western media. American coverage of the “Arab Spring” reveals many key culturalist assumptions: incompatibility with democracy, dependence on Western innovation, tendency to religious extremism and inherent oppression of women, among others. The prevalence of these essentialist perspectives is concerning. As Lisa Anderson remarks, these reductionist approaches “can be very seductive, particularly to policy-makers looking for short, neat explanations for the complexities they face”.¹¹ Particularly in the wake of

⁹ Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 121.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 97-98. For an extensive examination of the characteristics and development of the essentialist thesis, the contextualist perspective, and the critical approach, see Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 96-104.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 103.

9/11, culturalist explanations for political realities became engrained in the discourse promulgated by the American mass media.

A free press is often lauded as one of the hallmarks of a free society. The mass media is perceived as the guarantor of liberty in a democratic political system due to their commitment to fact checking, truth seeking and information sharing. In his studies on propaganda in the 1920s, Walter Lippmann posited that the media can play a role in the “manufacture of consent”, or the construction of a narrative that produces a particular outcome in line with the “common interests” of the public.¹² Building on his ideas, in *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky propose a “propaganda model” which holds that “manufacturing consent” is a critical aspect of the “services” provided by the American media. Derived from the fact that the mass media is one of the main exporters of information to the general populace, Herman and Chomsky propose an analytical approach that “suggests a systematic and highly political dichotomization in news coverage based on serviceability to important domestic power interests”.¹³ This is epitomized not only in the choices of what gets covered by the media, but also in “the modes of handling favored and inconvenient materials (placement, tone, context, fullness of treatment)” which “differ in ways that serve political ends.”¹⁴ The media, due to its relative monopoly on the production and dissemination of knowledge, not only controls what information the public receives but promotes an interpretation of that knowledge. This is illustrated by the classic adage, ‘one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’. The propaganda model suggests that there is a relationship

¹² Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002): lix.

¹³ *Ibid*, 35.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 35.

between the rhetoric used by the media in its coverage and the interests of the powerful who seek to encourage a particular range of opinions that they deem ‘acceptable’.

The logic behind the propaganda model became the topic of Sandra Silberstein’s 2002 work, *War of Words: Language, Politics and 9/11*, in which she examines how language is utilized to manage national crisis. Using the aftermath of September 11th as a case study, Silberstein concludes that through its coverage the media was able to transform the public discourse about “a religion, a region, and a culture” with which—prior to September 11th—Americans had been relatively unfamiliar.¹⁵ She determines that the post-September 11th understanding of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as Islam generally, was constructed through the lens of “strategic and military imperatives”. This promoted an understanding of Islam a dangerous enemy with underlying assumptions of American “management and prerogative” in the region.¹⁶ Thus, by analyzing what Silberstein calls “rhetorical moments” in mass media,¹⁷ one can discern common themes and underlying assumptions revelatory of the dominant discourse.

Michel Foucault outlined the theory of the postmodern discourse in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Best summarized by Iara Lessa, discourses are

systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of actions, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak...all start from the broadly accepted recognition that language, the medium of interaction, creation and dissemination and discourses, is deeply implicated in the creation of regimes of truth, i.e. they explore ways in which, through discourses, realities are constructed, made factual and justified, bringing about effects.¹⁸

¹⁵ Sandra Silberstein, *War of Words: Language, Politics and 9/11*. (London: Routledge, 2004), 159-60.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 150-53.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 15.

¹⁸ Iara Lessa, “Discursive Struggles Within Social Welfare: Restaging Teen Motherhood,” *British Journal of Social Work* 36 (2006): 285-86.

In other words, these discursive formations are governed by the rules of language—both conscious and unconscious—that determines what is conceived of as being ‘true’. Knowledge and power are intimately correlated in an idea Foucault calls power-knowledge: power produces knowledge (a ‘regime of truth’), and in turn, domination of knowledge sustains power. A synthesis of these mechanisms of analysis shows that the media is a critical part of the creation of ‘regimes of truth’. An example is provided by Silberstein’s case study: in an effort to rebuild the symbolic understanding of the American nation after September 11th, President Bush spearheaded rhetorical ““convergence by divergence””, or the process by which “Americans are brought together through their contrast with a shared enemy.”¹⁹ This exemplifies what Herman and Chomsky called ‘fear ideology’, which formed one of the five ‘news filters’ of the propaganda model.²⁰ Fear ideology holds that the media can deploy rhetoric of fear and hatred to describe groups that are perceived as a threat. The classic example of this is Communism, although Chomsky and Silberstein both argue that the “War on Terror” has become a major rhetorical mechanism of social control.

This discourse, as well as the ideas embodied by Weber, Huntington and Lewis, is based in an adversarial understanding of the history between Islam and Christendom. Tunisian writer and lecturer Larbi Sadiki posits that this understanding has therefore resulted in the exclusion of the Arab World from discussions of democracy.²¹ Adopting a critical perspective, Edward Said would go one step beyond Sadiki, arguing that throughout history it has been in the political interest of the powerful West to construct a reductionist regime of truth that would keep “intact

¹⁹ Silberstein, *War of Words*, 7.

²⁰ The five “news filters” are (1) Ownership of the Medium, (2) Medium’s Funding Sources, (3) Sourcing, (4) Flak, and (5) Fear Ideology.

²¹ Larbi Sadiki, “Popular Uprisings and Arab Democratization,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 32 (2000): 72.

the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability” because it perceives the Orient “as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption”.²² Essentially, Said argues that “the West”, the dominant global power, uses rhetoric that reduces and essentializes “the Orient” in order to better dominate it. The resultant regime of truth, which was cemented during the Age of Exploration, the Enlightenment and the Age of Imperialism, cements the West’s hold on power.

An examination of the rhetoric surrounding the “Arab Spring” emphasizes that this discourse is both pervasive and persistent in contemporary discussions of the “Arab World”. In analyzing the coverage in the Western (American) media of the 2010 demonstrations, I discerned four primary areas where this tendency was made manifest: (1) the utilization “Arab Spring” as the umbrella term for referencing the events, (2) the overstatement of the role of Social Media as a determinant of success outcomes, (3) the emphasis on the secular protestors and the marginalization of Islamists, and (4) the lack of media coverage on the active participation of women during and after the demonstrations. An analysis of each of these trends underscores a singular discursive tendency to speak about actors in the Middle East and North Africa as if they are passive receptors of culture, ideas and ideology rather than active participants with a role in determining their own identity.

²² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 39.

Chapter One: Naming the “Arab Spring”

Introduction: Tracing the “Arab Spring”

The beginning of the wave of demonstrations that would fundamentally alter the political landscape of the Middle East and North Africa was marked by the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor named Mohammed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010.¹ Commentators in the West designated these movements the “Arab Spring”, which became the umbrella term used to refer to the protests, demonstrations, riots, civil wars and revolutions that swept across the region. The term was later translated into Arabic (*ar-rabī’ al-‘arabī*) and “re-appropriated” by Arab intellectuals, scholars and journalists, contributing to its emergence as the dominant term of reference for the regional movements.² In spite of its preeminence, for the first four weeks immediately following Bouazizi’s public suicide, the “Arab Spring” nomenclature is notably absent from Western media accounts of the demonstrations—despite the fact that protests had already spread to Algeria (28 December 2010) and Jordan (14 January 2011).³ The earliest print usage of the term “Arab Spring” in reference to this wave of demonstrations was in an opinion article for *Foreign Policy* published on 6 January 2011, in which contributor Marc Lynch⁴ questioned whether the “seemingly unrelated protests and clashes” emerging throughout the Middle East and North Africa were the beginnings of what he casually labeled “Obama’s “Arab Spring””.⁵

¹ Kareem Fahim, “Slap to a Man’s Pride Set Off Tumult in Tunisia,” *New York Times*, Jan. 21, 2011.

² Maytha Alhassen, “Please Reconsider the Term “Arab Spring”, *The Huffington Post*, Feb. 10, 2012.

³ Protests would emerge before the end of January in Oman (17 January 2011), Egypt (25 January 2011), Yemen (27 January 2011), Djibouti (28 January 2011), Somalia (28 January 2011), and Sudan (30 January 2011).

⁴ Marc Lynch is an Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs and the Director of the Institute for Middle East Studies at George Washington University.

⁵ Marc Lynch, “Obama’s “Arab Spring”,” *Foreign Policy*, January 06, 2011.

Lynch was referencing an expression first used in a *Le Monde diplomatique* article in 2005,⁶ cited primarily by conservative commentators to vindicate the democratization policies in the Arab world outlined by George W. Bush in the early 2000s.⁷ In December 2002, the State Department unveiled the US-Middle East Partnership Initiative, which “supports organizations and individuals in their efforts to promote political, economic, and social reform in the Middle East and North Africa”.⁸ The MEPI was an integral component of what George W. Bush called a “forward strategy of freedom to promote democracy throughout the Middle East” in a speech at the National Endowment for Democracy on 6 November 2003.⁹ This “freedom agenda”¹⁰ remains an integral objective of the Global War on Terror and characterized the Bush Administration’s Middle East policy. President Bush believed that freedom was “not only best for the Arabs, but also a vital national interests that would keep Americans, U.S. allies and interests around the world safe from terrorism.”¹¹ The Bush-era foreign policy equated the spread of “freedom” to a decrease in violence and conflict, and is exemplified by the following excerpt from President Bush’s Second Inaugural Address in 2005:

The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world...The concerted effort of free nations to promote democracy is a prelude to all our enemies’ defeat...By our efforts, we have lit a fire as well - a fire in the minds of men. It warms those who feel its power, it burns those who fight its progress, and one day this untamed fire of freedom will reach the darkest corners of our world.

⁶ Gilbert Achcar, “Arab Spring: Late and Cold,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 2005.

⁷ Charles Krauthammer, “What’s Left? Shame,” *Washington Post*, Mar. 18, 2005.

⁸ The United States-Middle East Partnership Initiative. MEPI.state.gov. n.d.

⁹ White House. “Fact Sheet: President Bush Calls for a “Forward Strategy of Freedom” to Promote Democracy in the Middle East”, *WhiteHouse.Gov*, Nov. 6, 2003.

¹⁰ Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-revolution and the Making of a New Era*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2012), 21.

¹¹ Lee Smith, “In Egypt, More Proof That George W. Bush Was Right”, *NPR*, Feb. 11, 2011.

In the eyes of the Bush Administration, the “untamed fire of freedom” reached the Middle East with the 2003 War in Iraq.¹² It claimed several key victories in 2005 with the Lebanese Cedar Revolution¹³ and the legislative elections in Iraq. Following these events, the rhetoric of Bush’s “Arab Spring”¹⁴ was used to describe “a prescient ‘democratic domino effect’ that was expected to spread its ‘seeds’ across [the Middle East and North Africa]”.¹⁵ The designation was resurrected with the *Foreign Policy* blog post, in which Lynch drew a comparison between seemingly similar events in the region during the Bush and Obama Administrations. The term caught on slowly, first appearing in *Time Magazine* on 14 January 2011,¹⁶ followed by the *New York Times* on 28 January 2011,¹⁷ the *BBC* on 31 January 2011,¹⁸ and *CNN* on 1 February 2011.¹⁹ Initially the *Wall Street Journal* resisted utilizing the term at all. However, by mid-March, it had attained widespread use by the Western media and quickly became the dominant method of referencing the demonstrations.²⁰

The use of the word ‘spring’ to describe a revolutionary movement is an allusion to the “Springtime of the Peoples” or the European Revolutions of 1848.²¹ Sometimes called “the Year of Revolution”, the Springtime of the Peoples refers to the largest revolutionary wave in European history. The revolutionary fervor lasted only a year and by 1849 the revolutions had

¹² Tariq Ramadan, *Islam and the Arab Awakening*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 9.

¹³ Lee Smith, “In Egypt, More Proof That George W. Bush Was Right”, *NPR*, Feb. 11, 2011.

¹⁴ Robin B. Wright, *Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 28.

¹⁵ Alhassen, “Reconsider the Term”.

¹⁶ Vivienne Walt, “Tension Grips Tunisia’s Capital After Leader Flees”, *Time Magazine*, January 14, 2011.

¹⁷ Tobin Harshaw, “How Do You Solve A Problem Like Mubarak?”, *New York Times*, Jan. 28, 2011.

¹⁸ Martin Asser, “Q&A: Egyptian Protests Against Mubarak”, *BBC Online*, Jan. 31, 2011.

¹⁹ Paul Cruickshank, “Why Egypt Revolt Threatens Al-Qaeda”, *CNN*, Feb. 1, 2011.

²⁰ Joshua Keating, “Who First Used the Term Arab Spring?” *Foreign Policy*, November 4, 2011.

²¹ James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 32.

collapsed, though the legacy of 1848 remains.²² ‘Spring’, as both a moniker and a metaphor, has been used to brand liberal reform movements throughout history: the Prague Spring of 1968, the European Spring (“Autumn of Nations”) of 1989, and the Damascus Spring following the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000. The term has most often been associated with movements that have not been markedly successful at achieving their aims: the Prague Spring of 1968 was suppressed by the Soviet Union, the Syrian government had returned to its repressive methods by 2001, and by 2006 hopes for democratic liberalization in Iraq (“Bush’s “Arab Spring””) were undermined by sectarian violence.²³ Nevertheless, for the West, naming a revolution a ‘spring’ has its origins in anti-Soviet discourse from the Cold War. It was utilized to distinguish movements that were perceived as being “analogous to the European experience”.²⁴ Columbia Professor Joseph Massad draws attention to this fact, arguing that the label is only “deployed ideologically” when a political uprising appears to be serving Western interests, promoting liberal democracy or supporting a regime expected to be loyal to US interests.²⁵ These were criteria met by the Prague Spring, the European Spring, the Damascus Spring, and Bush’s “Arab Spring”, but not—for example—the Palestinian *Intifada* or the 1977 “uprising of thieves” in Egypt against Anwar Sadat.²⁶

Western commentators drew several parallels between the 2011 “Arab Spring” and the 1989 ‘Autumn of Nations’. Equivocating the rise of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa to the fall of communism in Eastern Europe held a certain appeal for Western media

²² Kurt Weyland, “The Arab Spring: Why the Surprising Similarities with the Revolutionary Wave of 1848?” *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 4 (2012): 918.

²³ Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings*, 32-33.

²⁴ Asher Susser, “The “Arab Spring”: The Origins of a Misnomer,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, April 2012.

²⁵ Joseph Massad, “The “Arab Spring” and Other American Seasons,” *Al-Jazeera*, August 29, 2012.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

outlets.²⁷ September 11th cemented a process begun by the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, securing the emergence of a “new entente” as Western Strategy “had become preoccupied with the image of an ‘arc of crisis’ in the Middle East, given fears of a regional domino effect”.²⁸ This new entente was represented by a fear of Islamism and a foreign policy designed to contain it, which Beverley Milton-Edwards discusses in *Critical Studies on Terrorism* in 2012.

In the twenty-first century, understandings of ‘new terrorism’ have been epitomized by Islamist violence and its threat to incumbent regimes of the Middle East. Western governments have been the architects of security and strategic policies that have sought to tackle the challenge posed by the desire of such Islamists to engage in the violent imposition of Islamic regimes that in turn would create a security nightmare to the interests of the West and to wider global stability...[Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda] were represented to Western mindsets as the antithesis of modern European and American values.²⁹

This contributed to the creation of an ideological front that pitted Political Islam against the West and “global stability”, shifting the rhetorical focus from the now-discredited Communism to Islamism. Now portrayed as the West’s political antithesis, Islamic regimes were to be contained at all costs. For the West, particularly America, the rise of Islamism, often portrayed as radical, would mean a regional destabilization that would pose a risk to three critical interests: (1) the desire to curb the spread of terrorism, (2) the stability of critical geopolitical interests such as oil and the preservation of the state of Israel, and (3) the determination to prevent the emergence of another Islamic theocracy. As a result, the discourse produced since 1979 has been similar to the Truman-era containment doctrine of the Cold War.³⁰ Furthermore, Theodor Tudorou argues that, since 1989, the action and rhetoric of the White House and the Kremlin-led opposing patterns of support and intervention and their relative alignments in the

²⁷ John R. Bradley. *After the Arab Spring: How the Islamists Hijacked the Middle East Revolts*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.

²⁸ Behr, “EU Foreign Policy and Political Islam”: 24.

²⁹ Beverley Milton-Edwards, “Revolt and Revolution: The Place of Islamism” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5, no. 2 (2012): 221-23.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 220.

Middle East and North Africa have made the “Arab Spring” “the last episode of the Cold War”.³¹ This led to extensive cooperation between Western governments and authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, out of a desire to ensure the protection of their geopolitical interests. Naturally, in practice this meant supporting the status quo of secular, totalitarian, military regimes or their monarchical equivalent. Thus, when demonstrations that seemed to be espousing a liberal democratic ideology emerged, both in 2005 and 2011, they became the ‘Arab Spring(s)’.

Even irrespective of the Cold War connotations of the “Arab Spring” terminology, the nomenclature also faces scrutiny for not being indigenous. In August 2011, Palestinian-American journalist Rami G. Khouri critiqued the use of the term “Arab Spring”, arguing that the media outlets ought to use native terminology to refer to the movements rather than “the vocabulary of the winds and tides”.³² He posits that the way that individuals in the Middle East and North Africa refer to their own actions is almost universally represented by “Revolutions”(or “*thawrat*” in Arabic), though “Uprising” (“*intifada*”), “Awakening” (“*sahwa*”) and “Renaissance” (“*nahda*”) are also used.³³ However, as Professor of Oriental Studies Tariq Ramadan at Oxford University explains, because of the broad spectrum of connotations and interpretations each label impacts, the challenge in categorizing these mass movements should not be understated.³⁴ On these grounds, scholars such as Lin Noueihed argue that due to the startling similarities between the Arab Spring and the 1848 “Springtime of the Peoples”, the appellation is appropriate:

³¹ Theodor Tudoroiu, “The Arab Spring: Last Episode of the Cold War,” *Contemporary Politics* 19, no. 3 (2013): 316-17. Traditionally, with few exceptions, the authoritarian republics in the Middle East and North Africa oriented themselves towards Moscow, while the monarchies leaned towards the United States.

³² Rami G. Khouri, “Drop the Orientalist Term “Arab Spring”,” *The Daily Star*, Aug. 17, 2011.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Ramadan, *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, 7.

A comparison with the 1848 spring of nations is apt. Those revolts spread to some 50 countries, affecting most of Europe and even reaching Latin America. Their roots lay in widespread disaffection with existing rulers, demands for greater participation in politics, rising nationalist sentiment, crop failures and economic discontent among the urban working classes. Their ideas were distributed by the burgeoning popular press, raising expectations among people whose lives had already been improved by new technology.³⁵

The causal similarities of economic discontent and demands for liberation from tyranny are striking. Furthermore, as Weyland articulates, like the “Arab Spring”, the Spring of Nations started in a relatively peripheral place (Sicily) and had widespread repercussions throughout the entire region.³⁶ Despite the many similarities, articulated by Noueihed, Weyland and others, the “Arab Spring” is rhetorically problematic because it reflects the Western media interpreting events through the lens of its own geopolitical interests. As Marc Lynch appropriately points out, though the use of ‘spring’ implies a blossoming of liberal ideals, Arab popular movements are not uncommon. The region has an extensive history of waves of popular uprisings inspired by feelings of Pan-Arab solidarity around a variety of issues: anti-colonialism, anti-Zionism, labor revolts, et cetera. To name a few in recent history, the 2005 *Kefaya* (Enough) Movement in Egypt and the 2008 Gafsa labor revolts in Tunisia have been cited as direct predecessors to the “Arab Spring”.³⁷ Khouri echoes Lynch’s criticism, challenging the fact that calling what he terms “citizen revolts” a ‘spring’ “denotes a brief or limited transitional moment that soon gives way to the next season” and that “an “Arab Spring” conveniently removes the element of culpability and foreign complicity in the dark, bitter and endless “winter” that [the Arab World] endured for three generations of incompetent Arab policy and family-mafia states”³⁸. Therefore, the imposition of a foreign moniker on a series of events that were partially an outgrowth of regional

³⁵ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 306.

³⁶ Weyland, “The Arab Spring”, 918.

³⁷ Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), 64.

³⁸ Khouri, “Drop the Orientalist Term”.

frustrations against unfair policies advocated by regional governments seems wildly inappropriate.

Consequently, the deeply politicized rhetorical history of the ‘spring’ nomenclature outweighs any potential substantive comparisons with the 1848 “Springtime of the Peoples”. The widespread use of “Arab Spring” would suggest that the Western media’s evaluation of the movements is based on the degree to which the Western ideal of democratic modernity is subsumed (potentially at the expense of Islam) and to what extent the anti-authoritarian movement itself serves Western interests. It rather ominously echoes the argument made famous by Edward Said in *Orientalism* in 1978: the comparative framework set up between the “Orient” and the “Occident” contains a delusory bias and has become “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” in order to remake it in its own image.³⁹ Using a term of European origin rather than a native or indigenous one to collectively describe the demonstrations and their outcomes imparts an association with a particular set of values and experiences that are ultimately not representative of the people engaging in the political action.

Irrespective of these questionable rhetorical implications, the “Arab Spring” did eventually become the predominant “umbrella term” utilized in both English and Arabic. This is in large part because of the sheer volume of alternative descriptions available, as “the events of 2011 have been variously described as uprisings, revolts, revolutions, protest movements, insurrections, rebellions, insurgencies, or awakenings”.⁴⁰ The frequency and implications of the use of other collective labels—particularly those that are more indigenous—merits further analysis.

³⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 3.

⁴⁰ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 302.

The ‘Arab Awakening’

Arab commentators have used the ‘Arab Awakening’ (*sahwat al-arab*) as an indigenous alternative to the “Arab Spring” terminology.⁴¹ The term has not achieved widespread usage in the West, except in the periodical the *Economist*, which has published over 260 articles containing the phrase since 2011. This is almost 75% more frequent of an occurrence than in the *New York Times*.⁴² The metaphor of ‘awakening’ is best represented by the following selection from Nasser Abourahme:

What we came to recognize was that this phantasmic sensation was, in fact, the sudden realization of masses of people waking up from a dream, being shaken out of a collective trance. For what we were all living in at that moment—all of us in the Arab world, in the shared political cosmos in which we have all grown up under the shadow of the immovable object of autocratic state power—was the shattering of this most obdurate of illusions.⁴³

Though Abourahme never specifically refers to the “events” as an ‘awakening’ (or as a ‘spring’), he utilizes this metaphor of awakening to describe the sensations within the “revolutionary moment.”⁴⁴ In spite of this, the implication of the ‘Arab Awakening’ as an alternative umbrella term extends beyond the metaphor itself—as Lin Noueihed succinctly states, “The events of 2011 cannot be called an ‘awakening’ because the region had not been asleep”.⁴⁵ Echoing the arguments made by Lynch, Noueihed argues that the demonstrations and subsequent regime downfalls were indicative of the culmination of over ten years of activism rather than a singular and sudden rousing to consciousness. To call the uprisings an ‘awakening’ carries the implicit suggestion that individuals who were engaging in “protest, political activism and media criticism

⁴¹ Sir Terence Clark, “Reflections on the Arab Awakening,” *Asian Affairs* 44, no. 1 (2013): 44.

⁴² The occurrence of “Arab Spring” remains the *Economist’s* predominant method of referring to the movements.

⁴³ Nasser Abourahme and May Jayyusi, “The Will to Revolt and the Spectre of the Real: Reflections on the Arab Moment,” *City* 15, no. 6 (2011), 625.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 625.

⁴⁵ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 302.

that had laid the ground for more open political systems” had been “asleep”.⁴⁶ Though the ‘awakening’ nomenclature does have the advantage of being relatively more active and participatory, as well as significantly more indigenous, the idea of an ‘Arab Awakening’ simply does not capture the scope, breadth or rapidity of the change that happened in the wake of the events of 2011.

The ‘Arab Revolutions’

As stated by Khouri and reiterated by others, the most common term utilized by participants in the demonstrations to describe their political actions is the ‘Arab Revolutions’ (*al-thawrat al-‘arabīya*).⁴⁷ The terminology is used with relative infrequency in the Western media outside of the context of “the Facebook Revolution” (an issue to be discussed in a later chapter). The category of “revolution” is scarcely applied to the demonstrations and their outcomes generally except with respect to Egypt (“Lotus Revolution”) and Tunisia (“Jasmine Revolution”). There appears to be a hesitation on the part of Western journalists and academics alike to define the broad spectrum of events encapsulated within the “Arab Spring” as revolutions. While the demonstrations have fundamentally altered the political fabric of the Middle East and North Africa, collectively the demonstrations have not achieved the requisite “transformed political order or shift in the economic balance of power” to merit being labeled as revolutions.⁴⁸

Unlike the terminology of ‘spring’ or ‘awakening’, about which relatively little literature exists, the idea of the revolution in theory and practice has been thoroughly extrapolated in Western philosophy, political science and history. Labeling the events as ‘revolutions’

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 4. Alhassen, “Reconsider the Term”.

⁴⁷ Khouri, “Drop the Orientalist Term”.

⁴⁸ Ramadan, *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, 7.

immediately associates them with the brunt of Western literature, which carries certain suggestions about the nature and form the revolutions must take.⁴⁹ Revolutions are prosaically defined in the *Encyclopedia of Political Science* as “rapid changes in the institutions of government, carried out by non-institutional means and usually with the support of popular groups mobilized for demonstrations, local revolts, guerilla warfare, civil war, mass strikes, or other revolutionary actions...bringing a mixture of change and continuity” and classified either by goals and processes or by outcomes.⁵⁰ Revolutions are subsequently divided into six major subcategories: anticolonial revolutions, anti-dictatorial revolutions, communist revolutions, constitutional revolutions, fascist revolutions, and ‘people power’ or ‘color’ revolutions.⁵¹ The events of 2011 would appear to be an example of these “color revolutions”, or revolutions in which “popular demonstrations toppled dictators or communist regimes not by mass violence, but by rallying huge crowds around symbols of national unity and popular opposition”.⁵² It appears that the success outcomes that unite the events of 2011 onward in the Middle East and North Africa are varied, and the majority is not purely in the realm of the political or economic order.

Therefore, the myriad events of the “Arab Spring” collectively do not satisfy most of the theoretical criteria for classification as a ‘revolution’. In spite of this, “it is all too clear that [the ‘Arab revolutions’] have produced the most dramatic changes in the region since the mid-

⁴⁹ Roger Owen, “The Arab ‘Demonstration’ Effect and the Revival of Arab Unity in the Arab Spring,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5, no. 3 (2012), 376.

⁵⁰ George Thomas Kurian and James E. Alt, *The Encyclopedia of Political Science* (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 1477.

⁵¹ Kurian and Alt, *The Encyclopedia of Political Science*, 1477.

⁵² Abdelkader Abdelali, “Wave of Change in the Arab World and Chances for a Transition to Democracy,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2013), 200-1. Kurian and Alt, *The Encyclopedia of Political Science*, 1477.

twentieth century, which marked the end of the colonial era”.⁵³ Irrespective of the outcomes in the political and economic realm and the uneven distribution of structural changes in the wake of the protests, the events of 2011 certainly mark a revolution in thinking. In total, protests in the Middle East and North Africa spanned twenty-one countries and territories, representing a resurgence of demands for liberty, dignity, and egalitarianism. The events of the “Arab Spring” are fundamentally *revolutionary*. However, can they fairly be called ‘revolutions’?

The ‘revolution’ nomenclature has the most indigenous legitimacy of any of the previously discussed terms. According to Maytha Alhassen, “[The] cutting edge cultural analytics research of Tweets and Facebook updates [conducted by the virtual lab R-Shief and its creator VJ Um Amel] reveals that the three most popular words used to describe the uprisings in [the Middle East and North Africa] are: “*karama*”, “*thawra*” and “*huqooq*” (dignity, revolution and rights)”.⁵⁴ The crux of the dilemma surrounding the usage of “Arab Revolution” as a collective umbrella term is that the idea of ‘revolution’ does not suit the entirety of the events of 2011 onward. The political and structural changes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya could fairly be classified as ‘revolutions’. However, some countries possessed only a revolutionary ethos, and were unable to achieve widespread societal change. In Morocco, the February 20th Movement was able to bring about constitutional reforms by taking their grievances to the street, but the reforms were carried out under the supervision of King Muhammad VI.⁵⁵ Djibouti experienced only minor protests,⁵⁶ but the armed conflict in Libya merited a United Nations-

⁵³ Sari Hanafi, “The Arab Revolutions: The Emergence of a New Political Subjectivity,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5, no. 2 (2012), 198-99.

⁵⁴ Alhassen, “Reconsider the Term”.

⁵⁵ “Morocco Reforms to Cut Monarch’s Powers,” *Al-Jazeera*, Jun. 17, 2011.

⁵⁶ Mohamed H. Gulaid. “People in Djibouti Protest Against President Gelleh,” *Somaliland Press*, Feb. 3, 2011.

mandated NATO intervention.⁵⁷ The Syrian Civil War wages on at the time of this writing, and President Bashar al-Assad does not seem willing to relinquish his grip on power to the armed opposition. This sampling of “Arab Spring” underscores the diversity of its events. Any umbrella term utilized to collectively describe the demonstrations that followed the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi must be inclusive and all encompassing, able to equally represent each and every one of the twenty-one demonstrations and their outcomes.

The ‘Arab Uprisings’

In his 2012 book, Marc Lynch stated simply that though he unintentionally coined the term, the “Arab Spring” “does not do justice to the nature of the change” and advocates instead for the use of the term ‘Arab Uprising’.⁵⁸ Though some scholars have argued that to consider the “Arab Spring” to be a “series of popular uprisings” would be a reduction or an oversimplification,⁵⁹ Tariq Ramadan advocates specifically for that terminology, which was used initially by the Tunisians at the start of the demonstrations.⁶⁰ Drawing on the work of Jean Paul Sartre, Ramadan argues:

Uprising as a category can be situated halfway between revolution and revolt; once it is carried to its fullest extent and overthrows the existing system (both as political rule and economic structure) it can become revolution. On the other hand, if it is incomplete, if it is manipulated, or if it fails, it will have expressed the people’s aspirations but not concretized their hopes.⁶¹

The ‘uprising’ nomenclature strikes the appropriate balance of cautious optimism and respect for the significant accomplishments of the political actors, without appropriating any rhetorical

⁵⁷ “Security Council Authorizes ‘All Necessary Measures’ to Protect Civilians in Libya”, *United Nations*, Mar. 17, 2011.

⁵⁸ Lynch, *Arab Uprisings*, 9.

⁵⁹ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 6.

⁶⁰ Ramadan, *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 8.

baggage. Unlike the suggestion that the recent events in the Arab world have been a sudden ‘awakening’, the ‘uprising’ terminology allows us to “read them as continuities in a long history of protest in the region rather than a total rupture”.⁶² It leaves room for a more active and participatory role on the part of the political actors instead of framing them as passive receptors for authoritarian imposition. Finally, the Tunisian protestors intentionally used the term ‘uprising’ to invoke the powerful images of the Palestinian *Intifada*, an indigenous and powerful rhetorical association not bogged down by the same quandaries as the ‘spring’ nomenclature.

The ‘Arab’ Uprisings?

In the wake of the emergence of ‘spring-like’ protests in Kiev, Ukraine, in a blog post on *Informed Comment* on 20 February 2014, historian and University of Michigan Professor Juan Cole questioned why there had been no discussion of “Slav” democracy. Cole draws a comparison between the terminologies of ‘Slavs’ (and the ‘Slavic world’) to ‘Arabs’ (and the “Arab World”) to underscore examples of the ‘racialization’ of linguistic groups. While any mention of ‘Slavs’ has been all but eradicated in the media in favor of the geographical terminology of “eastern Europe”,⁶³ the primary media designation for the Middle East and North Africa remains the “Arab World”.⁶⁴ This classification disregards the tremendous diversity of the region in favor of essentializing linguistic and religious commonalities.⁶⁵ Cole uses the term ‘racialization’ to describe this reductive exercise. ‘Racialization’ refers to a set of dynamic processes by which “meanings are attached to particular issues” in which “race appears to be a,

⁶² Hanafi, *The Arab Revolutions*, 198-99.

⁶³ There is an exception to this in the Russian press, which Cole argues is politically motivated.

⁶⁴ Juan Cole, “Racializing Politics: We Don’t Say “Slav” Democracy Troubled in Ukraine, Why Talk About “Arab” Failures?” *Informed Comment Blog*, February 20, 2014.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

or often the, key factor in the way they are defined and understood”.⁶⁶ According to Michael Banton, initially this “mode of categorization was developed, applied tentatively in European historical writing and then, more confidently, to the populations of the world”.⁶⁷ In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon briefly describes how, a ‘racialization of thought’ occurred as a result of this imposed categorization during the colonial period, Fanon argues that this racialization blurred the perception of difference among and between Africans, creating a pervasive illusion of homogeneity that was subsequently internalized.⁶⁸ A similar illusion of homogeneity in the Middle East and North Africa was perpetuated by the creation of a racialized “Arab” identity.

The process of racialization blurs some cultural differences while constructing others in order to structure social relationships between newly “differentiated social collectivities” based on ascribed meanings and signification, which may then be assumed as a primary markers of identity.⁶⁹ In other words, it is the “dialectical process” of defining the ‘Self’ in relation to the ‘Other’.⁷⁰ The creation of this dichotomous discourse circumscribed identity in a European context, and as Miles and Brown elaborate, “By virtue of sharing that common world of meaning, the Other may adopt the content of the racialized discourse to identify itself as Self. Thus, populations that were racialized and excluded by the European discourse of race have appropriated and legitimated that discourse as a means by which to identify Self and Other.”⁷¹ This process can alternatively be called ‘ethnicization’, particularly when the marker of difference is cultural or national difference rather than physical indicators.⁷² For Miles and

⁶⁶ Karim Murji and John Solomos, “Racialization in Theory and Practice,” in *Racialization: Studies in Theory and Practice*, ed. Karim Murji et al. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 3.

⁶⁷ Michael Banton, *The Idea of Race*. (London: Tavistock, 1977), 18-19.

⁶⁸ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 171.

⁶⁹ Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown, *Racism*. (London: Routledge, 2003), 101.

⁷⁰ Murji et al. *Racialization*, 15.

⁷¹ Miles et al. *Racism*, 101-02.

⁷² Murji et al. *Racialization*, 13-14.

Brown, in the process of ethnicization, “meaning is attributed to socio-cultural signifiers of human beings, as a result of which individuals may be assigned to a general category of persons which reproduces itself biologically, culturally, and economically.”⁷³ In the words of Iliya Harik, “the term ‘Arab’ is not a binding epithet; it is descriptive of diverse people and states whose language happens to be Arabic.”⁷⁴ Racialization is therefore a subcategory of ethnicization, referring to a specific process whereby the perception of corporal features is given emphasis over culture, national origin or language.⁷⁵

The unsystematic use of the “Arab” appellation appears suggestive of this same process of racialization and ethnicization. Though the revolutions in 1848 were referred to a-racially as the “Springtime of the Peoples” and the 1989 “Autumn of Nations” made no mention of “Slavic democracy” in a post-communist society, the 2011 uprisings were immediately declared to be “Arab” movements. Despite the wide variance of terms used to describe the wave of popular uprisings, the one consistency is that they were all referred to as ‘Arab’. This not only disregarded non-Arab minority participation in the protests, but it also neglected the spread of protests beyond the so-called “Arab World” to Israel, Mexico and Afghanistan.⁷⁶ Though not every usage of ‘Arabs’ or the “Arab World” is part of this same process of racialization,⁷⁷ to call the demonstrations ‘Arab’ demonstrations is reductive. By disregarding the heterogeneity of an ethnically and linguistically diverse region, the process of racialization rhetorically displaces the myriad non-Arab political actors who rose up to challenge authoritarianism. Future efforts to reference the ‘uprisings of 2011’ (heretofore the “Arab Spring”) should do so with appropriate

⁷³ Miles et al. *Racism*, 99.

⁷⁴ Harik, “Arab Exceptionalism”, 680.

⁷⁵ Miles et al. *Racism*, 99.

⁷⁶ Hanafi, *The Arab Revolutions*, 198.

⁷⁷ Juan Cole gives the example of the Arab League.

respect being given to the geographic space and cultural diversity of the Middle East and North Africa.

Chapter Two: Crediting the ‘Facebook Revolution’

Introduction

On 24 January 2011, in the midst of the popular uprisings in Tunisia, Roger Cohen authored an op-ed piece in which he characterized the events leading up to the ouster of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali as “a Facebook Revolution”.¹ In describing the effects of the protests, he writes “an Arab dictatorship with a 53-year pedigree was shuddering...it had fallen in perhaps the world’s first revolution without a leader. Or rather, its leader was far away: Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook.”² Cohen’s assertion is reflective of a common theme in Western-based narratives of the uprisings, which place social media in a position of centrality above and beyond the individuals that use the technologies. By decentering the community organizers and bloggers that coordinated the protests, Western commentators are marginalizing the political actors and relegating them to a position of importance that is subordinate to the technological means they deploy to achieve their objectives.

This marginalization is not a phenomenon that is unique to the Arab Spring: over the past five years, media commentators have emphasized the role played by Western-based online media applications by dubbing political movements as ‘social media revolutions’ or ‘Internet revolutions’.³ This technology-centric terminology has also been applied to the civil unrest in Moldova in 2009,⁴ the 2009 “Green Revolution” in Iran,⁵ the Egyptian “Lotus” Revolution of

¹ Roger Cohen, “Facebook and Arab Dignity,” *New York Times*, Jan. 24, 2011.

² *Ibid.*

³ Francesca Comunello and Giuseppe Anzera, “Will the Revolution Be Tweeted? A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Social Media and the Arab Spring,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 4 (2012): 454.

⁴ “‘Twitter Revolution’: Fearing Uprising, Russia Backs Moldova’s Communists,” *Spiegel*, Apr. 10, 2009.

⁵ Brad Stone and Noam Cohen, “Social Networks Spread Defiance Online,” *New York Times*, Jun. 15, 2009.

2011 and the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2013.⁶ In the Middle East and North Africa, the utilization of the Internet and social media by the “Green Revolution” and the subsequent revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt were emphasized to such a degree that it has resulted in extensive debates about the role of social media and other Internet technologies in democratization movements.⁷

According to Genevieve Barrons, ‘social media’ refers to “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow for the creation and exchange of User-Generated content.”⁸ In the context of the popular uprisings of 2011, this primarily refers to Facebook, Twitter and YouTube whose roles were given prominence by media commentators in Western countries. Tremendous weight was placed on social media’s ability to facilitate the organization of protest activities and the rapid spread of information about the regional protests through grassroots journalism.⁹ This emphasis on the diffusive properties of internet-based social media is not without cause. One of the pillars of “Arab authoritarianism” was enforcing conformity by keeping an uncompromising hold on the public sphere through censorship, press restrictions and repression.¹⁰ The evolution of communications technology—from the printing press to the Internet—has dramatically transformed the way individuals connect to each other and to their governments throughout history. The Internet, satellite television and the advent of increasingly effective “technologies for accessing information” have made impeding the flow of knowledge and the spread of ideas

⁶ “Ukraine’s Euromaidan Revolution: What’s in a Name?” *Washington Post*, Dec. 2, 2013.

⁷ Vasileois Karagiannopoulos, “The Role of the Internet in Political Struggles: Some Conclusions from Iran and Egypt,” *New Political Science* 34, no. 2 (2012): 151.

⁸ Genevieve Barrons, “‘Suleiman: Mubarak decided to step down #egypt #jan25 OH MY GOD’: examining the use of social media in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5, no. 1 (2012): 55.

⁹ Comunello et al. “Will the Revolution Be Tweeted?” 454.

¹⁰ Lynch, “The Arab Uprising,” 11.

increasingly more difficult for authoritarian regimes throughout the world, breaking down established power arrangements.¹¹ However, as Vasileios Karagiannopoulos argues in *New Political Science* journal, the centrality of social media in the Western discourse about the uprisings does not paint an adequate picture of the political reality:

[P]erceiving the use of these online applications as the epicenter of national political struggles, a perception reinforced by the western media hype, promotes a unilateral and narrow understanding of these events. Such perceptions primarily do injustice to the multi-faceted contribution of the Internet as a whole and, second, falsely present digital technologies as the core aspect of these protests. There are, thus, two stages of disorientation, first in relation to the extent of digital technologies employed and, second, to the extent these technologies influenced the events in relation to offline activity.¹²

Karagiannopoulos posits that the stress on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube dramatizes the importance of particular social media sites while simultaneously understating the importance of other modern technologies that—in conjunction with social media—“provide so many different, interlinking platforms for many users to produce and exchange information”.¹³ The myriad interactions between generational change, grassroots political activism and the availability of technological innovations played a complex role in the transformation of the public sphere in the Middle East and North Africa.

These technological innovations have not emerged evenly across the Middle East and North Africa. The role played by Internet-driven technologies such as social media is dependent upon and limited by the prevalence of Internet access in the region—access to which increased dramatically in the decade preceding the uprisings. The Arab Human Development Report of 2002 discerned that more people in sub-Saharan Africa had access to the Internet than those in

¹¹ Stephen M. Saideman, “When Conflict Spreads: Arab Spring and the Limits of Diffusion,” *International Interactions: Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations* 38, no. 5 (2012): 716.

¹² Karagiannopoulos, “The Role of the Internet in Political Struggles”, 162-63.

¹³ *Ibid*, 162-63.

the “Arab World”,¹⁴ a number that would nearly quadruple by 2011.¹⁵ Despite these advances, according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Database for 2010, a higher percentage of Internet use did not correlate to a higher incidence of regime change: the United Arab Emirates (78%), Bahrain (55%), Oman (62%), and Morocco (49%) all had higher rates of Internet use than the Tunisia (36.8%), Egypt (26.7%), Libya (14%) and Yemen (12.4%). The latter four countries experienced regime turnover in the wake of the events of 2011.¹⁶ The Middle East and North Africa accounts for the highest rates of growth and contains the most new users of social networking globally. By December 2010, on the eve of the protests, the number of Facebook users in the “Arab world” had increased 78 percent from 2009 to 21 million, but only 17.6 percent of Tunisians and 5.5 percent of Egyptians utilized Facebook.¹⁷ Genevieve Barrons analyzed the incidence of the #egypt ‘hashtag’ from 16-23 January to 24-30 January, and despite finding a 962 percent increase in a single week, pointed out that only 0.24 percent of the tweets listed their location as Egypt.¹⁸ These statistics reflect the demographics of the percentage of the population that was capable of utilizing the Internet during the widespread dissent, they are not indicative of the impact of social media usage specifically. Twitter was likely available to no more than 1-2 percent of the protestors,¹⁹ and Barrons ultimately concluded that “the vast majority of tweets about Egypt were coming from outside the country...Almost 70% of all tweets were re-tweets,

¹⁴ United Nations Development Programme, “Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations” (2002): 29.

¹⁵ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 53.

¹⁶ International Telecommunication Union, *Information and Communications Technologies Database*, 2010.

¹⁷ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 54-55. In December 2010, 3.7 percent of Libyans and 0.7 percent of Yemenis were Facebook users.

¹⁸ Barrons, “Examining the Use of Social Media”, 63. The incidence of the hashtag increased from 122,319 to 1.3 million.

¹⁹ Miriyam Aouragh, “Framing the Internet in the Arab Revolutions: Myth Meets Modernity” *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 1: 151-52.

suggesting that information was being shared and re-shared, rather than created or discussed.”²⁰

Representing the impacts of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, or other social media sites statistically is a near impossibility. However, Barrons’ research sheds light on an important fact: the demographic realities of the users of social media in the Middle East and North Africa are not representative of the ordinary citizenry.

Robert McChesney and John Nichols, in their book *The Death and Life of American Journalism*, argue that digital media remains “more niche than general, more elite than democratic” because it is still not available to the majority of the world’s population.²¹ An over-emphasis on the Internet as a causative force for the process of democratization throughout the world is therefore exclusive of the percentage of the population that remains without access to this online democratic forum. However, for those with access it is undeniable that the ability to converse with others online allowed people to easily form collectivities around common beliefs and interests. Challenging the centrality of social media to the discussion of technologies that facilitated the spread of information about the 2011 demonstrations, Noueihed suggests that the accessibility of better and cheaper mobile phones might have played a larger role in the coordination of protests than social media. Emerging parallel to the Internet boom between 2005 and 2011, mobile phone subscriptions increased 400 percent and (unlike the Internet) spread to rural communities that had previously remained disconnected from the urban centers.²² The advent of the camera phone, and subsequently the smartphone, which allowed users to record and share footage with unprecedented ease, was a revolutionary advancement in technology that

²⁰ Barrons, “Examining the Use of Social Media”, 63.

²¹ Robert McChesney and John Nichols, *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution That Will Begin the World Again* (New York: Nation Books, 2010): 82.

²² Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 53-54.

played as much of a role in the success of the protests as the presence of social media.²³ The coalescence of different technologies “decentralizes and propagates information exchanges on a multidirectional and synchronous level” forming a matrix which would constitute the foundation for the new media environment.²⁴ In other words, the increase in availability of higher quality mobile devices to all strata of society created a multiplicity of instantaneous connections among people who were then able to share information—irrespective of social class.

“A New Arab Public Sphere”

In *The Arab Uprising*, Marc Lynch identified three outcomes of the modern media environment in the Arab World: (1) the erosion of authoritarian control of the public sphere, (2) the empowerment of the Arab citizenry, and (3) the fusion of what he calls the “Arab political space”, which synthesized individual political grievances into “a common narrative of shared fate and struggle”.²⁵ These three claims have been echoed throughout the Western media narrative of the popular uprisings of 2011, and merit being examined in detail. Perhaps least disputable is the degradation of the regimes’ forceful monopoly of information. The authoritarian republics of the Middle East and North Africa were notorious for their domination over the flow of information in the public sphere. Ben Ali’s Tunisia was particularly repressive, characterized by harsh restrictions on political expression with “zero press freedoms, a censored internet, monitored phone and email communications, and only token opposition”.²⁶ Ben Ali’s domination of the public sphere manifested itself most clearly in his restriction of the media, though the president’s official rhetoric maintained that Tunisia had both freedom of speech and

²³ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 53-54.

²⁴ Karagiannopoulos, “The Role of the Internet in Political Struggles”, 162-63.

²⁵ Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 11.

²⁶ Gideon Rose, *The New Arab Revolt: What Happened, What It Means, and What Comes Next* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2011): 77.

freedom of the press. Since Arab independence from colonial domination in the 1950s, authoritarian regimes in the Middle East had come to associate one's control of the media with one's grasp on power.²⁷ Ben Ali's regime embodied this ideal: all forms of Tunisian media were restricted through the issuance of licenses, accreditations, and registrations. In their 2008 report on Tunisia, Reporters Without Borders declared Tunisia's treatment of civil liberties to be "the region's most authoritarian".²⁸ Generally speaking, national newspapers in Tunisia were largely uncritical of the regime, and papers that failed to follow the government line were censored or banned. Tunisians were granted only limited access to certain authorized foreign newspapers, and regime loyalists owned all private media.²⁹ This was true throughout the Middle East and North Africa, where the legitimacy of print media as a source of information was constantly undermined by political, financial and institutional controls, which forced journalists to adhere to censored versions of political events.³⁰ Senior political analyst for *Al-Jazeera* Marwan Bishara describes these efforts as part of a process that "aimed to erase features of plurality and diversity in order to establish a uniform political society based on the ruling ideology."³¹ Though censorship protected the regime from criticism, it ultimately "created a remarkably brittle structure of control" because as the communications environment was changing, such intense and totalitarian control over the transmission of information was becoming increasingly obvious and difficult to maintain.³²

Though Lynch underscores the new avenues of self-empowerment available to members of authoritarian societies since the advent of the new network of media technologies, many in the

²⁷ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 46.

²⁸ Reporters Without Borders, "Tunisia: Annual Report 2008".

²⁹ Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 74.

³⁰ Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 250.

³¹ Marwan Bishara, *The Invisible Arab* (New York: Nation Books, 2012): 35.

³² Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 74.

Western media adopt what Francesca Comunello calls a “technologically deterministic” framework. Comunello defines *technological determinism* as “a theoretical perspective that assumes that the relationship between technology and society can be described as one-way effects of technology on society: in other words, that technology shapes society.”³³ This ‘impact’ framework would emphasize the “*consequences* of the use for society, without considering the complex interactions between technological and social factors, the various contexts in which technologies are used, and the different purposes people pursue by using technology”.³⁴ In other words, rather than seeking to understand how individuals utilize technology, commentators have instead analyzed what technology does for society. Comunello describes the Western commentators who possess such eagerness for social media to be an indispensable feature of modern revolutions as “digital evangelists”.³⁵

Providing the complementary perspective to these technological optimists, in an article for the *New Yorker*, Malcolm Gladwell criticizes the argument that social media have “reinvented social activism” by comparing modern protest movements to the tactics utilized in the American Civil Rights Movement.³⁶ Challenging the notion that social media have caused a fundamental shift in the power relationship between “political authority and popular will”, Gladwell contends that social media platforms are constructed on the basis of what he calls *weak ties*, methods of interacting with people one might never meet or managing acquaintances one once knew.³⁷ He asserts that this results in *network* building, which lacks the centralized authority and decision-making capacities of hierarchical structures. He concludes that the

³³ Comunello et al. “Will the Revolution Be Tweeted?” 458.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 458.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 462.

³⁶ Malcolm Gladwell, “Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted,” *New Yorker*, Oct. 04, 2010.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

association of social media with political activism since 2009 has resulted in a dual process in which it becomes easier for activists to engage in self-expression, and more difficult for that expression to have any significance.³⁸ Though Gladwell is right to acknowledge that the role of social media and Internet technologies has often been overstated, he overlooks the ways in which technologies have provided new forums for citizens to express their political disaffection. The new media environment empowered the citizenry by “creating a sense of communal fearlessness”.³⁹ By providing a common forum by which to share opinions, new technologies facilitated the dissolution of the climate of fear constructed by authoritarian regimes. Once society collectively realizes that dissent is both common and extensive, the authoritarian regime is unable to withstand the pressure.

Though the presence of new technologies should not be viewed as deterministic, it is important to realize the impacts of social media on the previously restricted social society in the Middle East and North Africa. The presence of social media and new technologies created an information infrastructure for the uprisings by performing five primary functions: (1) serving as an initial online forum for dissent, (2) enabling protesters to produce and perpetuate an alternative narrative of events, (3) assisting in the mobilization of other protesters, (4) providing a mechanism of connection and organization, and (5) supplementing more traditional methods of political action. However, despite the fact that this technological revolution contributed a framework within which political dissents were able to operate, social media cannot be studied in isolation from traditional media forms or offline activism.⁴⁰ As Karagiannopoulos writes:

It becomes, thus, apparent from the review of the events that, for both the regimes and the protestors, internet-related activities did not constitute a separate, autonomous level of

³⁸ Gladwell, “Small Change”.

³⁹ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 55.

⁴⁰ Comunella and Anzera, “Will the Revolution Be Tweeted?”, 466.

contestation. Instead, online activities constituted the interconnected extensions of real life actions of both conflicting sides during those political events. As Christian Fuchs argues, virtual reality is neither absorbed nor separate from social reality, but part of the latter, as cyberspace influences our cognitive, communicative, and interactive functions in everyday life.⁴¹

In light of this, it is impossible to examine this new media framework without differentiating between its diverse components and their multifarious effects throughout the Arab world. The outcomes of the Iranian “Green Revolution” in 2009 underscores why an overemphasis on social media can be destructive: the regime is also capable of utilizing the Internet to serve its own ends and objectives.⁴² The Egyptian security forces purchased monitoring software to track and jail cyber-dissidents, even going so far as to create a mobile phone and Internet blackout toward the end of January 2011.⁴³ Though the Egyptian regime exploited the structural weakness of the technological framework of the protests, it was ultimately unable to stem the flow of protesters. This underscores the complexity of interactions between technology and society that contributed to the success of the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia.

Comunello deems this interaction *convergence culture* and concludes that it is part and parcel of post-modernity. A convergence culture is a culture “where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways”.⁴⁴ Nowhere is this more evident than in the rapid diffusion of events from Mohammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in December. Even in the absence of centralized authority, the presence of social media allowed the story of the Tunisian experience to escape the roadblocks of the Ben Ali regime and be swiftly

⁴¹ Karagiannopoulos, “The Role of the Internet in Political Struggles”, 164.

⁴² *Ibid*, 165.

⁴³ *Ibid*. 165.

⁴⁴ Comunella et al, “Will the Revolution Be Tweeted?”, 459.

transmitted from country to country, facilitating a truly leaderless revolution.⁴⁵ This process was enabled by “the common language, shared identity, tight focus and dense communication across countries” that produced the environment that would “bind together the disparate protests within a shared identity and a common narrative.”⁴⁶ Despite Gladwell’s assertion that modern activists are “defined by their tools” rather than their causes,⁴⁷ the evidence shows that the political activists in Egypt and Tunisia simply used the tools that were available to them to advance their causes, enhancing the more traditional methods of voicing dissent utilized throughout history.

Lynch’s final argument is that out of the modern media network emerged a new “Arab political space”. This is consistent with the argument made by Jürgen Habermas, who in his discussion of modern democratic revolutions, posited that an essential characteristic of these revolutions has been “the existence of an independent public sphere where citizens can meet to discuss politics relatively free from state interference”.⁴⁸ The introduction of the Internet to the region meant that a new space had emerged where individuals could express their dissent and dissatisfaction with the regime, providing the foundations for viable collective action later. Bishara argues that the process of utilizing cell phone and Internet technologies to challenge the dominant media narrative began with the occupation of Iraq, which “opened the floodgates of information in its later years through Twitter, blogs, Facebook and other multimedia forms”.⁴⁹ This trend was continued by campaigns such as the one conducted by the Egyptian *Kefaya* (“Enough”) movement during Egypt’s contested 2005 elections, in which Egyptian demonstrators essentially “test drove” many of the tactics that would later be used during the

⁴⁵ Barrons, “Examining the Use of Social Media”, 64.

⁴⁶ Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 125.

⁴⁷ Gladwell, “Small Change”.

⁴⁸ Youmna Elsayed, “Revolutionary Media on a Budget: Facebook-only Social Journalism,” *Arab Media and Society* 17 (2013): 3.

⁴⁹ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 88.

“Lotus Revolution”.⁵⁰ Sari Hanafi hypothesizes that the inherent pluralism of this modern media system in the Middle East and North Africa has “enabled the new political subjectivity of individuals...[and] the creation of an Arab public sphere, in a Habermasian sense, wherein dialogue, rational, critical and deliberative debates emerge and evade control by the national regimes.”⁵¹ The coalescence of mobile phones, satellite channels, websites, and social media services produced a new political terrain to navigable by anyone with access to broadband or Wi-Fi.

Though the criticism has appropriately been made that internet access remains a luxury of the elite, the availability of the service- has been growing exponentially, lending some to discuss the “democratization potential” of the resulting political sphere. Scholars like Rex Brynen assert that the “emphasis on debating taboo topics [in the new Arab media] is creating a new, critical, and articulate public sphere...building the underpinnings of more liberal, pluralistic politics”.⁵² Emphasizing the capacity for individual participation in this new sphere, Hanafi postulates that protesters were empowered by the accessibility of cyberspace, as “each demonstrator became a ‘journalist’ carrying a mobile phone and filming state repression”.⁵³ This became known as ‘citizen journalism’, a form of journalism in which “the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another”.⁵⁴ In describing the multiplicity of levels of participation now available to the average protester, Bishara describes how an activist “could demonstrate during the day, circulate video clips in the evening as citizen journalists, and watch themselves at night making a difference”.⁵⁵ When married to social media,

⁵⁰ Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 237.

⁵¹ Hanafi, “The Arab Revolutions”, 206.

⁵² Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 233.

⁵³ Hanafi, “The Arab Revolutions”, 205.

⁵⁴ Elsayed, “Revolutionary Media on a Budget”, 4.

⁵⁵ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 88.

this form of news making becomes “social journalism”.⁵⁶ In social journalism, amateur content is not filtered separately from professionally produced and edited content, which Youmna Elsayed argues has shifted the role of the reader to one of more direct participation. “As the active audience paradigm suggests, audiences now are producers of meaning as they are not just reading the news passively...rather, audiences are pulled by the social media gadgets surrounding the piece of news to suggest and collaborate in the making of the story and ‘reframing it in the process’”.⁵⁷ Participation through witness and observation, both on satellite television and on media sites such as YouTube, helped construct a common understanding of what would come after the revolutions.⁵⁸ The model of assessing the value of technology through its “democratization potential” provides a more empowering lens for analysis. Rather than marginalizing actors like the technologically deterministic model, evaluating the democratization potential of tools to create an infrastructure for information-sharing leaves room for the ability of individuals to shape society themselves.

Prior to this transformation of the political sphere, the distribution of information in the Middle East and North Africa was one directional, flowing from the carefully produced media narrative of the authoritarian powers to the citizenry. Continuing the tradition begun by Gamal Abdel Nasser’s *Voice of the Arabs*, the Arab political sphere “spoke for the Arab people, who were not invited to speak back”.⁵⁹ The information infrastructure created by these new technologies fundamentally transformed the flow of information, allowing citizens to become newsmakers themselves through the easily accessible medium of the Internet. Karagiannopoulos

⁵⁶ Elsayed, “Revolutionary Media on a Budget”, 5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 19.

⁵⁸ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 215.

⁵⁹ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 50.

discusses how the presence of new technologies provided a mechanism by which the citizenry was able to transform itself into a “creative audience” capable of

generating its own global, social, and cultural spaces and hindering authoritarian attempts at information control. The power of the Internet, therefore, is not only or mainly vested in the emergence of new platforms, but also, mainly, in the openness and interconnectivity of a multitude of information-sharing and broadcasting applications and devices and the will of users globally to assist in spreading information and opposing authoritarian policies...As the events demonstrated, as soon as the regimes engaged in monitoring and filtering, protesters sought ways to circumvent information blockages through encrypting technologies, proxies, and alternative connection opportunities and maintained adequate levels of generation and distribution.⁶⁰

There has been the proclivity for digital evangelists and others who adopt a technologically deterministic framework to dramatize the actual role played by social media: “as if the use of social media itself constituted the revolution”.⁶¹ This equivocation, which often runs parallel to the essentialization of the uprisings as “social media revolutions”, is disrespectful to the agency of the demonstrators who risked their lives in the name of dignity and political pluralism. However, it is undeniable that new technologies have facilitated the emergence of a new public sphere; a discussion of which would be incomplete without examining the crucial role played by *Al-Jazeera* and satellite television.

“The *Al-Jazeera* Effect”

The beginnings of the transformation of the political sphere in the Middle East and North Africa can be traced to the early 1990s with the emergence of satellite television. The first private satellite channel was the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) in 1991, though it was with the launch of *Al-Jazeera* in 1996 that the Middle East and North Africa was offered a

⁶⁰ Karagiannopoulos, “The Role of the Internet in Political Struggles,” 162-63.

⁶¹ Barrons, “Examining the Use of Social Media”, 57-58.

professional news broadcast—in Arabic.⁶² Its coverage of the second Palestinian *Intifada* propelled the Qatari-owned news organization to the status of 'an Arabic CNN', offering a competing narrative to the Israeli media and hailed as “an antidote to the stale newscasts of old”.⁶³ *Al-Jazeera* came to define what modern Arab media would be, with enthusiastic reporters who provided an intriguing foil to the “Soviet-style, state-controlled Arab media”.⁶⁴ Unlike the Internet and social media, which have been criticized for not representing the mainstream Arab populous, satellite television is astoundingly accessible.⁶⁵ *Al-Jazeera* boasts an impressive 40 million viewers.⁶⁶ According to a 2010 opinion poll, 78 percent of Arabs listed *Al-Jazeera* as one of their top two choices for international news, and 85 percent of Arabs reported relying on their television as their primary source of news and information.⁶⁷ This breadth of the reach of *Al-Jazeera* has led scholars such as Youssef Sawani and Marc Lynch to conclude that the transnational media, through common narratives presented in a shared language, is contributing to the re-imagining of Pan-Arabism.⁶⁸ Noueihed speaks of the subsequent shrinking of the Arab world by the new media, a process that involved “consolidating the sense of community among a group of people who shared the same language, and many of the same concerns, but lived in a vast area that stretched from the Atlantic Ocean off Morocco to the Indian ocean off Oman.”⁶⁹ Not only did this time-space compression facilitate the transplantation of dissidence from one polis to another, but it also played a crucial role in the popular uprisings of 2011. *Al-Jazeera*'s coverage of the demonstrations amplified their effects, informed individuals in adjacent countries

⁶² Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 47.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 48-50.

⁶⁴ Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 235.

⁶⁵ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 184.

⁶⁶ Ramadan, *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, 46.

⁶⁷ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 50.

⁶⁸ Youssef Mohamed Sawani, “The ‘End of Pan-Arabism’ Revisited: Reflections on the Arab Spring,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5, no. 3 (2012): 389. See also Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 8.

⁶⁹ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 50-51.

and in diaspora of the struggles of their neighbors, and provided support to the information infrastructure for the uprisings that were established by the Internet and social media.

Throughout its coverage of the protests, *Al-Jazeera* was able to maintain coverage of the events by utilizing social media to “[tap] into a network of citizen journalists and bloggers that they had connected with prior to the start of the protests”, even when its reporters were banned from the demonstration areas.⁷⁰ During the upheavals themselves, ‘*Al-Jazeera*’ came second only to ‘Egypt’ as the most searched term on the Internet, receiving a 2500 percent upsurge in traffic—70 percent of which was directed from social media networks.⁷¹ *Al-Jazeera* and other satellite stations were not immune to the efforts of authoritarian regimes to maintain control over the narrative of events, but like the cyber-activists, traditional news channels were able to circumvent the communication-breakdown by transmitting via proxies and alternative satellites.⁷² Even when the Internet in Egypt was completely blacked out, citizens remained informed because television was able to maintain an “information bridge between protestors in different parts of the country”.⁷³ Unlike the Saudi-backed *Al-Arabiya* network, *Al-Jazeera*’s coverage blatantly favored the protests, which undoubtedly helped to perpetuate the demonstration effect and spread of the uprisings from Tunisia.⁷⁴ Some Tunisians reportedly celebrated Ben Ali’s ouster with *Shukran lil-Jazeera* (‘thank you, *Al-Jazeera*’) placards.⁷⁵

Lynch argues that the result of *Al-Jazeera*’s dominance in the Arab political sphere has meant “this generation of Arabs sees all the region’s revolutions as part of a single, shared

⁷⁰ Barrons, “Examining the Use of Social Media”, 59. It is interesting to note that 40 percent of this traffic came from the United States.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Karagiannopoulos, “The Role of the Internet in Political Struggles, 160-61.

⁷³ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 185.

⁷⁴ Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 242.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 236.

narrative, with a common set of heroes and villains”.⁷⁶ Marwan Bishara describes this new Pan-Arabism as “the *Al-Jazeera* identity”, which has “grown to become the virtual public sphere of the Arab world, commanding the loyalty of tens of millions in any given week”.⁷⁷ He ultimately contends that the “*Al-Jazeera* effect” cultivates change and democracy in the Arab world, adopting the sort of technological determinism that he criticizes earlier in his book.⁷⁸ Though the importance of *Al-Jazeera* should not be overlooked, it can be overstated. Bishara’s book concludes with a quote from the *Washington Post*, in which Hussein Agha and Robert Malley declare, “*Al-Jazeera* has emerged as a full-fledged political actor...It has become the new Nasser. The leader of the Arab world is a television network.”⁷⁹ Perhaps representing this opinion is not shocking, considering that Bishara is one of *Al-Jazeera*’s best-known correspondents. In citing Agha and Malley, Bishara is contributing to a dialogue that marginalizes the political actors in the Middle East and North Africa in favor of crediting the success of the uprisings to a television network. Lynch frames his analysis in the middle ground, arguing that *Al-Jazeera*’s role was in cooperation with the narrative of the demonstrations developed online, not in competition with it, amplifying “the framing of the protests developed online” to a wider audience.⁸⁰ *Al-Jazeera* was not responsible for the outburst of protests, nor can they claim responsibility for the events in Tunisia. *Al-Jazeera* has previously come under fire for acting as an agent of its owner, the Qatari government, a process most evident in its refusal to cover the attempt at a “Hunayn Revolution” in Saudi Arabia on 11 March 2011.⁸¹ The Qatari news organization is a *component* of a broader movement in the new Arab media “which is

⁷⁶ Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 21.

⁷⁷ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 183.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 191.

⁷⁹ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 194. See also the original article: Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, “In Post-Mubarak Egypt, the Rebirth of the Arab World”, *Washington Post*, Feb. 11, 2011.

⁸⁰ Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 82.

⁸¹ Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 251.

driven from below, and expresses a set of common political and socioeconomic demands, ranging from individual freedoms and freely elected and accountable governments...shaping a novel Arab identity”—it does not singularly characterize it.⁸² What Bishara’s analysis is missing is the agency of the new generation in the Middle East and North Africa, who have shaped the new political sphere—using including the Internet, social media, and satellite networks such as *Al-Jazeera*—as tools to advance their own interests.

Appreciating Individual Agency

Challenging Western commentators to abandon the framework of *technological determinism* in discussions of the uprisings of 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa, Comunello posits that an appropriate framework for analysis would examine the complex relationships between society, technology and political systems in order to avoid the pitfalls of perceiving it as a determinant rather than a facilitator.⁸³ This will allow analysts to abstain from interpreting modern Internet technologies as having “inherently democratic capacities”,⁸⁴ a position that has been critiqued by Tariq Ramadan, who argues that “[the Internet and social networks] are the property of powerful multinational firms whose first loyalty is to profit, growth, expansion and cutthroat competition” and therefore it “would likewise be foolish to imagine that the alternative media...can guarantee freedom and autonomy”.⁸⁵ Alternatively, commentators ought emphasize that modern technology such as satellite television, mobile phones, the Internet and social media are fundamentally neutral and carry with them democratization *potential*. Abandoning technological determinism will allow analysis to be

⁸² Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 251.

⁸³ Comunello and Anzera, “Will the Revolution Be Tweeted?”, 465.

⁸⁴ Elsayed, “Revolutionary Media on a Budget”, 2.

⁸⁵ Ramadan, *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, 49.

conducted in a realistic context, avoiding any false promises of determinism or abuse by authoritarian forces.⁸⁶ As Barrons astutely observes, the overemphasis on social media by the Western media lessens the risks taken up willingly by protestors who demonstrated in the face of real danger: there will be no victory without offline engagement.⁸⁷ Compared to their predecessors, the modern media does possess technological advantages, but their fundamental neutrality must be stressed in order to place the demonstrator in a position of centrality and superiority to the technology.

That is not to say that analysis of the role played by the Internet must be abandoned altogether. Fundamentally, “the internet is an indispensable facet of contemporary politics. This is not because real-life politics have been substituted or are impotent to bring change without it, but because digital media constitute a dominant expressive and practical phenomenon of our time that can facilitate as well as compromise political activity.”⁸⁸ The formation of the modern media network by the demonstrators in 2011 was a symptom rather than a cause of revolution—“the modes of expression of an intelligent people capable of using the instruments at hand to mobilize autonomously”.⁸⁹ A rational individual will always use the best instrument of communication available, be it carrier pigeons, a telegraph or a text message.⁹⁰ The insistence on identifying a *prima facie* cause or singular determinant outside of the certitude of the protestors is a distraction: “Social media cannot provide the needed conviction or discipline, let alone stop

⁸⁶ Karagiannopoulos, “The Role of the Internet in Political Struggles”, 166.

⁸⁷ Barrons, “Examining the Use of Social Media”, 55.

⁸⁸ Karagiannopoulos, “The Role of the Internet in Political Struggles”, 171.

⁸⁹ Mustapha Marrouchi, “Willed From the Bottom Up: The Postcolonial Turned Revolutionary,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 18, no. 3 (2013), 395.

⁹⁰ Aouragh, “Framing the Internet”, 148-49.

lethal tear gas or bullets”, as Miriyam Aouragh eloquently reminds us.⁹¹ The actor must not be marginalized in favor of the means he or she uses to achieve his or her objectives.

All of this begs the question: what was the reason for the emphasis on alternative media? Why was it easier for the Western Media “to give credit to a handful of websites [rather] than to study the more complicated Arab reality from which the youth emerged”?⁹² Bishara suggests that in a post-Jihadist world, a generation of globalized youth is appealing to the West, who sees them as being “natural byproducts of a cyber environment”, “free of colonial baggage and more prone to ‘universalist ideals’”.⁹³ Ramadan proposes that the alternative media has simply created the illusion that they will bring about a transformation in the Middle East and North Africa that is in line with the “global neoliberal capitalist order”,⁹⁴ mostly because “they conveyed the reassuring impression that they were speaking the same language as ‘we’ were, that they shared ‘our’ values and ‘our’ hopes”.⁹⁵ Barron contends that emphasis was placed on forms of technology that originated in the West because its use “allowed some in the West to feel a sense of control over what was going on”.⁹⁶ Perhaps most tellingly, Marcelo Lopes de Souza and Barbara Lipietz argue that the commentators’ fascination with the role played by social media was the West “projecting our own fascinations, our own wishes, rather than seriously trying to understand the complex situations as they ‘are’”.⁹⁷ Whatever the rationalization, the process of decentering the demonstrator in favor of the tools they employ devalues the risk taken by the individual, downplays the importance of action, and marginalizes those directly engaging with

⁹¹ Aouragh, “Framing the Internet”: 153.

⁹² Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 94.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 66.

⁹⁴ Ramadan, *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, 131.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 125.

⁹⁶ Barrons, “Examining the Use of Social Media,” 61.

⁹⁷ Marcelo Lopes de Souza and Barbara Lipietz, “The “Arab Spring” and the City: Hopes, Contradictions and Spatiality,” *City* 15, no. 6 (2011): 619.

the authoritarian regimes. Revolutions are not made online, and joining a Facebook group or re-tweeting a call to action is not the same as actually rising up. The action of protesting requires discipline, conviction and endurance on the part of the individual—all of which is notably absent from the Western media discourse surrounding the so-called “social media revolutions”.

Chapter Three: ‘Hijacking’ the Revolution

Introduction

In *From Arab Spring to Islamist Winter*, Raphael Israeli describes what he believes is a fundamental transition that has occurred in the Middle East and North Africa unleashed by the popular uprisings of 2011: “[I]nstead of the peace, progress, development, democracy and stability that the (Arab) Spring was supposed to have triggered, we are entering an era of uncertainty, tumult, instability, unrest and deprivation caused by the unfolding Islamic Winter”.¹ Israeli’s book echoes a sentiment underlying an emerging narrative in the Western media: that the “Arab Spring” had “continued its evolution into an Islamist Winter.”² As the revolutions, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, began the process of electing constituent assemblies and rebuilding their governments, many commentators began to speak of “hijacked” elections and Islamist usurpers.³ Since its emergence in the latter half of the 1970s, political Islam (or *Islamism*) is

frequently portrayed [by the West] as an enraged mass movement engaged in a social uprising which abhors the symbols of the West and Western influence in the Arab world. As it is popularly understood, Islamic fundamentalism is an anti-modern trend that champions a return to an uncivilized age with a social and political order based on despotic rule and barbarian practice.⁴

¹ Raphael Israel, *From Arab Spring to Islamic Winter* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013): xii.

² Many articles to this effect appeared in various publications (the majority of them conservative, with notable exceptions). *See Also*: “Editorial: From Arab Spring to Islamist Winter”, *The Washington Times*, Oct. 25, 2011. Khaled Abu Toameh, “From an Arab Spring to an Islamist Winter,” *Gatestone Institute*, Oct. 28, 2011. Michael J. Totten, “Arab Spring or Islamist Winter?” *World Affairs Journal*, John Bradley, “Arab Spring? This is Turning Into the Winter of Islamic Jihad,” *The Daily Mail Online*, Nov. 22, 2011. Jan./Feb. 2012. Catherine Herridge, “The Islamist Winter: New Report Suggests Extremism in Libya”, *Fox News*, Jan. 04, 2012. Tamara Cofman Wittes, “Learning to Live With the Islamist Winter,” *Foreign Policy*, Jul. 19, 2012. Niall Ferguson, “Turning Points,” *New York Times*, Nov. 30, 2012. Serge Schmemmann, “From the Editor,” *New York Times*, Nov. 30, 2012. James Phillips, “The Arab Spring Descends into Islamic Winter: Implications for US Policy”, *The Heritage Foundation*, Dec. 20, 2012.

³ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 265.

⁴ Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996): 2.

As Marc Lynch elaborates, “The fiercest denunciations of the Arab Uprisings come from those who see them not simply as compromising friends, but as actively empowering Islamist enemies...as a sign of the rapid advance of radical Islam.”⁵ The young, secular, Western-oriented protestors whom the Western media had so closely followed on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube had been replaced by an Islamist force that was perceived as being significantly more ominous.

For many Western observers, the 30 January 2011 return of Ennahda Party leader Rachid Ghannouchi to Tunisia after twenty years in exile was too reminiscent of Ayatollah Khomeini’s return from exile to claim victory after the popular revolution in Iran in 1979.⁶ Many feared his arrival would signal the “Islamization of Tunisian politics and society”,⁷ reaffirming fears that Islamist parties might “hijack” the supposedly secular revolutions in Tunisia and build up an oppressive theocracy.⁸ The underlying assumption was simple: “a win for the Islamist political parties necessarily equals a loss for democracy”.⁹ This discourse, prevalent both in America and in the European Union countries,¹⁰ is grounded in persistent Western beliefs about Islam’s incompatibility with democracy that continue to influence these countries’ ability to interact with Islamist movements and actors. These ideas are sustained by memories of the Islamist Revolution in Iran, the rise of the Islamist FIS (*Front Islamique du Salut*) in Algeria,¹¹ and the September 11th terrorist attacks in the United States, which continue to perpetuate fears about the risk of Islamism and Middle Eastern democracy.¹² As a result, since 1979 “Islamist” has held a pejorative connotation in the Western media as *Islamic fundamentalism* became “a part of the

⁵ Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 27.

⁶ “Tunisian Leader Returns From Exile,” *Al-Jazeera English*, Jan. 30, 2011.

⁷ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 78.

⁸ *Ibid*, 265.

⁹ *Ibid*, 265.

¹⁰ Behr, “EU Foreign Policy”, 20.

¹¹ The FIS or ‘Islamic Salvation Front’ is an Islamist party that is now outlawed in Algeria after the country’s civil war in the early-1990s.

¹² Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 51-52.

West's political, scholarly and journalistic vocabulary", a term that became particularly threatening after September 11th.¹³ The same is not true of the label in the Middle East and North Africa, where the storied history of the Islamist movement has ensured a positive reception among the middle and lower classes—an opinion not shared by the countries' elites. "Although the revival of Islam represents empowerment and authentic renewal to many Muslims, there has been a tendency in the West to delegitimize the process and to demonize those who adhere to it. The clash of worldviews has 'reinforced the Western tendency to see Islamic activism as extremism and fanaticism'" rather than embracing Islamism as a pluralistic political reality for many in the region.¹⁴

According to Rex Brynen, an 'Islamist' is "a Muslim who seeks to actively extend the purview of Islam beyond the private realm by also applying it in the public realm, so that Islam guides all spheres of life, including political life. Thus, an Islamist seeks to Islamize society".¹⁵ Asef Bayat argues that what makes particular movements or activities "Islamic" is "the combination of an alternative to both the state and the private sector, the religious conviction of many of their activists, Islamic-based funding, and, finally, the provision of affordable social services" in line with Qur'ānic teaching.¹⁶ During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a "global Islamist resurgence" in which Islam re-emerged as a legitimizing force for political activities.¹⁷ Previously, Islamism had begun as a grassroots movement that was both legalistic and nonviolent, which believed that society and the state could be reconstructed through education

¹³ Maria Holt and Haifaa Jawad, *Women, Islam and Resistance in the Arab World* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013), 43.

¹⁴ Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 43.

¹⁵ Brynen et. al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 120.

¹⁶ Asef Bayat, "Activism and Social Development in the Middle East," *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34 (2002): 14.

¹⁷ John L. Esposito, *The Islamist Threat: Myth or Reality?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992): 11.

and community outreach to the poor.¹⁸ Therefore, Islamism has not emerged as a movement *among* the poor, but rather a movement *for* the masses: making significant contributions to social welfare in countries in the Middle East and North Africa by directly providing critical services, developing community, building social networks, fostering social competition and forcing the governments to implement competing social welfare policies to gain legitimacy.¹⁹ As a movement, Islamism represents the middle classes and their interests, which are marginalized by the structures of authoritarianism and constitute the primary mechanism through which societal change is affected.²⁰ Tracing the history of the movement throughout the 20th century, Khalil al-Anani identifies three major turning points for Islamism that facilitated their current prominence:

Over the course of the last century, Islamism experienced three major turning points. First was the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) by Egyptian schoolteacher Hassan al Banna in 1928...Al-Banna aptly transformed the ‘elitist’ Islamic reform rhetoric...into a populist social movement...The second turning point in the modern history of Islamism was the Iranian revolution of 1979...allow[ing] the articulation of Islamic ideology in a political order...The third and perhaps the most important development in the evolution of Islamism is the Arab Spring. This is not only because it allowed Islamists to take power through the ballot box but most importantly because of the consequences of such developments on Islamists’ ideology and tactics.

Al-Anani appropriately begins his analysis with the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood. Founded in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood is the oldest religious movement in the Middle East; the teachings of its founder, Hassan al-Banna, have inspired almost all of the other Islamist movements in the region.²¹ The Muslim Brotherhood transformed from being an initially apolitical religious movement to a nonviolent socio-political movement to an organization with enough support and infrastructure to successfully agitate for political change.²² The Muslim

¹⁸ Asef Bayat, “Activism and Social Development,” 11.

¹⁹ Mona Farag, “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and the January 25 Revolution: New Political Party, New Circumstances,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5, no. 2 (2012): 223.

²⁰ Bayat, “Activism and Social Development,” 14.

²¹ Al-Anani, Khalil. “Islamist Parties Post Arab-Spring”, *Mediterranean Politics* 1, no. 3 (2012): 467.

²² *Ibid*, 467.

Brotherhood gained much of its support by espousing ideologies of justice and equality, and by providing social services to the Egyptian poor that were being neglected by the authoritarian Egyptian state.

Following independence from the colonial authorities in the first half of the 20th century, the Muslim Brotherhood established a network of student groups in universities across the region in states like Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco. These satellite groups helped facilitate the production of a generalized ‘Arab’ education program, contributing to the ‘Arabization’ of the Middle East and North Africa by encouraging Arab cultural and linguistic dominance. Not only did this contribute to the marginalization of minority groups in the region and an increase in the relative homogenization of ‘Arab society’, it allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to spread their ideals of political Islamism throughout the region.²³ For many Muslims throughout the formerly colonized world, joining an Islamist movement appealed to a desire to return to an Islamic identity that had been compromised—first by the colonizers, then by the incredibly secular nationalist dictatorships that emerged in their wake. In agitating for political change, the various organizations of civil society established by Islamists then—in agitating for political change—drew in the youth first, then the educated and unemployed, followed by other politically marginalized groups.²⁴ The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and other like-minded groups such as Ennahda in Tunisia experienced severe repression under the post-colonial dictatorships, which perceived them as a primary political challenger because of their ability to drum up legitimate socio-economic grievances.²⁵ This repression facilitated the development of intricate and often clandestine networks of members, which allowed the Islamist movements to manifest as the

²³ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 69.

²⁴ Bayat, “Activism and Social Development,” 14.

²⁵ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 39.

apparent victors in the wake of demonstrations, despite not openly participating in them. The perceived absence of the Islamists from the protests during the 2011 uprisings, for instance, caused confusion among Western media groups, contributing to the idea that the revolutions had been “hijacked” when Islamists began winning at the polls.²⁶

Secularism

At the same time that Muslims are struggling to translate democratic ideals and processes through the lens of their own culture and historical experiences, the West is questioning the absence of secularists and secularism from the contemporary discourse. The West often speaks of a ‘secularist bloc’ made of the non-Islamic parties (moderates, liberals, leftists) who are categorized and defined primarily out of their opposition to the religious bloc.²⁷ In Egypt specifically, despite the fact that these groups do not play a major defining role in politics, there are several trends that have emerged suggesting that there is still incredible diversity (and polarization) within the movement, though they all lack resources to attain political success.²⁸ Though the Egyptian and Tunisian demonstrations initially appeared to be secular uprisings, the lack of success of the secularist parties in the wake of the revolutions coupled with the inclusion of Islamic terminology in varying degrees in the respective constitutions has led some to question why *secularism* as an ideology appears to unlikely to emerge.

There have been several answers as to why secularism has not emerged as a feature in the ‘post-Arab Spring’ governments of Tunisia and Egypt. Some scholars, like Lin Noueihed, argue that it would be “unrealistic” to expect the divorce of politics and religion to occur in the Middle

²⁶ Michelle Pace and Francesco Cavatorta, “The Arab Uprisings in Theoretical Perspective – An Introduction,” *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 2 (2012): 132.

²⁷ Wahid Abdul-Majid, “Egypt at the Crossroads. Egypt’s Future: Three Scenarios,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2013): 21.

²⁸ Abdul-Majid, “Egypt at the Crossroads,” 21.

East, given the time frame since the revolutions relative to the amount of time the same change took to occur in Europe.²⁹ An alternative perspective, like the one adopted by Tariq Ramadan, would suggest that the imperial legacy in the Middle East and North Africa has contributed to a fundamental misunderstanding between the former colonies and the former colonizers, who have had obverse experiences with secularism. Secularism, or *la laïcité* in French, was able to contribute to democratic ideals, political pluralism and religious toleration in the West precisely because it was a freely occurring process by which confrontations between church and state occurred slowly, “in the name of respect for shared rationality, of equality of all citizens, and of universal liberties.”³⁰ During the period of colonialism and imperialist domination, when the West sought to impose its secularist ideals on the societies of the Global South, secularization “became identified with the threefold experience of repression, colonialism, and the assault on Islam.”³¹

In the postcolonial Middle East and North Africa, the nationalists often employed intense secularization as a mechanism of despotic social control. According to Ramadan,

Similar examples abound in virtually all the Arab countries in the postcolonial period. Each of the “liberators” from Bourguiba to the FLN in Algeria from Nasser to the secular socialist Ba’ath Party regimes in Iraq and Syria or the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran...boasted that they had instituted secularization and the separation of state and religion. But in reality these were dictatorial regimes whose policies were often more antireligious than those of the former colonial powers, repressing faith-related demands and enforcing a system in which religious authorities were kept under tight control, in a state of total subservience.³²

When this nationalist, socialist and secularist model collapsed in the late 1980s, the political systems of the Middle East and North Africa appeared to become polarized between the same dichotomy the West speaks of today: on the one hand, the advocates of secularization and on

²⁹ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 280.

³⁰ Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, 75.

³¹ *Ibid*, 76.

³² *Ibid*, 78.

the other, the Islamists.³³ Ramadan argues during this period it became evident that Arab intellectuals “appeared—as they still do—to have assimilated the binary frame of reference and the concept of otherness brought with it by Orientalism.”³⁴ Intellectuals speak in terms of the same ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ blocs that continue to represent the indigenous and the foreign, pitting cultural preservation against liberal values. The political thinkers then produced a political discourse and theory that seemed deterministic and self-fulfilling. The only possible political outcomes had already been established, and they were presented in a binary that seemed diametrically opposed.³⁵

The “Islamism problem” was addressed harshly in Egypt and Tunisia. A notable case in 1992, involved the arrest of 8,000 people who had been accused of being part of the Islamist Ennahda Party, in an Islamist crackdown so severe that “Tunisian men were rounded up for growing beards or attending dawn prayers, while mosques were watched closely by the secret police.”³⁶ Of the 8,000, nearly 300 were accused of attempts to subvert the power of the state through plotting to assassinate the Tunisian President.³⁷ The secular nature of Egyptian politics was maintained primarily through suppressing the role that Islamist organizations—particularly the Muslim Brotherhood—were able to play. Abdul-Majid argues that this process produced “a major schism at the heart of the Egyptian political trajectory vis-à-vis the Muslim Brotherhood and its political program”.³⁸

³³ Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, 61.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 61.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 61.

³⁶ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 67.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 67.

³⁸ Abdul-Majid, “Egypt at the Crossroads,” 18.

Irrespective of the appearances created by the 2011 protests, proportionally few Egyptians would truly describe themselves as “secularists” or personally irreligious.³⁹ Despite this development, there does not appear to be evidence to support the common assertion that support for political Islam in North Africa correlates to an unfavorable opinion of democracy, rendering debates around the absence of secularism a relatively moot discussion. Data accumulated from the World Values Survey suggests that, though individuals who are more intensely involved with religious activities are more likely to agree that democracy has drawbacks, this is not a value judgment on the democratic mode of governance generally or relative to other forms of governance. They are simply more likely to believe that democracy is not flawless.⁴⁰ Though this may contribute to a hesitance to describe the political future of countries in the Middle East and North Africa in terms of a “secular state”—undoubtedly a legacy of the storied history with colonial processes of secularization—the tendency of Islamists to refer to the existence of a “civil state” does seem to suggest an acknowledgement of the separation of political authority and religious authority.⁴¹

The Hijacking of Revolutionary Legitimacy

Almost immediately, Western observers noted an intrinsic difference in the “Arab Spring” from previous mass movements in the region: “the banner of Islamism was rarely recognized as an organizing motif”.⁴² In Egypt, the contentious relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood as a political group and the Mubarak government had helped produce the conditions

³⁹ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 120.

⁴⁰ Mark Tessler, “Do Islamic Orientations Influence Attitudes Toward Democracy in the Arab World? Evidence From Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 43 (2002): 243.

⁴¹ Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, 106.

⁴² Milton-Edwards, “Revolt and Revolution”, 220-21.

that prompted the January 25th revolution. Following the Muslim Brotherhood's impressive electoral victory in 2005, there was a severe backlash by the Egyptian government.⁴³ In the aftermath of the elections held in 2010, which were widely perceived as being blatantly undemocratic, the Egyptian youth began agitating for political change—but though the Muslim Brotherhood had knowledge of the demonstrations they chose not to participate, to the shock of many in the West.⁴⁴ This may have been out of a desire to protect what gains they had made in the political spectrum. Since the Nasser regime, when Islamists were frequently jailed, tortured or executed, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt had maintained a careful balance of conflict and cooperation with the regime. That is not to say that the Muslim Brotherhood did not have a role to play in the 2011 protests. According to Mona Farag, in its official capacity the Muslim Brotherhood utilized their organizational skills to ensure that the protesters were protected from incursion by the security forces. Additionally, the group also provided protestors with tents, blankets and other necessities.⁴⁵ However, perhaps fearing backlash for participating should the protests fail, the Muslim Brotherhood—in keeping with political trends over time—did not attempt to spearhead the confrontation with the Mubarak regime in Tahrir Square.⁴⁶ They knew firsthand from their previous experience that the regime had an astounding capacity for brutality, and they proceeded with caution.

Unofficially, however, the Muslim Brotherhood was very present in the movement at Tahrir Square. Interestingly, the particular slogans of the Muslim Brotherhood (“Islam is the Solution”) were replaced by demands for democratic self-government, free elections and an end to corruption. According to Farag, when the Islamist group began participating, “they joined as

⁴³ Farag, “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” 217.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 217.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 218.

⁴⁶ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 198.

Egyptians and not as a socio-religious movement with an agenda of its own. The goal of the revolution was clear: to regain the dignity and rights of the Egyptian people...members of the Muslim Brotherhood were allowed to join the protests, but they participated on their own accord and without pushing the Muslim Brotherhood's agenda or chanting any of its slogans."⁴⁷ Many Islamists, particularly the younger members, unofficially joined the protestors. Beverley Milton-Edwards uses this fact as evidence to suggest that calls for popular sovereignty and Islamism are not diametrically opposed, as the Western discourse might suggest:

[E]ven the demand for democracy does not exclude Islam explicitly and cannot be construed as an embrace of secularism as the new alternative for the Middle East. This has also been a form of Islamism tied to a demand for democracy and its attendant principles of plurality and power sharing. But a pall of suspicion hangs over such demands when expressed in the lexicon of Islamism.⁴⁸

Members of Islamist groups were as present at the protests in 2011 as any other group—leftist, liberal, or otherwise—but not formally as Islamists. Instead, they acted through their involvement in the myriad other civil society organizations present in Muslim societies: unions, neighborhood groups, Internet networks, et cetera. This highlights that Islamism is not all-encompassing: Political Islamists are also members of labor unions, workers guilds, professional organizations, human rights groups and interest groups, which were all active to varying degrees and emerged in the protests.⁴⁹ Just as the Islamists were informally present, Milton-Edwards posits that Islam was “symbolically present” in the protests: best represented by the example of the communal prayer and shouting of “We Are One!” among the protestors in Tahrir Square—both Muslim and Coptic Christian.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Farag, “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” 217.

⁴⁸ Milton-Edwards, “Revolt and Revolution,” 231.

⁴⁹ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 68.

⁵⁰ Milton-Edwards, “Revolt and Revolution,” 221.

This widespread sentiment of egalitarianism underscores how many of the protesters at the protests in Tahrir Square arrived as individuals, or as members of smaller community networks, rather than as members of political organizations. The protests were comprised of loose political coalitions of individuals from all facets of society. As Noueihed observes, “The focus of these activists on what they did not want—human rights abuses, martial law, one-man rule, high-level corruption—resonated far beyond their own ranks, allowing them to build broad coalitions with groups and activists with whom they did not share a world view.”⁵¹ Anja Wollenberg and Jason Pack argue that this is consistent with the trends of youth political engagement in the Middle East and North Africa throughout the past decade, in which broad-based coalitions are formed among and between movements that are highly critical of the ruling regime, but lack strong ideological convictions and instead espouse the causes of social justice.⁵² Thus, these movements are able to mobilize a broad base of society, across political and socio-economic divisions. These youth-driven movements, due to the absence of ideology, were able to connect basic demands (such as for jobs) with the need for a more effective and just political administration, effectively lowering the entry costs for joining in the movement.⁵³ Due to this process, in the initial protests, the discourses among these coalitions were able to eclipse any obvious disaffection between Islam, Arabism or secularism. According to Youssef Sawani:

Arabism and Islamism are ideals, aspirations or beliefs that significantly shape the content and direction of the societal value system and determine the behavior of individuals and groups in addition to being the two basic components for the historical mass required for change. The Arab Spring provides evidence that these two ideals have interacted to produce the cultural and political grassroots movement with a potential to lead Arab society in directions more relevant to its long-professed goals of freedom and dignity than the top-down state-level projects of pan-Arabism of the twentieth century.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 273.

⁵² Anja Wollenberg and Jason Pack, “Rebels with a Pen: Observations on the Newly Emerging Media Landscape in Libya,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 18, no. 2 (2013): 188-89.

⁵³ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 79.

⁵⁴ Sawani, “The ‘End of Pan-Arabism’ Revisited”, 385.

Though Sawani believes that the potential exists among these coalitions to lead the Middle East and North Africa towards a Pan-Arabist movement espousing social justice and human rights, in the wake of the Lotus Revolution significant conflict emerged between the Muslim Brotherhood and the secularist groups with whom it had once formed coalitions, in the wake of the Lotus Revolution. The ouster of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak had opened up previously inaccessible avenues of political participation for the Muslim Brotherhood and for other political groups, and each of these groups shared a distinct vision for how post-revolutionary Egypt should operate.⁵⁵

Many scholars mark 29 July 2011 when Tahrir Square was once again filled with protesters—this time calling for the establishment of an Islamic state, as the turning point for the trajectory of post-revolutionary Egypt. Islamists shouting slogans like “The People Want God’s Law” and forcing younger and more secular groups from the square “exposed the fault line that had divided Islamist and secular activists all along, but had been pushed beneath the surface by the unifying clamor to bring down Mubarak”.⁵⁶ This protests, and the outcome of the elections themselves, were shocking by Western observers, who wondered where the secular, liberal youth protestors had gone. Questions like these in the wake of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia led correspondents like Robin Wright to postulate that, “Political predators—from illiberal leaders to Islamist extremists—will certainly try to take advantage of fragile transitions”.⁵⁷ As the disconnect between the politically active minority who initially went out to Tahrir Square and

⁵⁵ Farag, “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” 218.

⁵⁶ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 119-20.

⁵⁷ Wright, *Rock the Casbah*, 230.

lobbied for the downfall of the authoritarian regimes came into conflict with the silent majority seeking to reap the benefits of revolution, old societal divisions began to reemerge.⁵⁸

To explain this phenomenon, Lynch speaks of a concept known as “revolutionary legitimacy”, which can be contrasted with “democratic legitimacy”. Though there was a “prominence of revolutionary activists on Twitter and in the blogosphere”, Lynch argues that because Internet-savvy activists often “systematically over represent secular, cosmopolitan, well-off urban youth whose views are a distinct minority in the broader society” they often do not represent broader societal views.⁵⁹ The West mistook the views represented by these revolutionary activists as characteristic of the dominant ideology of the movements. This problem illustrates how assumptions about revolutionary legitimacy can often affect perceptions of democratic legitimacy in the wake of elections, particularly for outside observers. The broad base of support established over generations by the Muslim Brotherhood and other well-established groups had a significantly easier time mobilizing voters with positive results than the less experienced youth movements, who had difficulty persuading voters that they were ready to govern.⁶⁰ The Islamist establishment, which offered experience coupled with an attractive vision of a society governed by the principles of Qur’ānic social justice, was a much more appealing offer to voters.⁶¹ In the words of Mustapha Marrouchi, “[the Tahrir vanguard] discovered that starting a revolution is not owning it”.⁶² This is because the strength of the young and secular “activist class” is in its capacity to mobilize people to engage in nonviolent protest, thereby disrupting the normal socio-political and economic workings of society. Transitioning from this

⁵⁸ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 117.

⁵⁹ Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 128.

⁶⁰ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 59.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 271-72.

⁶² Marrouchi, “Willed From the Bottom Up”, 389-90.

framework to establishing the civil society infrastructures required to effectively democratically mobilize and deliver results at the ballot box is a challenge.⁶³

If the post-revolutionary democracies hope to retain any democratic legitimacy, there must be an allowance for full participation. The crux of a democracy is citizen participation, and exclusionary policies would only undermine their own right to govern. As Lynch points out:

Islamism has been transforming Arab public culture for generations. It was never going to simply disappear. An empowered public will include Islamist voices, almost by definition. After all, such groups had spent decades cultivating strong popular organizations, opposing the unpopular authoritarian regimes, and working to transform public culture in a conservative direction...They could not help but benefit from the opening of political space or to do well should elections be organized. They are generally the most well-organized, best-funded, and most politically savvy political movements, and are able to tap into the deeply held Islamist sentiment that they have been helping to cultivate for decades.⁶⁴

Islam—and to an extent, Islamism—are fundamental components of civil society in the Middle East and North Africa. Political Islamists, by holding dual membership in Islamist organizations as well as community outreach groups, non-governmental organizations, professional labor unions, and other groups interact with other facets of society in complex ways. In the wake of the 2011 demonstrations, throughout the region a variety of Islamist civil society organizations emerged as the inheritors of the uprisings. Now playing a major role in the restructuring of their respective societies, political Islamists are often misrepresented by the West as being part of what Milton-Edwards describes has been portrayed as a “homogenous jihadi-inspired mass...epitomized by al-Qaeda”.⁶⁵

⁶³ Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 129-30.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 209.

⁶⁵ Milton-Edwards, “Revolt and Revolution,” 221.

The False Islamic Monolith

As a result of emerging concerns about an “Islamist Winter”, political debates in the ‘post-Arab Spring’ countries have resulted in the dichotomization of political parties in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in Tunisia and in Egypt. The ‘secular bloc’ and its antithetical ‘religious bloc’ counterpart have come to represent post-revolutionary politics. However, according to Brynen, although the dominant Western discourse portrays Islamism as a monolith, academics usually split Islamism into a polarized dichotomy in its own right: moderate Islamism and radical/violent Islamism, separated by a variety of characteristics:

[Moderate] Islamists are those who seek to achieve an Islamized state and society through nonviolent means. Politically, they support pluralist political competition and create parties that can participate in elections. By contrast, radical Islamists are those who employ violence... There are also generally also ideological distinctions between moderate and radical Islamists. Thus a moderate Islamist movement can be defined as one that ideologically accepts electoral democracy and political and ideological pluralism and aims for gradual social, political and economic changes. Behaviorally, moderate Islamists accept the principle of working within the established state institutions, regardless of their perceived legitimacy, and shun violent methods to achieve their goals. Conversely, a radical Islamist movement is one that ideologically rejects democracy as well as the legitimacy of political and ideological pluralism.⁶⁶

Among moderate and radical Islamists, there is an incalculable range of approaches to social justice, state building, democracy and governance. Despite this, moderate and radical Islamists are both perceived as being part of a single ‘religious bloc’. Even this simple division disregards the presence of alternative groups within Islam, such as *Sufi* Muslims or other Islamic minorities. The Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda, as some of the dominant examples of moderate Islamist groups, have emerged to take the place in the political spectrum that they were repeatedly denied by authoritarian regimes. The new openness of the political sphere has meant that a previously unseen multiplicity of discourses within the Islamist discourse itself has emerged in the wake of

⁶⁶ Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 123.

the Lotus Revolution.⁶⁷ The democratic process appears to be taking hold as a new and dynamic pluralism has produced “division and competing perspectives on a variety of political, social, and economic issues”.⁶⁸ Operating within such a closed political arena forced Islamist movements to evolve in specific patterns that are being altered by the shifting paradigms of the political sphere, especially as the Islamists struggle to “compete for the same constituencies and the same legitimization”.⁶⁹ Despite this process, the emergence of the previously politically inactive Salafi parties on 25 January 2011 in Egypt shocked onlookers.⁷⁰

‘Salafist’ is another term for radical Islamists,⁷¹ who follow the fundamentalist teachings of the Saudi Wahhabist sect of Sunni Islam and are often financially backed by the Saudi government.⁷² Salafists preach a particularly severe form of Islamic austerity: “rigid dress codes, a simplified religious doctrine, and extremely conservative societal norms”.⁷³ The simple Salafist message appeals to the poorer classes of countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, and its emergence has been a significant cause of concern for many Western observers because some Salafists predominantly hold positions that are antithetical to notions of ‘civil statehood’ and democracy, and often preach rhetoric imbued with violence. From the 1980s until the 2011 uprisings, Salafist groups primarily avoided engaging with the political system that they deemed unsuitable to their ends.⁷⁴ This apolitical rhetoric contributed to the Salafists’ exclusion, and the new emergence of Salafist groups have contributed to the rise of the “Islamist Winter” discourse among Western commentators. Irrespective of the division between moderate and radical Islamism—or their

⁶⁷ Milton-Edwards, “Revolt and Revolution”, 231-32.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 231-32.

⁶⁹ Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 210.

⁷⁰ Abdul-Majid, “Egypt at the Crossroads”, 19-20.

⁷¹ From the Arabic ‘*salaf*’ or ‘ancestor’.

⁷² Sawani, “End of Pan-Arabism”, 385-86.

⁷³ Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 210.

⁷⁴ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 70.

respective subgroupings—in discussions of politics in the ‘post-Arab Spring’ Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis are often juxtaposed into a single bloc. However, the individuals who have been drawn to participate in the Salafi movement do so partially out of frustration with what they believe are the flaws of the Muslim Brotherhood movement: they perceive it as being insufficiently committed to the notions of Islam and too committed to politics and the interests of the urban middle class.⁷⁵ Bishara criticizes this “monolithic version of political Islam presented by Western media”, arguing that it disregards the frictions that exist “among its various components along sectarian and generational lines”.⁷⁶

It is, of course, important to distinguish between radicalism and extremism, yet another dichotomy that oversimplifies the reality of the political complexities within the so-called ‘Islamist bloc’.⁷⁷ The pluralizing effects of the opening political sphere have had dynamic effects within Salafism itself. Raphaël Lefèvre distinguishes between the practice of *Salafiyya al-ilmiyya*⁷⁸ and Salafi-Jihadism:

The heterogeneity of the Salafi spectrum has become especially visible in the wake of the “Arab Spring” in countries such as Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt where the unprecedented level of political freedom has allowed Salafis of all hues to organize in an array of groups sharing different goals. Most practice *Salafiyya al-ilmiyya*, a frequently encountered type of Salafism, which emphasizes the importance of discussing in a scholarly way the day-to-day implications of the Prophet’s words, and either strive to spread their teachings to society through *dawa*, by preaching in the social and cultural sphere, or through peaceful political activism, by forming non-violent associations and even political parties. But a minority of Salafis, whose number has been growing over the past year, have endeavored to use violence not only as a means through which to enforce Salafi norms and precepts

⁷⁵ Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 210.

⁷⁶ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 204.

⁷⁷ Raphaël Lefèvre, “Commentary: Current Events in North Africa,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 17, no. 5 (2012): 927.

⁷⁸ In the post-revolutionary societies, Salafist groups that were established in 2011, such as the ‘Nour’ Party, the ‘Asala’ Party, the ‘Fadila’ Party, or the ‘Construction and Development Party’, have struggled to overcome the challenges of minimal political experiences and internal conflict. For more information, see Wahid Abdul Majid, “Egypt at the Crossroads,” 19-20.

but as an overarching ideology legitimized by the notion of *jihad* in Islamic doctrine—hence their description as Salafi-Jihadist.⁷⁹

Salafi-Jihadists like al-Qaeda have often been appropriated by the West to represent the entire ‘Islamic Bloc’. These groups targeted regimes they perceived as being ‘puppets of the West’, and emerged particularly as alternative to authoritarian rule. These groups also tend to have goals that are largely unrealistic (such as the establishment of a theocracy or a caliphate).⁸⁰ Since the 1980s, the pursuit of the goal of the Islamization of all facets of daily life absorbed the attention and rhetoric of these movements, and most adopted violence as the primary methodology for achieving these goals.⁸¹ Salafi-jihadist movements in particular are vulnerable to moderation by the democracy movement.⁸² Instead of resorting to violence to achieve their ends, some are being inspired to participate in the public debate. Some, however, maintain their hardline anti-democratic stance. In a statement given to BBC by a Salafist group, a spokesperson articulated the incompatibility of Islam and democracy: “Democracy is a human condition where laws are made by people...Only God has the authority to make law and that is why Islam and Sharī’a are incompatible with democracy.”⁸³ Views like these have resulted in the exclusion of some Salafist groups from the democratic process, though in doing so the governing bodies risk repeating some of the same repressive policies of their predecessors.⁸⁴

The many groups that comprise the ‘Islamic bloc’ are fierce competitors for the positions of leadership. Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood, to this end, are fiercely attempting to distance themselves from association with Salafi-jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda. The Muslim

⁷⁹ Raphaël Lefèvre, “Commentary,” 377.

⁸⁰ Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 124.

⁸¹ Khalil al-Anani, “Islamist Parties Post Arab-Spring”, *Mediterranean Politics* 1, no. 3: 469.

⁸² Milton-Edwards, “Revolt and Revolution,” 219.

⁸³ David D. Kirkpatrick, Suliman Ali Zway and Kareem Fahim, “Attack by Fringe Group Highlights the Problem of Libya’s Militias,” *New York Times*, Sep. 15, 2012.

⁸⁴ Raphaël Lefèvre, “Commentary,” 926.

Brotherhood and its affiliate groups, despite being early incubators for the ideas that now justify jihadi thinking, has had success in its endeavors to reinvent itself as the party that represents the moderate view between the implementation of Sharī'a and democracy by seeking precedents for democracy within the framework of Islam itself.⁸⁵ The impact of the Muslim Brotherhood and other moderate Islamist groups on society has been powerful precisely because of their size, organization, and financial autonomy.⁸⁶

Though awareness of Islamic diversity may not be widespread, it is relatively easy to acknowledge the diversity of Muslims—traditionalists or rationalists, reformists or Sufis—the better to understand that Islam, as a religion, cannot be reduced to the behavior of one of a small group of its faithful...The oversimplification is as dangerous as it is frequent; in its reductionism, it fails to assign concepts and dynamics their just place in history, depriving them of the contexts that lend them meaning and justification.⁸⁷

Furthermore, Islamism is not stagnant. Faraq argues that throughout its history, the Muslim Brotherhood in particular has demonstrated evidence of an 'evolutionary trait', or an inherent pragmatism with which the Muslim Brotherhood approaches and interacts with the world around it that has allowed it to change over time and morph into something that is very different from the original movement founded by al-Banna in 1928.⁸⁸ Lynch points out that there has also been dynamic evolution in Salafist groups. Despite being a subgroup notorious for their rejection of democracy and their tendency to nurture violent jihadism, Salafis are now willingly "rushing into the democratic political game and falling over themselves to reassure the West and their own people of their moderation."⁸⁹ Due to the development of this extensive pluralism within Islamism, Sari Hanafi argues that the modern era is one of "post-Islamism in the sense of a new form of *reflexive Islamism* whose leaders have declared constantly their desire for pluralism and

⁸⁵ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 121.

⁸⁶ Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 124.

⁸⁷ Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, 69.

⁸⁸ Farag, "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood," 215.

⁸⁹ Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, 212.

respect for freedom of expression... I fully agree with Slavoj Zizek that what is now required is a universalistic position of solidarity. People's aspirations for democracy and freedom are universal objectives."⁹⁰ Despite these common aspirations, the false dichotomy still dominates discussions of Middle Eastern democracy. Indeed, many Islamists seem to have internalized the dichotomy itself. Regardless, the interactions between secular and Islamist seems to be reforming the Arab political space, allowing Muslims to reshape and redefine their own political identities.⁹¹

To deny this understanding disregards the reality of ideological evolution, as well as overlooks the interaction of Islamists as social organizations with society. "Pan-Arabism and Islamism are not fixed dogmas, nor should they be seen merely as cultural identities or political ideologies," writes Marwan Bishara, "[t]hese intellectual currents have developed over the last century in the context of the region's geopolitics... Nationalism, Islamism, and governance are hybrid concepts likely to further develop with time and in the context of sociopolitical change."⁹² The electoral process in and of itself has been shown to have a moderating effect on groups who traditionally adhere to immoderate beliefs or traditions. This is called the Moderation Theory. Drawing on historical trends among socialist parties in Western Europe, the Moderation Theory argues that radical parties tend to ameliorate their positions when the perception of their position as 'radical' appears to be costing votes.⁹³ This electoral pragmatism is only one way in which political ideology in the Middle East and North Africa—for parties spanning the political spectrum—will change in response to the new political pluralism that was ushered in by the popular uprisings of 2011 and their subsequent revolutions.

⁹⁰ Hanafi, "The Arab Revolutions," 208.

⁹¹ Abdul-Majid, "Egypt at the Crossroads," 17-18.

⁹² Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 175.

⁹³ Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 130.

Future of Political Islam

Survey data collected by the Abu Dhabi Gallup Center prior to the 2011 Egyptian uprisings revealed that, for the majority of the Egyptian masses, there is no perception of a contradiction between Islam and democracy. In an analysis of the results conducted by Dalia Mogahed,⁹⁴ she remarks, “Egypt tops the region in two things: Egyptians are the most likely to say Muslim progress requires democracy, and the most likely to say Muslim progress requires attachment to spiritual and moral values.”⁹⁵ Consistent with these beliefs, the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 provided a pathway by which the Islamists could take advantage of this opportunity to inherit power from their brutally secular predecessor. Islamism has become politically significant, accounting for 70% of the votes cast in Egypt.⁹⁶ In both Tunisia and Egypt, Islamist groups may have acquired democratic legitimacy, but they must also “contend with negotiating a new place themselves, not only in relation to political and constitutional power in the state, but also with other powerful institutions such as the military and issues such as the economy”.⁹⁷ This negotiation means that the odds of a Khomeini-inspired theocracy emerging in either Tunisia or Egypt is highly unlikely: the Gallup survey revealed that the majority of Muslim Egyptians wholeheartedly supported the idea of a democracy and outright rejected any attempts to reestablish a government in the Iranian model.⁹⁸ Furthermore, as Farag elaborates, though 75% of Egyptians have been reported to have a ‘somewhat favorable’ or ‘favorable’ opinion of the Muslim Brotherhood that does not necessarily correlate with a belief that the Muslim Brotherhood ought to retain political control of Egypt, at all or indefinitely.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Dalia Mogahed is the director of the Abu Dhabi Gallup Center.

⁹⁵ Dalia Mogahed, “What Egyptian Women (and Men) Want,” *Foreign Policy*, Mar. 10, 2011.

⁹⁶ Milton-Edwards, “Revolt and Revolution”, 232.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 232-33.

⁹⁸ Farag, “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” 223.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 223.

For decades, the Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda and other Islamist organizations have been excluded from politics by authoritarian regimes, which has been a unique double-edged sword: they had the privilege of making political promises without any capacity to test their validity. Under political repression, the Islamists agitated under the banner of “Islam is the solution”, and could unite the global Muslim *umma* in nonviolent struggle, or *jihad*, against enemies foreign and domestic.¹⁰⁰ The century of promises, combined with Qur’ānic values such as justice and equality, resonated with Egyptian and Tunisian voters at the ballot boxes: the Islamists represented the antithesis of the secularist, corrupt and authoritarian establishment.¹⁰¹ From their first emergence onto the political scene, the Islamists functioned almost exclusively as a banned entity. Acting as a “force of resistance to an oppressive ruling establishment” became a fundamental component of how Islamist movements conceive of themselves and devise political strategies.¹⁰² No longer cast in the role of the victim, in the wake of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, Islamists now have a formal stake in the political process and possess the capacity to act as fully legitimate political actors.

This legitimization has altered the way Islamists interact with civil and political society. Khalil Al-Anani identifies four transformations in the Islamist perspective in the wake of the mass uprisings of 2011: (1) the end of the old ‘Islamist architecture’, eroding its former uniformity and providing for the emergence of a new Islamist pluralism; (2) the materialization of “informal” Islamists, who rely heavily on alternative networks rather than formal organization; (3) the shift in Islamist discourse, ideology and tactics, weakening the former *halal* and *haram* dichotomy in favor of relativism and pragmatism; and (4) the emergence of inter-

¹⁰⁰ Milton-Edwards, “Revolt and Revolution,” 233.

¹⁰¹ Farag, “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” 226.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 219.

Islamist conflicts, replacing what was once a cooperative and cohesive movement with a united vision of the political future.¹⁰³ The new relationship among and between Islamist organizations, new and old, and the replacement of “religious rhetoric” with the increasing presence of the “language of politics” has transformed modern Islamism.¹⁰⁴ In other words, Islamist movements have shifted dramatically away from their fundamental origins, retaining themes and visions while amending rhetoric and goals. Tariq Ramadan describes the orientation of the movements at their emergence:

[Political Islam] reduced the Islamic heritage and the categories by which it understood itself, the better to seize hold of the principles and means that it needed, at a precise moment in history, to differentiate itself from the other: The West, and its colonialism and its domineering, restrictive secularization...the conditions of thought historically imposed upon the Islamists drove them to limit the scope of their own traditions of thought historically imposed upon the Islamists drove them to limit the scope of their own traditions and the breadth and depth and depth of their long history to the immediate imperatives of the questions before them.¹⁰⁵

However, the evolutionary nature of the Islamist groups has ensured that interactions with opposing opinions in the new sphere of political pluralism have produced a new Islamism in the wake of the popular uprisings of 2011. Ramadan makes four observations based on these developments: (1) Islamists evolve in relation to the political and social conditions of the time; (2) Islamists are not becoming increasingly fundamentalist, but rather developments in Islamic law and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) suggests that new and innovative strategies are being devised; (3) Islamists have explicitly endorsed the separation of political and religious authority by accepting the idea of a ‘civil state’; and (4) the question of the relationship between Islam and the state has culminated in “the development of an ethics to be applied in the exercise of power”.¹⁰⁶ In this new system, the place and role of Islamism has been moderated by the demand among voters for

¹⁰³ Al-Anani, “Islamist Parties,” 466-69.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 468.

¹⁰⁵ Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, 84.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 105-06.

democracy. Unlike earlier attempts to spread democracy through promotion agendas or democratic experiments for the purpose of “external pacification”, these demands for democracy have been predominantly indigenous.¹⁰⁷ The new Islamism will have to “chart a new vision of justice, equality, the empowerment of women, and the struggle against corruption and poverty”, an agenda which extends beyond regime turnover.¹⁰⁸

Western Fears

On 11 September 2012, the attack on the US diplomatic compound in Benghazi marked a turning point in the Western media: many feared the materialization of a ‘Salafi Crescent’ that would emerge as the inheritors of the political turbulence unleashed by the “Arab Spring”.¹⁰⁹ The attack by Islamists—whose date held powerful memories for the West—stimulated a recurrent discussion about the dangers of Islamist-dominated governments in the Middle East and North Africa. Since the 2011 September 11th terrorist attacks, unique interstate cooperation in counterterrorism efforts emerged in the region. Milton-Edwards argues that the “exclusivity within counter-terrorism, where the state in the region acts as broker-interlocutor with society, has allowed, for strategic reasons, these societies to be represented back to the West as part of a homogenous Islamist threat” which deliberately ignored the diversity of political opposition.¹¹⁰ Since Islamists posed the primary threat to the authoritarian regimes, the authoritarian regimes rhetorically represented Islamists to the West in a politically advantageous way. As a result, jihadism became a primary concern of Western policymakers as the label was appropriated to the

¹⁰⁷ Milton-Edwards, “Revolt and Revolution,” 232-33.

¹⁰⁸ Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, 140.

¹⁰⁹ Lefèvre, “Commentary,” 923.

¹¹⁰ Milton-Edwards, “Revolt and Revolution,” 222-23.

majority of Islam's faithful adherents.¹¹¹ According to Milton-Edwards, the suppression of groups labeled as "radical jihadists", who were often moderate Islamists in reality, became a common goal of the authoritarian state and the West:

When aligning the moral equivalency of supporting regimes that by their own standards were undemocratic and predicated on authoritarianism and significant human rights violations, [Western] politicians would remind their audiences of the unpalatable alternative: domination by *jihadis* of countries and a region vital to Western strategic and economic motives.¹¹²

When the popular uprisings of 2011 opened the door for the emergence of a new political pluralism in the Middle East and North Africa, and Islamists became the likely contenders for power, Western observers were unable to discern the moderate Islamists from the radical Islamists, or the radical Islamists from the violent *jihadis*. Islamism, which posed a legitimate threat to the political stability of the authoritarian regimes and their foreign supporters, was portrayed as a threat to the stability of the region more generally.

One of the pressing questions of the post-revolutionary period of state building was whether "Arabs [would] resume their tentative march towards democratization—a march that started timidly in the nineteenth century and was cut short with a series of military coups...or chase the mirage of a revived Islamic caliphate".¹¹³ This fear is a function of the prism through which the West has viewed Islamism since 1979.¹¹⁴ Particularly since the Bush era, the rhetoric of populism employed by former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad "inflamed the perception of a 'clash of civilizations'" and "orchestrated confrontation and conflict, especially with the West".¹¹⁵ The image of the Islamist, rhetorically hateful Iran was contrasted with that of

¹¹¹ Milton-Edwards, "Revolt and Revolution," 226.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 226.

¹¹³ Amir Taheri, "The Future of the Arab Spring: Best-Case Scenario, Worst-Case Scenario," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 34 (2012): 302.

¹¹⁴ Milton-Edwards, "Revolt and Revolution," 221.

¹¹⁵ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 153.

Turkey, which is an Islamist government born out of a century of staunch secularism. “Iran and Turkey reflect two faces of the new pan-Islamic revival,” Bishara argues, “with Ahmadinejad and Erdogan touting their own models for emulation”.¹¹⁶ As the example of Ahmadinejad shows, the reverberations of the 1979 Iranian revolution are still being felt. The threat posed by ‘revolutionary Islam’ resulted in the reorientation of American foreign policy interests in the Middle East and North Africa, promoting policies of containment, intervention, and a reevaluation of existing military alliances.¹¹⁷ A new “ideological front” had emerged in the wake of the Cold War, fueling Samuel Huntington’s 1993 culturalist predictions of a “clash of civilizations” that continues to inform Western discourse about the region.

“Arab Exceptionalism” and Selective Representation

The emergence of this “ideological front” and the concept of ‘the Arab Exception’ of democratic expansion have their roots in imperialism. In order to highlight some of the foundational beliefs, Tariq Ramadan describes a lecture on Semitic peoples delivered by Ernest Renan at the Collège de France on 23 February 1862:

[Renan] argued, “Islam is the most complete negation of Europe. Islam is fanaticism, the likes of which even the Spain of Phillip II or the Italy of Pius V never witnessed: Islam is disdain for science and the suppression of civil society; it is the terrifying simplicity of the Semitic spirit, shrinking the human mind and closing it to every subtle notion, to every fine sentiment, to rational investigation, to ultimately confront it with the eternal tautology: ‘God is God’”.¹¹⁸

Ramadan’s explication of this early Orientalism highlights the process by which, throughout the nineteenth century, others came to be seen and defined in terms of backwardness and civilizational difference. This understanding contributes to what Ramadan describes as a “binary

¹¹⁶ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 153.

¹¹⁷ Milton-Edwards, “Revolt and Revolution,” 220.

¹¹⁸ Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, 17.

manner of thinking in which the emancipated Occident [the West] must civilize the Islamized Orient” and culminated in historical imperialism.¹¹⁹ He defines this imperialism as “a monopoly on the meaning of human history that determined who was advanced and who had fallen irretrievably behind. For history had a meaning, and the emancipated, democratic West was its avant-garde, if not its culmination.”¹²⁰ This conviction has contributed to the persistent essentialization of the “Islamic” or “Arab” world.

An essentialist approach is fundamentally a deterministic one, arguing that Islam is the primary factor in determining the political outcomes for the region as a whole. In order to test the validity of the essentialist assertion that democracy in the region is a function of the dominance of Islamic culture, Mark Tessler conducted a study using World Survey Data from the Middle East and North Africa. He concluded that religiosity—measured in terms of religious involvement—is not “related to attitudes toward democracy to a statistically significant degree...most people claim to be pious and most also have a favorable opinion of democracy”.¹²¹ Abdelwadeh el-Affendi discusses three main trends in the Islamist debate on democracy: (1) those who advocate the ideas of democracy and seek to demonstrate the potential for its harmonic coexistence with Islam, (2) those who expressed ideological grievances and suggested legal limitations to ensure conformity with shari’a and *fiqh*, (3) those who spurn democracy altogether.¹²² This conclusion underscores a fact of particular importance: Islamist values, attitudes and ideologies are neither uniform nor unchanging. As we have established, the so-

¹¹⁹ Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, 17.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 17.

¹²¹ Tessler, “Do Islamic Orientations Influence Attitudes Toward Democracy”, 239-45.

¹²² Abdelwahab El-Affendi, “On the State, Democracy and Pluralism,” in *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki and Basheer M. Nafi. (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, Ltd., 2004): 172-194. *See Also*: Edien Bartels and Lenie Brouwer, “Islam, Democracy and New Media: A Moroccan Case Study,” in *Islam, Democracy and New Media*, eds. T. Buys Sunier and P. Versteeg. (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2013): 196-217.

called “Islamist monolith” is actually a conglomeration of various groups espousing sometimes dissimilar and conflicting understandings of Islamic modernity.

The tendency to describe society in the Middle East and North Africa as passive receptors for a homogenous Islamist ideology ignores this complexity of interactions. In the words of Brynen, “while Islamist organizations have an ideology that they would like to propagate and policies they would like to implement, they also must deal with institutional constraints such as electoral and constitutional rules [or] the presence of other political parties”.¹²³ Particularly in light of the pluralism within the political sphere alone—which has produced a myriad of compliments and contradictions—it is an impossibility that Islamist ideology would not respond and react to external influences and pressures. The trend in the West has been to disregard this pluralism in favor of “selective representation”, reducing the representation of Islamic societies to particular actors, organizations or ideas. First and foremost, the West seems intent on only measuring the socio-political influence of Islamism “through a particular prism: that of the various Islamist organizations”.¹²⁴ There are many individuals who seek to correlate all Islamic political activity with the actions of violent Islamists like al-Qaeda, or arguing that such violence is a derivative of the lack of democracy in the Middle East, a problem whose source is Islamic culture. According to this view, Islamic fundamentalists are “a medieval political party using religion as an attractive shield behind which to hide their real intent”, whose ultimate goal is to react against and repress the expansion of modernity in line with the Western historical narrative.¹²⁵ This was evident in the contrasting ways the discourse represented the Muslim Brotherhood (“considered remnants of the old-school leadership-oriented hierarchy” and thus

¹²³ Brynen et al, *The Arab Awakening*, 124.

¹²⁴ Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, 96.

¹²⁵ Tarek Heggy, *The Arab Cocoon: Progress and Modernity in Arab Societies* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2010): 29.

represented negatively) with “leaderless actors such as Wael Ghonim”, the Google Executive imprisoned by the Mubarak regime and lauded by the West as the hero of the revolution.¹²⁶ Instead of recognizing the plurality of forces at work, a narrative of good vs. evil, new vs. old, and secular vs. Islamist was dichotomized and produced on a massive scale. It followed that some Islamists returned to the existent discourse about the West, projecting frustrations with Western political strategies, containment and intervention onto their dialogue about democracy, secularism and human dignity. According to Maria Holt and Haifaa Jawad, “for many Muslims, western knowledge and civilization are little more than an extension of colonial practices, whereby western scholars and policymakers continue to impose particular versions of the truth on Muslim societies and particular ways of judging what is good and what is bad.”¹²⁷

Both of these ends are mechanisms of applying political pressure through rhetoric, making the notion of democracy a pawn to be exploited in the name of dominating the conversation.¹²⁸ The dual discourse of “The Arab Exception” and the “Selective Representation” of political parties in the Middle East and North Africa are attempts to circumvent an admission that the absence of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa has very little to do with a “clash of civilizations”. As Tessler’s data analysis concludes:

The reasons that democracy has not taken root in the Arab world must therefore lie elsewhere; perhaps in domestic economic structures, perhaps in relations with the international political and economic order, or perhaps in the determination of those in power to resist political change by whatever means are required. But while these and other possible explanations can be debated, what should be clear is that cultural explanations alleging that Islam discourages or even prevents the emergence of support for democracy are misguided, indeed misleading, and thus of little use in efforts to understand the factors shaping attitudes toward democracy in the Arab World.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Aouragh, “Framing the Internet,” 150.

¹²⁷ Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*, 47.

¹²⁸ Bartels and Brouwer, “Islam, Democracy and New Media”, 215.

¹²⁹ Tessler, “Do Islamic Orientations Influence Attitudes Toward Democracy”, 239-45.

As Tessler's conclusions indicate, the presence of this dialogue seems to be detracting from the real question: not whether Islam, Islamists or Islamism is compatible with notions of democracy and human rights, but rather what conditions and mechanisms promote further democratization and a distancing of the region from its authoritarian and colonial past. It is equally inappropriate to question how much time will elapse before democratization efforts in the region will revert to the same authoritarianism it has always known.¹³⁰ The likely trajectory of the post-revolution regimes is one of a pursuit of new identities.

The political future of the Middle East and North Africa in the wake of the popular uprisings is not yet to be determined, nor is it the place of the West to attempt to shape it. Western interventionism, in exercising uses of both soft and hard power, has contributed to the lack of emergence of democracy, leaving what Bishara calls "a trail of bitterness, hostility and division that continues to influence the national political culture and temperament [of the region] to this day".¹³¹ As Lin Noueihed rightly concludes, the social and generational changes that predicated, produced and proceeded from the events of 2011 will be difficult to circumvent. This singular view of history, politics and civilization as construed through the lens of the Western experience is fundamentally in contrast to "the counterview of civilization and modernity as not only plural but also as inherently open to contact, interaction and change".¹³² Over time, if Moderation Theory is any indicator, 'secular' parties will have time to establish themselves and develop political bases of their own. As the countries of Tunisia and Egypt begin to free themselves from the "Radical Islamism" or "Secular Nationalist" dichotomy that has plagued their political history since colonialism, voters will have the opportunity to make political

¹³⁰ Brynen et al, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 124.

¹³¹ Bishara, *The Invisible Arab*, 3.

¹³² Armando Salvatore, "Tradition and Modernity Within Islamic Civilization and the West," in Muhammad Khalid Masud, Armando Salvatore, and Martin van Bruinessen, eds., *Islam and Modernity: Key Issues and Debates* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009): 14.

decisions on the basis of “the practical success of their policies, particularly in the economic sphere” and choose from a wider selection of political parties.¹³³ The Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda, and the other Islamist groups that currently dominate the political sphere will have to answer for their performance at the polls in the recent elections.

The bias in current discussions of democratization efforts in the region is largely evident. It is unlikely that the Middle East and North Africa are progressing towards the emergence of a Western modernity, duplicating its ideologies and values and appropriating its cultural norms.¹³⁴ Instead, the Egyptian and Tunisian constitutions of 2014 suggest that the nation-building efforts of the post-revolutionary governments of the Middle East and North Africa are inclined to produce a complex political fusion of Islamic cultural identity and democracy. Should the process of state formation continue along its current trajectory, the rejection of the political binary that has defined politics in the region and the opening up of the democratic space will facilitate the emergence of an indigenous democracy. Tunisia and Egypt are redefining democratic and political modernity, irrespective of the Western media’s rhetorical dismissal of democratic progress in the region or its insistence on secular constitutionalism.

¹³³ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 282.

¹³⁴ Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, 96.

Chapter Four: Gendering the “Arab Spring”

Introduction

In an article written for *Foreign Policy* on 23 April 2012, Egyptian-American columnist Mona Eltahawy poses the question, “Why Do They Hate Us?”¹ Eltahawy, who was detained, tortured and sexually assaulted by the Egyptian police in 2011, brutally condemns the region—and Arab Men in particular—for its treatment of women:

Yes: They hate us. It must be said...I’m not talking about sex hidden away in dark corners and closed bedrooms. An entire political and economic system—one that treats half of humanity like animals—must be destroyed along with the other more obvious tyrannies choking off the region from its future. Until the rage shifts from the oppressors in our presidential palaces to the oppressors on our streets and in our homes, our revolution has not even begun...Name me a country and I’ll recite a litany of abuses fueled by a mix of culture and religion that few seem willing or able to disentangle less they blaspheme or offend.²

Eltahawy, a highly regarded secular feminist, itemizes several of those gender-based abuses and repressions: political exclusion, genital mutilation, sexual harassment, virginity tests, legalization of polygamy, and more. An enumeration of these abuses and others like them dominates the discussion of the Muslim woman and her place in Arab society. Her statements are supported by some fact: the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Report, which proclaims that the Middle East and North Africa has 61 percent of its economic gender gap and 93 percent of its political gender gap remaining in 2013, the lowest globally in both categories.³ Despite the statistical realities of the plight of women in the region, Samia Errazzouki published a response to Eltahawy’s article in *Al-Monitor* on 24 April 2012. Criticizing Eltahawy’s rhetoric, Errazzouki

¹ Mona Eltahawy, “Why Do They Hate Us? The Real War on Women is in the Middle East,” *Foreign Policy*, Apr. 23, 2012.

² *Ibid.*

³ World Economic Forum, “The Global Gender Gap Report” (2013): 16. Overall, the Middle East and North Africa as a region has closed 59 percent of its gender gap, compared to top-ranked North America, which has closed 74 percent.

condemns the latter for her “monolithic representation of women in the region” and her “self-appointed representation of Arab women”.⁴ As Errazzouki points out, Eltahawy disregards the social and structural implications of gender equality in favor of framing the debate around “hate”. Despite the region’s abysmal ranking in the Global Gender Gap Report, the plight of women in the region must not be cast purely in the light of victimization; the situation of women should be considered in its post-colonial, socioeconomic, political and structural context. The “woman question” in the Middle East and North Africa is not handled universally, and each country can speak of unique challenges—as well as successes. Writings like Eltahawy’s underscore how the recent uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa have “brought into focus some dominant ways that sexual and bodily rights are framed, gendered, and politicized.”⁵ Reducing gender relationships in the region into a simplistic dichotomy between men and women fueled by misogynistic hate essentializes the myriad experiences of women in Muslim societies.

Equivocating “Women” and Gender

This oversimplification manifests itself in two distinct ways. The first is the selective representation of the condition of women in the Middle East and North Africa as the non-participatory victims of an oppressive culture, which is determined by a specific religion. The portrayal of Arab-Muslim women in the Western media is an integral component of the political discourse of the region. By titling her article “Why They Hate Us”, Eltahawy is contributing to the conception of “the Arab-Muslim woman as veiled, passive, docile, and dominated by men,

⁴ Sami Errazzouki, “Dear Mona Eltahawy, You Do Not Represent ‘Us’”, *Al-Monitor*, Apr. 24, 2012.

⁵ Maya Mikdashi, “The Uprisings Will Be Gendered,” *Jadaliyya Blog*, Feb. 28, 2012.

the antithesis of her Western, emancipated counterpart.”⁶ She thus frames women as a monolithic group, perpetuating an idea of an experiential uniformity. As she states, “Name me an Arab country, and I’ll recite a litany of abuses fueled by a toxic mix of culture and religion”.⁷

Throughout the *Foreign Policy* cover story, she enumerates several of the abuses by name, including Tunisia, which is often highlighted as a bastion of women’s liberation, and Muslim “state feminism”.⁸ To contest this perception, Eltahawy contends that, since the Jasmine Revolution, Tunisian women who both work and study at universities have reported harassment for their refusal to veil.⁹ Though deplorable, this issue is hardly comparable to the situation in Saudi Arabia, where women are bound by restrictive guardianship laws and where survivors of rape and sexual assault are frequently charged and sentenced alongside (or instead of) their attackers—or to the situation in Egypt, in which 90 percent of women who have been married have experienced some form of female genital mutilation.¹⁰ It is indisputable that some generalizations can be made: when one speaks *generally* of the Middle East and North Africa, women face substantial challenges. They “tend to lag significantly behind men in terms of literacy, participation in the workforce, and presence in the political sphere”.¹¹ Women are frequently caught in “an awkward dichotomy between their role as citizens of the nation-state (*watan*) and as members of the religious community (*umma*).”¹² The exclusion of women—widely accepted as a form of gender-based violence in which the state exerts undue influence over

⁶ Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, “Toward A Theory of Arab-Muslim Women as Activists in Secular and Religious Movements,” *Arab States Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1993): 87.

⁷ Eltahawy, “Why Do They Hate Us?” *Foreign Policy*, Apr. 23, 2012.

⁸ Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*, 60. Holt elaborates on the history of women’s activism and state feminism in Tunisia, which has been present since the era of post-colonial emancipation.

⁹ Eltahawy, “Why Do They Hate Us?” *Foreign Policy*, Apr. 23, 2012.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* It is worth noting that this practice is common among Egyptian Coptic Christians as well, and not exclusive to the Islamic Egyptian tradition.

¹¹ Holt et al, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*, 60.

¹² Margot Badran, “Competing Agenda: Feminists, Islam, and the State in Nineteenth—and Twentieth—century Egypt,” in *Global Feminisms Since 1945*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith (Routledge: London, 2000), 15.

their public roles—is present to a much higher degree in the Muslim-dominated societies of the Middle East and North Africa. To speak specifically and comprehensively about the individual conditions of women in the widely varied cultures and societies of the region would be to acknowledge that in reality the experiences of Muslim women in the Middle East and North Africa are mitigated by time, place, and “the strategies they adopt to negotiate on their own behalf...to protect them from patriarchal excess or traditional patterns of behavior that appear to relegate them to second-class status.”¹³ In addition to notable feminists such as Moroccan Fatima Mernissi and Egyptian Nawal el Sa’adawi who advocate for cultural and social reform, Arab women have played predominant roles in nationalist movements throughout history. For example, Huda Sha’arawi, an Egyptian feminist and nationalist, helped to found the Egyptian Feminist Union and spoke out actively against public veiling. Not only does Eltahawy’s analysis disregard the actions of these women, but she also discounts the everyday actions of women that support and challenge the sociopolitical and economic systems of society in the region on a daily basis. An Egyptian women’s rights activist interviewed by Sussan Tahmasebi emphasizes that these micro-activisms are reflective of women’s active engagement in all aspects of social life. In her view, this presence—extending beyond the issues that solely relate to women—is critical “so that the Egyptian population views them as capable of advocating for all of the population on a range of issues, as opposed to just the family code”.¹⁴ In light of this view, describing the “Arab World” as the global “pulsating heart of misogyny”, as Eltahawy does, is to disregard the

¹³ William R. Darrow, “Woman’s Place and the Place of Women in the Iranian Revolution,” in *Women, Religion and Social Change*, eds. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly (State University of New York Press: New York, 1985), 308.

¹⁴ Sussan Tahmasebi, “A Civil Society-Led Revolution? Promoting Civil Society and Women’s Rights in the Middle East” in *The Unfinished Revolution: Voices from the Global Fight for Women’s Rights*, ed. Minky Worden (Seven Stories Press: New York, 2012), 70.

complex reality for millions of Muslim women, thus contributing to a discourse that promotes a simplistic understanding of gender in the region.¹⁵

Secondly, for Eltahawy and others, gender issues in the Middle East and North Africa are exclusively projected upon women, who are selected as its representatives. Gender is not exclusive to women. As Maya Mikdashi states, “gender is not an analytic lens that can be withheld and deployed according to the genitalia and/or sexual practices of the group or topic under study”.¹⁶ In an article for the blog *Jadaliyya*, Mikdashi points out how discussions of gender often reproduce the very “power dynamics and hegemonic discourses” they are critiquing because they are only deployed in discussions of “non-hetero-normative males”¹⁷. No one speaks of ‘male protestors’ or ‘heterosexual activism’ because, until gender is deployed, categories of citizenship are viewed as universal.¹⁸ In this way, women are cast out of universal categories and recast as representatives of other marginalized groups—like LGBTQ¹⁹ Arabs—who are frequently omitted from coverage. This dynamic “reproduces international and national, political and economic dynamics, alliances and interests”.²⁰ In other words, rhetorically marginalizing and excluding these groups creates a perception of segregation, which in turn produces and reproduces actual segregation. Gender is often exploited and disregarded as is politically convenient. Women and LGBTQ persons are the victims of gendered discourses while heterosexual men, by virtue of their gender privilege, have somehow transcended it. Framing ‘gender’ solely in terms of the question of the place of women in Muslim societies has allowed

¹⁵ Eltahawy, “Why Do They Hate Us?” *Foreign Policy*, Apr. 23, 2012.

¹⁶ Mikdashi, “The Uprisings Will Be Gendered.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ LGBTQ is an acronym for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer”.

²⁰ Mikdashi, “The Uprisings Will Be Gendered.”

for biased representations of the negative conditions of women in society, casting them as victims and vilifying Islam as their oppressor.

The Development of a “Middle Eastern” Feminism

The narrative of gender in the Middle East and North Africa often presents Islam as its antagonist. Assuming “a constant presence of a timeless system of the oppression of women” dating back to Islam is a feature of the cultural essentialization that dominates the Western discussion of the treatment of Muslim women.²¹ According to Maria Holt, this victimization of Muslim women grounded early “understandings” of the Orient as early Orientalists targeted Islamic family law as “the cause of the backwardness of Muslim societies”.²² Eltahawy reproduces such reductionist discourse when she states, “The Islamist hatred of women burns brightly across the region—now more than ever” and implicitly correlates the rise of political Islam with the oppression of women throughout the region.²³ Disregarding alternative explanations for the existence of heteronormative and patriarchal injustice in favor of arguments grounded in what can only be called ‘Islamophobia’ mars the pursuit of gender equity.

The singular attribution of the oppression of women to religious prescriptions disempowers women in favor of empowering the patriarchy, which is able to justify its own existence through arguments about ‘divine ordination’.²⁴ Women are rhetorically robbed of their personal and political power as actors and activists.²⁵ This disregards the mechanisms by which,

²¹ Holt et al, *Women, Islam, and Resistance in the Arab World*, 3-5.

²² Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, “Islam, Women and Revolution in Twentieth-Century Arab Thought,” in *Women, Religion and Social Change*, eds. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly (State University of New York Press: New York, 1985), 275.

²³ Eltahawy, “Why Do They Hate Us?” *Foreign Policy*, Apr. 23, 2012.

²⁴ Mary Ann Tétreault, “Women and Revolution: What Have We Learned?” in *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia and the New World*, Ed. Mary Ann Tétreault (Columbia: University of South Carolina University Press, 1994): 435-36.

²⁵ Holt et al, *Women, Islam, and Resistance in the Arab World*, 3.

in a Foucauldian sense, resistance develops alongside and in opposition to the exercise of power.²⁶ By not acknowledging the strides being made by women to formulate their own identity, commentators are ignoring the feminist activism present in the region for the past century. Bonnie Smith, in her introduction to *Global Feminisms Since 1945*, details the importance of recognizing the diversities and complexities of feminism. Rather than thinking in terms of a singular and universal feminism, Smith argues that the assumption of plurality “makes us think in terms not of feminism but of multiple ‘feminisms’ ... a variety of activism on behalf of social, political, economic and personal justice” which implies “the existence of global debates over what feminism is in the first place” and thereby rejects a Western-dominated understanding of women’s empowerment.²⁷ Acknowledging this diversity demands an expansion in thinking beyond women when discussing gender, thus moving beyond a singular interpretation of feminism. Scholars ought to speak not in terms of feminism, but in terms of how the women’s movement in the region has emerged, defined itself and been interpreted.

The women of the Middle East and North Africa have not received “feminism” uniformly. Maria Holt illustrates how a thorough deconstruction of Muslim feminism in the region produces three broad trends by which one can categorize reactions:

The first, often used by conservative Muslims to criticize those who advocate greater equality for women, dismisses feminists as ‘agents of Western cultural imperialism’ who encourage Muslim women ‘to abandon home life and its responsibilities...and make their lives miserable by running after political, economic, social and other activities. A second usage applies to Muslim women who use the tools of western feminist scholarship to reappraise ‘the theological justifications that have been offered for restricting women’s rights’. A third understanding of feminism has been adopted by some Muslim women who would definitely not describe themselves as ‘feminist’ in a western sense, but who are pushing forward the boundaries of women’s rights by action and example.²⁸

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990): 94-95.

²⁷ Bonnie G. Smith, “Introduction,” in *Global Feminisms Since 1945*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith (Routledge, London, 2000), 1.

²⁸ Holt et al, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 13.

While critics may perceive it as another Western cultural import, supporters of feminism conceive of it as a critical tool to advance the position of women in society. Additionally, many women in the region “prefer to engage in a ‘new woman-friendly and gender-sensitive Islamic discourse’ that they do not regard as feminist”.²⁹ To understand this facet of global feminisms that has developed in a non-Western setting, it is important to trace its developments in the region over time.

The relationship between Islam and the role of women in society itself is multifaceted: the Islamic tradition contains stories of very influential and forceful females, who were both trusted and held in high regard by the Prophet Muhammad. In Islam, there are three sources for a religious perspective on human life: the Qur’ān (the literal word of God), the *Sunna* (the example of the life of the Prophet Muhammad), and the *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad).³⁰ The *Hadith*, in particular, have always been a subject of contention and interpretation since they were compiled posthumously. Holt argues that the emergence of the Qur’ān “both reflects and radically modifies the environment into which the new religion was born...Islam was initially far ahead of other religions and cultural traditions in its recognition of women as independent persons with rights and obligations”.³¹ In pre-Islamic Arab society, patriarchy was entrenched and pervasive: historical accounts argue it was so severe as to have normalized female infanticide.³² By extending some inheritance and property rights, instituting a dowry system, and modifying custody laws to benefit women, the establishment of Islam was successful in mollifying the patriarchy.³³ Irrespective of these facts, an empirical analysis

²⁹ Holt et al, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 13.

³⁰ Holt et al, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 30.

³¹ *Ibid*, 29.

³² Fluehr-Lobban, “Toward A Theory of Arab-Muslim Women”, 90.

³³ *Ibid*, 88-89.

suggests that there is “no convincing evidence that the social revolution engendered by the founding of Islam offered women opportunities for leadership”, at least formally, and in fact a body of laws emerged that cemented a patriarchal system that contributes to the oppression of women to modern times.³⁴ Due to this fact, many like Eltahawy have concluded that because Islam has historically produced patriarchal societies, Islam itself must be patriarchal. Holt wrestles with the contradiction between the legacy of Islam and the impact of Islam at its conception:

Are we to conclude that the Qur’ān and other sources of Islamic tradition have been interpreted—deliberately and systematically—to create, maintain and institutionalize the inferior position of women?...It is not Islam, per se, that oppresses women but, rather, the continuity of patriarchal values within nationalist and religious interpretations that limits women’s agency.³⁵

Jane Smith, in *Women, Religion, and Social Change*, offers an explanation, arguing that at the time that Islam took hold, so too did social changes contributing to the exclusion of women:

Two factors directly affecting [women’s] increased exclusion from normal social intercourse seem to have been (1) the codification of law based on divine revelation and (2) the imposition of seclusion, also based on divine revelation...The fact that exclusion and seclusion came to prevail quickly and increasing measure seems to have resulted from: (1) the prevailing male attitude about the inherent unsuitability of women for roles of full public participation and leadership; and (2) an apparent willingness on the part of women to accept the restrictions imposed on them and to acquiesce in the limitations then understood to be part of divine ordination.³⁶

This supports Smith’s contention that despite the pivotal roles played by women in times of social, religious and political upheaval, when a measure of stability eventually returns to society the women are often relegated to a position similar to the one they previously occupied.³⁷ This

³⁴ Jane I. Smith, “Women, Religion and Social Change in Early Islam,” in *Women, Religion and Social Change*, eds. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly (State University of New York Press: New York, 1985): 20, 34.

³⁵ Holt et al, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 30-31.

³⁶ Smith, “Women, Religion and Social Change,” 34.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 19.

phenomenon is not only applicable to women's movements in the Middle East and North Africa or other Islamic societies, but also to global feminist movements more generally.

In line with this reasoning, the role of women in the Middle East and North Africa has been influenced by the alternating periods of revolution and reform, which occurred in relation to (rather than in isolation from) the West as "intellectual and political leaders have attempted to transform its institutions by implementing various plans of development and social change intended to achieve an equivalence of power with the West."³⁸ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad writes, "The prevalent image of the dominant West with its challenge to Islamic culture became an essential component of the ideological formulations appropriated as vehicles of change by various groups."³⁹ She continues,

The feminist movement in the Arab world has struggled throughout this century to achieve the liberation of women. This liberation is not a goal in itself; it is not an exercise in self-indulgence or the beginning of a quest for self-fulfillment. It does not seek to cultivate an innate freedom of the individual to rebel, to protest or define one's own identity. Rather, it has sought the development of a better society in an effort to effect an acceptable image of progress and parity with the West.⁴⁰

Haddad is underscoring how being categorized as "backward" contributed to a feeling of discontent among intellectuals, which produced a revolutionary ethos that would come to define the history of the twentieth century in the region. The historical shift from Islamism to nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s and later to alternate ideologies have been attributed to the rise of an alternative perspective as each ideology successively failed to ease the disaffection among the people "when their governments were unable to create conditions that would have given them a sense of vitality, dignity and worth".⁴¹ Simultaneously, the adherence of Muslim women to Islamic prescriptions of modesty and righteous sexual conduct became "a precondition

³⁸ Haddad, "Islam, Women and Revolution," 275.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 275.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 296.

⁴¹ Haddad, "Islam, Women and Revolution," 277.

for the survival of society...because of the profound belief that salvation is a corporate responsibility...To ensure women's devotion to Islam is therefore the frontline of defense against the disintegration of society.”⁴² Achieving “parity” with the West, particularly in terms of attaining a position of global significance, was entrenched in a discourse about restoring confidence to the Muslim world and culture, and of returning the region to the pride of place it occupied during the golden age of Islam and the Ottoman Empire. Dissatisfaction with the reality of the Turkish-dominated caliphate and the subsequent colonial regimes that replaced it influenced some Muslim intellectuals to search for alternative options, producing a pan-Arab national identity that is reflected in the feminist and the nationalist movements of the first half of the twentieth century.

Feminism in this period was a distinctly Islamic feminism, grounded in the modernist interpretations of *ijtihad* (“diligence”) proposed by Muhammad ‘Abduh. The idea of *ijtihad* advocated independent reasoning and inquiry into religious matters. Desiring to reconcile Islam with a modernizing world, ‘Abduh believed that learned believers “could go straight to the sources of religion, principally the Qur’ān and the Hadith, for guidance in the conduct of everyday life. Through *ijtihad*...‘Abduh demonstrated that one could be both Muslim and modern and that indeed not all traditional practice was in keeping with Islam”.⁴³ Early Muslim feminists soon adopted *ijtihad* as a framework of reference for operating within Islam: in 1923, The Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU or *al-Ittihad al-nisa’i al Misri*) emerged and began to employ the term *feministe* to describe their political movement⁴⁴ Even outside of the EFU

⁴² Haddad, “Islam, Women and Revolution,” 293.

⁴³ Badran, “Competing Agenda,” 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

movement, women were active participants in political and national struggle, protesting alongside men against British rule and foreign occupation.⁴⁵

This pan-Arab national identity had profound implications for gender and gender relations in the Middle East and North Africa. The West, represented by the French and British military forces in the region that sought to replicate a Western-style system in what was hoped would be emerging spheres of influence, fostered and shaped the secular nationalism of this period.⁴⁶ Resistance to the realities of the post-Ottoman colonial period precipitated many of the contradictions in identity that women in the Middle East and North Africa continue to grapple with in contemporary times. While simultaneously creating some openings through which women were able to express their discontent, the colonial period also produced a “highly gendered” discourse that placed substantial burdens on the women who were trying to use the shifting political space to their advantage.⁴⁷ The colonial state’s attitude toward women was often informed by a desire to “reform or ‘civilize’ native practice”—typically by freeing them from the veil.⁴⁸ The parallel emergence of nationalism and feminism in the Middle East and North Africa has meant that there has been an integral antagonism between the movements and among their distinct subgroups. Throughout the revolution women were “treated more as symbols than as active participants in nationalist movements, organized to end colonialism and racism”,⁴⁹ and this constructed a dichotomy in which women were expected to choose between their own liberation and the liberation of the nation itself:

Although nationalist ideology has played a vital role in liberation struggles in the Arab world, it also ‘reclaimed many of the patriarchal values of Islamic traditionalism as integral to Arab cultural identity as such.’ As a result, although it is true that many

⁴⁵ Holt et al, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 58.

⁴⁶ Haddad, “Islam, Women and Revolution”, 277.

⁴⁷ Holt et al, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 14.

⁴⁸ Fluehr-Lobban, “Toward A Theory of Arab-Muslim Women”, 94.

⁴⁹ Holt et al, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 14.

women have experienced a conflict between national liberation and an anticipated improvement in their own status, others have welcomed a return to greater authenticity.⁵⁰

Nationalists successfully co-opted women into the anti-colonial movement by assuring them that their liberation would come, but only after the aims of the national cause itself had been satisfied: “Imperial domination affected everyone, it was argued, whereas the oppression of women only affected some people.”⁵¹ This fact underscores “revolution’s dual character”: while on the one hand, revolutionary groups are cooperating to the end of undermining a common enemy, on the other they are also competing amongst themselves to dominate how society will appear in the wake of the revolutions—and, fundamentally, “the identity of the individuals and groups who will dominate them”.⁵²

In the wake of liberation from colonialism, military coups d’états, heralded as “liberators of the Arab people from foreign domination”, would replace some of these Western-dominated regimes with socialist authoritarian governments.⁵³ The military revolutions of the 1950s occurred in Iraq and Algeria, as well as in many of the countries that would later host the major uprisings of 2011 such as Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Libya. The Arab-Israeli conflict intensified confrontation in the region, and contributed to the rise of Islamism as the dominant opposition ideology. During the mid-twentieth century, “the modern woman came to be viewed with ambivalence, especially if she was associated with the culture of the colonialists and imperialists”.⁵⁴ Political Islam emerged, providing an alternative. The Islamist ideology “affirms that it is only through the transformation of the Muslim individual within the family structure that society can be saved from annihilation at the hands of its enemies”, which included

⁵⁰ Holt et al, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 17.

⁵¹ Margot Badran, “Competing Agenda,” 13.

⁵² Tétreault, “Women and Revolution: What Have We Learned?”, 427.

⁵³ Haddad, “Islam, Women and Revolution”, 278.

⁵⁴ Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Lynne Rienner Publishers: London, 2003): 105-06.

disentangling Muslim society from the tendrils of Western influence.⁵⁵ The Western perception of the stagnation of modern women's rights in the region is often traced to the emergence of political Islam. "The development of political Islam has had a contradictory impact on women," writes Holt:

The movement—although it is by no means a monolithic one—counts a great many women among its supporters, which raises the question of whether they are attracted to its uncompromising ideology or to its anti-establishment, even revolutionary rhetoric. Generally speaking, however, Islamist movements tend to take a dogmatic approach to the role of women...[But] many women have benefitted from the upsurge of Islamic activism in a number of Middle Eastern countries.⁵⁶

In the 1970s, the growing popularity of Islamic fundamentalism resulted in an exponential increase in the number of middle class women on university campuses who adopted the *hijab*, who appreciated its anti-secularization and anti-modernization sentiment.⁵⁷ The *hijab* quickly became "a symbol of status for the recently urbanized": or, in other words, a way for Muslim women to correct a social order that had been disrupted by modernization.⁵⁸ As rural populations migrated to urban areas in search of work and engaged with a globalized urban culture, the veiling represented the reinstitution of traditional, middle-class values. Muslim women accepted the *hijab* as a symbol of a new Islamic egalitarianism in which "the outward manifestation of Islamic dress becomes in effect the initiation into a new sisterhood."⁵⁹ Women, who themselves cited religious, psychological, political, revolutionary, economic, cultural, demographic, domestic and practical reasons for veiling were symbolically confining themselves to their domestic role and thereby being protected from the dangers of modernization.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Haddad, "Islam, Women and Revolution", 278.

⁵⁶ Holt et al, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 44.

⁵⁷ Badran, "Competing Agenda," 33.

⁵⁸ Haddad, "Islam, Women and Revolution," 293-94.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 295.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 293-94.

With respect to women, throughout these shifts in revolutionary ideology, three interrelated trends emerged: while all revolutionaries “recognized and challenged the oppression of women”, women were simultaneously marketed as the symbols of the revolution and of cultural norms and values and therefore their status was perceived as being integral to the liberation of society generally.⁶¹ Holt poignantly argues that the gendered identity of women in the Middle East and North Africa has been “constructed through the discourse of religion and nationalism” in which “intense engagements of Western powers in Middle Eastern lives” have contributed to a desire for Muslim men and women “to express communal solidarity in the face of threats from outside”.⁶² These perceptions were correlated with the belief that the loss of the prestige of the Arab world collectively—including the status of women—had its source in exploitation by foreign governments. Therefore, though women were afforded a position on the revolutionary agenda, the competing visions for the post-revolutionary woman was a source of practical conflict: “in the liberal nationalist revolution the woman has been symbolized as competent wife and devoted mother, in the socialist revolution as a good producer and participant in national development, and in the Islamic revolution as the repository of ethical values.”⁶³ Each of the revolutions produced its own feminism, couched in two feminist visions, “secular feminism” and “Islamic feminism”, though they are not mutually exclusive.

The “secular feminist” position is based on the idea of the “applicability of universal human rights codes” and “holds that women all over the world are entitled to defensible rights that are independent of religion or tradition”.⁶⁴ Secular feminism has not been without criticism in the region. Particularly during the twentieth century, many Arab women constructed their

⁶¹ Haddad, “Islam, Women and Revolution,” 278-79.

⁶² Holt et al, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 4.

⁶³ Haddad, “Islam, Women and Revolution”, 278-79.

⁶⁴ Holt et al, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 32.

conceptions of feminisms on the basis of the “modest American woman, working next to her husband to build a better future”.⁶⁵ This model was delegitimized by “the fact that [Islamist literature in the 1980s depicted] America as currently afflicted with an epidemic of four plagues: narcotics, lawlessness, pornography and venereal disease”.⁶⁶ Islamist feminism, alternatively, emphasizes the compatibility of Islam with women’s rights, negotiating for an expansion of protections from a position within Islam itself.⁶⁷ These attempts at an Islamic feminism were not without criticism—scholars such as Haideh Moghissi criticized the gender hierarchies she perceives to be inherent to the Islamic system, arguing that a religion based on such norms could not be “adopted as the framework for struggle for gender democracy and women’s equality with men”.⁶⁸ Others, like Holt, argue that while gender hierarchies pose a problem, the “contradiction between feminist discourse and the ‘cultural authenticity’ of Islam” has resulted in divisions among women in the Middle East and North Africa that in many ways contributes to the persistence of the gender gap.⁶⁹ Regardless of the explanation, Muslim men have retained their position of superiority relative to Muslim women in the region: they maintain the exclusive right to interpret the corpus of religious literature and exclusive domination over the use of violence, which produces a dynamic in which both the physical means and the spiritual means of coercion are dominated by men.

In non-domestic realms, the position of the Muslim state on the ‘woman question’ has fluctuated throughout time and space to suit its own political objectives; thus, “while the state has promoted new roles for women for pragmatic and ideological purposes, it has also upheld

⁶⁵ Haddad, “Islam, Women and Revolution,” 292.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Holt et al, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 31.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 32.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 48.

imbalanced gender relations, and male authority out of political expediency.”⁷⁰ The historical interplay between the secular state and the Islamist opposition has often meant that the home is the last place where Islam retains authority independent of the state. According to Margot Badran, “This is precisely the area where the state has allowed patriarchal control over women a free hand and where gender relations have been most unequal.”⁷¹ The emerging discourses surrounding women are both oppositional and intimately correlated with power dynamics. Due to the balance of power and resistance in the region, the societal roles of many women—from the perspective of the state—remain at risk of being defined by “the biological functions of her gender” and “her relations to the men in her life”.⁷² Fundamentally, the fact that women are inextricably fettered to the biological realities of reproduction is often “translated theoretically as embedding women, through their biological role, in the private subsistence economy of the household.”⁷³ A corollary to this reality is that marriages in patriarchal societies are often structured to the advantage of the male partner:

For example, social mores often prescribe an age difference in spouses favoring men; property arrangements generally favor men; education, social activities and linkages, and political rights also favor men. Biology reflects this social inequality: on the average, men are larger than men. Even more restricting, women bear physical evidence of sexual experience while men do not...The outcome of these marriages is often a modal marriage pairing between a larger, older, better educated, richer, sexually experienced, and legally favored man, and a small, younger, less well-educated, propertyless, inexperienced, and socially and legally less protected woman. The structural disadvantages make it difficult for the weaker partner to assert herself, much less to protect herself from exploitation and violence.⁷⁴

The power dynamics of families as the primary agents of socialization, particularly for women who are underrepresented in education outside of the home, produces characteristics that lend

⁷⁰ Badran, “Competing Agenda,” 38.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 38.

⁷² Haddad, “Islam, Women and Revolution,” 286.

⁷³ Tétreault, “Women and Revolution: A Framework for Analysis,” 9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 9-10.

themselves to hierarchical societies like authoritarian regimes. Despite the fact that women are often socialized to think in terms of their biological capabilities and relationships to masculine authority, women have been active in defining the terms of the “woman question” for themselves, both as secular feminists and as female Islamists.

The emergent Islamic feminism (or post-feminism) is an extension of a long history of women’s rights advocacy in the region, and represents a synthesis of the cultural and historical context that preceded it. As Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban pointed out as early as 1993, Western observers should not be shocked by this development. An Arab-Muslim activist, whether secular or religious, “is a courageous woman...in that she has taken the bold step outside of the domestic arena into the public world of men, and of ideas, and has entered the realm of effecting social change.”⁷⁵ Arab-Muslim women, along with minority women in the Muslim World, are challenging injustice. Furthermore, as Maya Mikdashi points out, Islamists—and Islam by extension—does not “have an exclusive license to practice patriarchy and gender discrimination/oppression in the region. The secular state has been doing it fairly adequately for the last half of a century”.⁷⁶

In order to adequately understand the complex relations of sex and gender in the uprisings of 2011, it is necessary to transcend an understanding of Arab-Muslim society as one that is dominated by inherent injustice and patriarchy. This discourse, often replicated in the Western media and certainly present in Eltahawy’s article, reproduces and vilified understanding of Islam that implicitly overstates the redemptive and progressive nature of secularism. In framing the events of the uprisings, it is critical to understand the ways in which gender is deployed for the political advantage of the existing power structure.

⁷⁵ Fluehr-Lobban, “Toward a Theory of Arab-Muslim Women”, 104.

⁷⁶ Mikdashi, “The Uprisings Will Be Gendered.”

Muslim Women in Revolutions

Throughout the uprisings of 2011, protests were often politicized through the simultaneous employment of sex-based rhetoric and violence. Particularly in Egypt, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces utilized sexual violence, accusations of immorality, and other mechanisms of intimidation to discredit protesters.⁷⁷ Seven female protesters were dragged away from Tahrir Square and forced to participate in “virginity testing” in 2011,⁷⁸ while protests for International Women’s Day was interrupted by men who proceeded to harass and assault the female protesters.⁷⁹ In Iraq, female protesters were beaten, molested, and assaulted by government-backed counter-protesters who “in some cases attempted to remove their clothing, calling them whores and other sexually degrading terms”.⁸⁰ Throughout the region, the regimes in power essentially “propagated a discourse of immorality among male and female protesters” that was intimately correlated to gender.⁸¹ This discourse was not representative of ideas about Islamic chastity or sexuality, but rather intimately correlated to notions and understandings of power. Moghadam reiterates the understanding of gender relations as being inextricably bound up in contestations of power:

The nature of gender discourse...(gender equality versus gender difference) reveals a great deal about the nature of the revolution and the regime. During periods of revolutionary transformation, changes in societal values and ideologies affect gender relations and vice versa. Laws about women are closely bound to the power of the state.⁸²

⁷⁷ Mikdashi, “The Uprisings Will Be Gendered.”

⁷⁸ Eltahawy, “Why Do They Hate Us?” In Egypt, “virginity tests” involve medical doctors inserting their fingers into women’s genitals in order to search for hymens.

⁷⁹ Minky Worden, “Introduction: Revolutions and Rights” in *The Unfinished Revolution: Voices from the Global Fight for Women’s Rights*, ed. Minky Worden (Seven Stories Press: New York, 2012), 3.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

⁸¹ Mikdashi, “The Uprisings Will Be Gendered.”

⁸² Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, 104.

The role of women in the “Arab Spring” and the impact of the uprisings on women’s rights in the region are intimately connected to the relationship between gender and power. Therefore, it is critical to understand the theoretical foundations of the role of women in revolutions generally.

Tracing the development of an indigenous feminism in the region reveals a complex relationship between women and revolutions. An example of this relationship can be illustrated with the presence of the gendering of rhetoric and violence throughout the uprisings of 2011.

According to Mary Ann Tétreault in *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia and the New World*, “Normatively, women, as human beings whose social role is always defined at least in part by their reproductive capabilities, experience revolution and its outcomes differently from men.”⁸³

She elaborates later in the work:

To consider women as a class or social group that does or does not participate in revolution is to consider revolution from the perspective of the individual in politics and society rather than as the success or failure of classes or groups to gain access to state power. The presence of women in nearly every other social class or group, yet seldom as equals or equivalents to the men in them, is a constant reminder of the constraints on liberation embedded in formal and informal institutions and arrangements. When these private relations suddenly enter the realm of public discourse they illuminate the oppression of other groups. A focus on women shows how social institutions and political economies are mutually conditioned.⁸⁴

Due in part to the complex interactions between the “constraints on liberation” and the mutual “conditioning” of societies, despite women’s participation in revolutions, they are generally unlikely to be counted among the revolution’s victors.⁸⁵ Tétreault argues that because an increase in the status and legal capacities of women would necessitate a decrease in the monopoly of rights, power and resources for post-revolutionary leaders, a mutual interest in maintaining the gender hegemony on power forges an alliance of necessity between the state and the patriarchy

⁸³ Tétreault, “Women and Revolution: A Framework For Analysis”, 20.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Tétreault, “Women and Revolution: What Have We Learned?”, 427.

to subordinate women.⁸⁶ From a Marxian perspective, control of the family is integral not only to biological reproduction, but also to the reproduction of the social relations of production. The family is critical because “it rears the new generation to conform to a particular political economy and the social arrangements that underpin the economy...structures that are the targets of revolutionary transformation”.⁸⁷ Particularly in times of state building, the state becomes “the manager of gender” and “questions of gender, family, and male-female relations come to the fore”.⁸⁸ The relationship between family structures and reproducing the conditions of power has produced a discourse of “liberation” and an opposing discourse of solidarity that helped to cement the undesirable conditions for women in the region.

The discourse surrounding the “liberation” of Arab Muslim women began in the twentieth century and continues to present-day.⁸⁹ The *hijab* represented the reaction to the “missionary conspiracy” to “liberate” Muslim women:

The liberation of women is seen as part of the missionary conspiracy to destroy Islam, using its own people to uproot it from within. The missionary objective is now understood as having been assigned: to raise doubts about the adequacy of Islam as a way of life and to convince Muslims that it is the cause of their decline; and to separate Muslims from their morality and values, so they can be absorbed into the orbit of Western Civilization.⁹⁰

The rhetoric of “liberating” women from their Islamic oppressor was present in most modern conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, including the Soviet War in Afghanistan (1979-89), the Gulf War (1990-91), the War in Afghanistan (2001—present), the War in Iraq (2003-11), and the reactions to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. A reactionary and oppositional discourse emphasizing Islamic solidarity as a reaction to westernization, modernization and neo-

⁸⁶ Tétreault, “Women and Revolution: What Have We Learned?”, 431.

⁸⁷ Tétreault, “Women and Revolution: A Framework For Analysis,” 3.

⁸⁸ Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, 105.

⁸⁹ Haddad, “Islam, Women and Revolution,” 280.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 289.

colonialism emerged throughout the region. A comparison of writings on the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Saur Revolution in Afghanistan, despite their oppositional impacts on women's rights, highlights the pervasiveness of this rhetoric. Examining Muslim feminism through the lens of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Zohreh T. Sullivan argues,

the figure of the 'woman' has repeatedly been constituted as the over-determined sign of an essentialized totality, as a metaphor for the besieged nation, an embattled self, a delicate interiority, the uncontrollable other, the 'unpierced pearl', to be bought and protected, or the sacred interior. As Frazanch Milani observes, women dominate the cultural imaginary by becoming emblems of national identity: 'Forcefully unveiled, they personify the modernization of the nation. Compulsorily veiled, they embody the reinstitution of the Islamic order.'⁹¹

In writing about the Soviet War in Afghanistan and the Saur Revolution, Valentine M.

Moghadam comes to an astonishingly similar conclusion:

Recent feminist scholarship has revealed the gender dynamics of social change, revolution, economic transition, political conflicts, and national identity formation. Women frequently become the sign or marker of political goals and of cultural identity during the processes of revolution and state building, and when power is being contested or reproduced. Representations of women assume political significance, and certain images of women define and demarcate political groups, cultural projects, or ethnic communities. For example, in the history of many Muslim countries, the unveiled modern woman has signified modernity and national progress, while the veiled domesticated woman has symbolized the search for authenticity, cultural revival, and reproduction for the group. Women's behavior and appearance—and the range of their activities—come to be defined by, and frequently are subject to, the political or cultural objectives of political movements, states, and leadership.⁹²

Sullivan and Moghadam offer a startlingly similar narrative of how the forces within their states essentialize women—and how their bodies are often the battleground for claims of power. This phenomenon does not discount the “active role in the revolutionary drama [played by women] or

⁹¹ Zohreh T. Sullivan, “Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern? Transformations in Twentieth-Century Iran,” in *Global Feminisms Since 1945*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith (Routledge: London, 2000), 250.

⁹² Valentine M. Moghadam, “Revolution, Islamist Reaction, and Women in Afghanistan,” in *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia and the New World*, Ed. Mary Ann Tétreault (Columbia: University of South Carolina University Press, 1994): 212

that the representation described above has gone unchallenged”.⁹³ Though images of the societal vision are often projected onto women in an effort to maintain autonomy from the influences of modernization and globalization, women often actively refuse to comply.

The ‘Women’s Spring’

Female participants in the protests of 2011 provide a glimpse into the process of how women in the Middle East and North Africa are engaging in a struggle to define their collective identity in the twenty-first century. The discourse in the Western media largely disregarded the presence of women at the demonstrations that began the uprisings of 2011. Muslim women have historically been seen as being passively oppressed and in need of “liberation”, in large part to the interpretation of “Islamic dress” as associated “with passivity, submissiveness and segregation”.⁹⁴ As Holt points out, the actions of these women “throw[s] into doubt conventional images of the “veiled, homebound, uneducated women who need help to take the first steps towards emancipation.’ It seemed that, far from being “homebound” or “uneducated”, Arab women in 2011 were capable of providing a convincing example of heroic activism.”⁹⁵ Female participation in the uprisings has been rich, multifaceted and widespread, in conflicts that were violent as well as nonviolent, as they took part in “liberation struggles, civil society organizations, and other forms of engagement, including feminist activism”.⁹⁶ Women not only provided material support to male protesters by caring for their physical needs through medical

⁹³ Farrah Farhi, “Sexuality and the Politics of Revolution in Iran,” in *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia and the New World*, Ed. Mary Ann Tétreault (Columbia: University of South Carolina University Press, 1994): 263.

⁹⁴ Soumaya Ghannoushi, “Rebellion: Smashing Stereotypes of Arab Women,” *Al Jazeera English*. Apr. 25, 2011.

⁹⁵ Holt et al, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 57.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 58.

care and charity work, but they also took to the streets and to the web alongside men, serving as protesters, bloggers and—in some instances—soldiers.

The uprisings of 2011 provided a unique political space in which women in the Middle East and North Africa were able to produce an alternative feminism, in a postmodern sense, that is unique to the region and its customs and history and indispensable to future democratic growth. In describing the outcomes of the uprisings Morocco, Zakia Salime describes how Islamists were incorporated into the February 20th movement only after the “secular, modernist, and democratic” nature of the movement was established.⁹⁷ Salime argues that the presence of the Islamists “enriched the movement by providing opportunities for discussions and networking among secular, leftists, Islamists and women” and promoted the renegotiation of issues of gender equality.⁹⁸ In other words, this postmodern negotiation was producing a democratic space in which men and women were learning the fundamentals of democratic dialogue.

Two competing narratives have competed for the obedience of the region’s feminist movement. First, Western observers and Western-influenced non-governmental organizations have observed the region’s treatment of women and made their proscriptions and expectations astonishingly clear: the United Nations Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security prioritized issues of gender and gender perspectives, equal participation and protection from gender-based violence in 2000. Additionally, it “reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction”.⁹⁹ All gender issues in the Middle East and North Africa are under intense scrutiny from outside observers, and subject to inclusion

⁹⁷ Zakia Salime, “A New Feminism? Gender Dynamics in Morocco’s February 20th Movement,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 13 (2012): 109.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 110.

⁹⁹ “United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325: Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security”, *United Nations Security Council*, Oct. 31, 2000.

in an ever-present discourse about ‘backwardness’ and ‘otherness’. Secondly, gender-based advocacy in the Middle East and North Africa must reconcile its position with the Qur’ān. “[O]ut of the one hundred verses in the Qur’ān believed to be proscriptive or prescriptive in nature and not subject to change, eighty percent deal with issues relating to women”—which brings gender issues into the domain of revelation as well as legislation.¹⁰⁰ Despite these competing narratives, the horizontal nature and leaderless design of the protests that swept the Middle East and North Africa in late 2010 provided an egalitarian forum in which women seized the opportunity to participate in a heterogeneous manner, providing them an avenue through which to reconcile democracy and dogma.

As the history of feminism in the Middle East and North Africa has demonstrated, Islamism can scarcely be divorced from the feminism in the region. Women’s participation in active resistance over the course of the twentieth century was facilitated through the use of “Islam as a tool of activism, which has provided respectability and motivation”.¹⁰¹ According to Nicholson and Fraser, this constitutes a conception of feminism, whose approaches are “attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and periods and to that of different groups within societies and periods”.¹⁰² In this case, producing an “Islamic feminism” which is “collapsing the opposition between modernity and Islam, secular and Islamic feminism, and feminism and cultural authenticity”.¹⁰³ In other words, the conflict is not between Islamism and Western feminism. Western feminism, in many ways, provided an example to Muslim women in the Middle East and North Africa, inspiring them to seek the betterment of their own condition. The

¹⁰⁰ Haddad, “Islam, Women and Revolution,” 280.

¹⁰¹ Holt et al, *Women, Islam and Resistance*, 59.

¹⁰² Linda J. Nicholson and Nancy Fraser, “Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (London: Routledge, 1990): 34.

¹⁰³ Holt et al, *Women, Resistance and Islam*, 61.

inspiration coalesced with the empowerment provided by Islamic activism, but conflicted dramatically with the established institutions of the patriarchy: “the various traditions, cultural norms, and prohibitions that prevent women in some Arab states from playing a more active role”.¹⁰⁴

Holt and Jawad, by conducting personal interviews with female activists, discerned a correlation between “when Islamic values are employed to galvanize resistance forces” and “the active participation of women in these societies”:

Women’s active participation in the resistance movements and their breaking away from the confines of the domestic sphere, is legitimized and justified by the “cause” of Islam, the call to struggle in the ‘path of God’ (*fi sabil Allah*). As a positive corollary, women themselves feel more motivated to undertake this struggle and to participate more vigorously therein, invoking Islamic values as their justification...Our research has tested prevailing concepts of powerlessness and victimization by looking at women’s own strategies of resistance. It suggests that, despite the impediments created by prevailing patriarchal structures, women have achieved a notable degree of success in overcoming these disadvantages, whether through negotiation or by defying hierarchies in the name of Islamic justice...[The result] has been an effective an expanded space for female participation.¹⁰⁵

Holt and Jawad conclude that in movements of resistance throughout the Middle East and North Africa—in Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine as well as in the countries of the major battles of 2011—Islam has played a significant role empowering women to act on their own behalf and reclaim “their perceived rights and entitlements given to them by Islam but withheld from them by generations of Muslim men.”¹⁰⁶ However, women have also achieved self-empowerment through alternative political venues, including movements that were nationalist, leftist, or secular in nature. Ultimately, renegotiating the patriarchal gender structures in the region is the only way to achieve genuine progress for the condition of women in the region: even if the persistent

¹⁰⁴ Holt et al, *Women, Resistance and Islam*, 61.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 176-77.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 181.

sexualization of female activism has created a substantial barrier.¹⁰⁷ Resistance can make women the targets of rhetorical attacks and gender-based violence. This analysis underscores the ways in which gender factors into the questions of revolution and understandings of power. It explains why, historically, women have not benefitted from structural revolutions in the same ways as men. However, the fact remains that women in the Middle East and North Africa are defining a new path for women's activism, resisting their persistent rhetorical victimization in the dominant discourse. "Women are neither 'returning' to a past narrative, nor are they mimicking a Western model of feminism," writes Sullivan, "Instead they struggle to articulate a women's movement in dialectical conflict with each."¹⁰⁸

Revolutionary Outcomes for Women

Though some have lauded the protests of 2011 as the 'Women's Spring', it is critical to evaluate the effects the protests of 2011 have had on the place of women in the Middle East and North African societies. In *Modernizing Women* Valentine Moghadam argues that, in terms of impact on women and questions of gender equity, there are two manifestations of revolutions: the Woman's Emancipation/Egalitarian Model of Revolution (which draws on the Bolshevik model) and the Woman-in-the-Family/Patriarchal Model of Revolution (which draws on the example of the French Revolution).¹⁰⁹ The Woman's Emancipation Model includes revolutions in which "national progress and societal transformation were viewed by the leadership as inextricably bound up with equality and the emancipation of women" and is exemplified by the

¹⁰⁷ Holt et al, *Women, Resistance and Islam*, 67.

¹⁰⁸ Sullivan, "Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern?" 250.

¹⁰⁹ Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Lynne Rienner Publishers: London, 2003): 81-82. & 105.

radical socialist reforms in Turkey in the 1920s and the Saur Revolution in Afghanistan.¹¹⁰

Contrastingly, the Patriarchal Model includes revolutions in which “the leadership regarded cultural identity, integrity, and cohesion as strongly dependent upon the proper behavior and comportment of women, in part as a reaction to colonialist or neocolonialist impositions”.¹¹¹ An example of this type of revolution is the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Moghadam argues that in order to analyze which outcome is most likely it is critical to examine how the “woman question” is framed in the context of the revolution. In the context of the ‘Women’s Spring’, are the power structures legitimizing women’s emancipation as an end of the revolution, or are women simply being mobilized as its means? The structures of the pre-revolutionary states in Egypt and Tunisia expressed different manifestations of patriarchy. The subordination of women was present to at least some degree in all of the societies affected by the protest wave of 2011, and each of these regimes promoted (to some degree) women’s liberation as a primary revolutionary outcome. Some of this subordination was grounded in interpretations of Islamic law, while some was enshrined in laws that dated back to the era of colonialism. In order to best examine a facet of the uprisings’ impacts on the place of women, one can examine the January 2014 constitutions of Egypt and Tunisia.

Egypt has been criticized for the marginalization and harassment of women in the wake of the Lotus Revolution. Mona Eltahawy singles out the prevalence of virginity testing, as well as female genital mutilation, as particular indicators of Egyptian male misogyny. According to Amnesty International’s Annual Report (2013) on Egypt, women continue to be marginalized, both rhetorically and in effect. Only seven women served in the Constituent Assembly, and

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 81.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 82.

women only occupied 12 of the 508 seats in the People's Assembly, a dismal 0.02 percent.¹¹²

The Egyptian Constitution of 2014 took effect on 18 January 2014, after its ratification by referendum,¹¹³ and was lauded by the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights for its groundbreaking protections of women's rights.¹¹⁴ Unlike the 2012 Constitution, which said that women were the "sisters of men",¹¹⁵ the Constitution emphasizes gender equality, upholding equal opportunities and ensuring special care and protection for "female breadwinners, divorced women, and widows".¹¹⁶ In Article 11, the state specifically provides for the representation of women in senior positions and commits to protect women from violence and discrimination.¹¹⁷ The former is stipulated further in Article 180 (which stipulates percentages), and the latter in Article 93 (which agrees to uphold international conventions on women's rights). In practice, since its approval the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights has argued that Article 11 is presently being violated.¹¹⁸ Many view the presence of Islam in Article 2 is problematic and opens the door for further abuses of women's rights and have criticized the power given to the military in the Constitution;¹¹⁹ however, it generally seems to represent significant progress in the realm of recognizing the rights of traditionally marginalized groups in Egypt, such as women, the youth, and the Coptic Christian minority.¹²⁰ The Egyptian Constitution of 2014 will undoubtedly face challenges in the years to come and it is too soon to see if the rhetoric is will

¹¹² *Annual Report on Egypt*, Amnesty International, 2013.

¹¹³ "Egyptians Overwhelmingly Back Constitution: Official Results" *Reuters*, Jan. 18, 2014. The official results were 98.1 percent of voters voted in favor, with 38.6 percent of eligible voters taking part.

¹¹⁴ "Egypt's New Constitution a Victory for Women's Rights to Full Citizenship," *Egyptian Center for Women's Rights*, Dec. 2, 2013.

¹¹⁵ Gregg Carlstrom, "What's In Egypt's Proposed New Constitution?" *Al Jazeera English*, Jan. 14, 2014.

¹¹⁶ Nariman Youssef, "Egypt's Draft Constitution Translated", *Egypt Independent*, Feb. 12, 2012.

¹¹⁷ Mariz Tadros, "Egypt's Constitutional Referendum: The Untold Story", *Open Democracy*, Jan. 17, 2014.

¹¹⁸ "12% Women's Share in the Morsi's Government Violation of the Constitution," *Egyptian Center for Women's Rights*, Mar. 4, 2014.

¹¹⁹ Youssef, "Egypt's Draft Constitution".

¹²⁰ Tadros, "Egypt's Constitutional Referendum".

translate into the improvement of conditions for Egyptian women. However, Egyptian women have been present in demonstrations since the Lotus Revolution, and seem intent on reminding politicians that they too merit participation.

As previously mentioned, Tunisia is often heralded as the example of modern progressivism in terms of gender equality in the Middle East and North Africa.¹²¹ Yet, during the drafting of its post-revolutionary constitution, conflict arose over the issue of female ‘complementarity’ rather than ‘equality’ in Article 28—which was criticized for being ambiguous and leaving a back door open for rights abuses in the future.¹²² When the Tunisian Constitution was adopted on 26 January 2014, the preamble directly guaranteed “equality of rights and duties between all male and female citizens”, a point reiterated in Article 20 which bans discrimination and upholds equal dignity.¹²³ Though this clause has come under scrutiny by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International for limiting protections to citizens and not elaborating on the particular definition of discrimination, it is a far cry from complementarity. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women lauded Article 45, in which the state

commits to protecting women’s achieved rights and seeks to support and develop them. The state guarantees equal opportunities between men and women in the bearing of all the various responsibilities in all fields. The state seeks to achieve equal representation for women and men in elected councils (parity). The state takes the necessary measures to eliminate violence against women.¹²⁴

The Constitution has been lauded as the epitome of consensus between Islamist and secularist political parties, as well as between politicians and NGOs. The Constitution ensures parity in

¹²¹ “Tunisia Gender Equality: National Assembly Approves Constitutional Article Giving Women Equal Rights,” *Huffington Post*, Mar. 09, 2014.

¹²² Larbi Sadiki, “Tunisia: Women’s Rights and the New Constitution,” *Al Jazeera English*, Sep. 21, 2012.

¹²³ “Tunisia’s Draft Constitution: An English Translation,” *Tunisia Live*, Jan. 21, 2014.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

representation, even giving women the right to be presidential candidates.¹²⁵ Regardless, the Constitution has been criticized for being too vague. Furthermore, many women express concerns that “there is a huge gap between the law and what actually happens on the street”.¹²⁶ In order for the gender gap in any society to close, there must be a shift in the way the society conceptualizes gender difference.

The most shocking revelation about the way the Western media portrayed gender in the “Arab Spring” is that it was largely ignored. Women received very little mention in coverage of the protests and the issue of women’s emancipation did not play a critical role in the discourse constructed about the uprisings. However, in spite of Western fears about the rise of Islamists, both the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda-led coalition governments that participated in state building in Egypt and Tunisia respectively expressed a rhetorical commitment to the betterment of women’s conditions. Both constitutions contain important advances in the legal status of women, but perhaps more importantly, there is a symbolic commitment to pursuing gender equity in the future. This commitment is critical, in the eyes of Tétreault, because it legitimates women’s liberation:

Such legitimacy, because it rests upon the perception that women as well as men have paid the price of victory, requires that the achievements of women be integrated with other revolutionary myths, and that women share authority over them. A related set of issues deals with symbolic and objective outcomes.¹²⁷

Ultimately, it is too soon to express with any certainty the outcome for women’s rights in Egypt or Tunisia. Both Egypt and Tunisia possess vibrant civil societies. The situation is particularly optimistic in Tunisia, where in the wake of Ben Ali’s ouster, the provisional government took critical steps to fulfill their rhetorical promise and consolidate women’s rights through the

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Naveena Kottoor, “Tunisia’s Ennahda and Ettakattol Women MPs Celebrate,” *BBC News*, 28. Jan, 2014.

¹²⁷ Tétreault, “Women and Revolution: What Have We Learned?”, 20.

passage of gender parity laws.¹²⁸ In the wake of the protests of 2011 the dominant Western myth of “Arab Women as caged in, silenced and invisible” has been challenged by images of women protesting in the streets of the Middle East and North Africa’s major cities.¹²⁹ Whether they were dressed in ‘Islamic’ or ‘Western’ dress, the solidarity of women’s activism in pursuit of gender equity in the region was and remains prevalent. This fact underscores how women in the Middle East and North Africa are contributing to their own empowerment and challenging the dominant Western discourse that casts them as passive victims of their culture.

¹²⁸ Esraa Abdel Fattah and Sarah J. Robbins, “After the Arab Spring, Mobilizing for Change in Egypt” in *The Unfinished Revolution: Voices from the Global Fight for Women’s Rights*, ed. Minky Worden (Seven Stories Press: New York, 2012), 72.

¹²⁹ Ghannoushi, “Rebellion.”

Conclusion

An analysis of these four case studies underscores a sampling of the ways the Western media deploys rhetoric that influences how its audiences perceive the events of the so-called “Arab Spring”. The themes present in the media provide insight into common Western conceptions of the social and political culture of the Middle East and North Africa. Influenced by pervasive memories of geopolitically salient events such as the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and September 11th, the rhetoric describing the events of the “Arab Spring” would seem to suggest that an ideological front has re-emerged in the wake of the fall of Communism that once again pits ‘Occident’ against ‘Orient’. However, this confrontation is primarily a rhetorical construct: in many ways, it is the West’s discursive effort to manage and maintain control of a region of undisputed geopolitical significance.

When the West—a term which first meant Western Europe and has now come to be synonymous with America and the Washington Consensus—became economically and politically powerful, the way of thinking that emerged shaped the dominant discourse about what it meant to be modern. As Foucault would argue, knowledge about what is “modern” or “backward” cannot be separated from the power that supports it. The view that the cultures of the Middle East and North Africa are somehow inhibiting the emergence of democracy not only embraces the assumption that western ‘progress’, ‘globalization’ and ‘democracy’ is the natural and desirable objective of all societies, but disregards the uneven ways in which modernization has been constructed to suit those nations who are already powerful. The modernization projects of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank caused many of the conditions that led to the uprisings of 2011. The United States supported many of the pre-revolution dictators. American foreign policy towards the events of the “Arab Spring” has been suited to its

own political convenience rather than the pursuit of freedom and human rights: though there was a NATO-sponsored intervention in Libya, there was not one in Syria despite the presence of over two and a half million Syrian refugees. As a result, the West is often perceived as being “hypocritical and frequently aggressive” and its universalist claims about modernity are being rejected in favor of something more indigenous.¹ It should not be shocking that many individuals in the Middle East and North Africa are embracing Islamism as a tool of liberation, pursuing the development of an alternative understanding of what it means to be ‘modern’ in an Islamic context.

The ‘rhetorical moments’ examined in these case studies are discursive mechanisms by which the West attempts to manage events that are relatively out of its control. In *Orientalism*, Said underscores two primary rhetorical trends: the essentialization of the ‘Orient’ and its rhetorical pacification. Thematically, Said argues that there is “an essentialist conception...which expresses itself through a characterized ethnist typology...based on a real specificity, but detached from history, and, consequently, conceived as being intangible, essential”.² The essentialization of the “Arab Spring” experience was present at myriad points throughout the case studies, perhaps most notably during the discussion of the “Arab Spring” nomenclature and the discussion of Islamists. Secondly, Said argues that the subject of the essentialization will be portrayed as “passive, non-participating, endowed with a ‘historical’ subjectivity, above all, non-active, non-autonomous, non-sovereign with regard to itself”.³ Together, these two trends form the primary rhetorical trend that unites each of the four case studies: a discursive tendency to refer to the demonstrations in the region as if they were *happening*, not being *caused*. This

¹ Holt et al, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*, 47.

² Said, *Orientalism*, 97.

³ *Ibid*, 97.

decenters the political actors, who ought be the crux of any analysis. Instead, history, culture, technology and religion were cast as the actors—not the individuals who were acting.

If one lesson is to be derived from the complex and diverse events that comprised the uprisings of 2011, it is that the “Arab World” is a region comprised of diverse actors. The Middle East and North Africa stretches from Morocco to the Arabian Sea, comprising over 21 countries and territories, over one-dozen languages, nearly thirty ethnic groups and myriad sects and religions. Far from being a cultural monolith, the region is both heterogeneous and dynamic. Within each of its sovereign territories are men and women who have been plagued by generations of political subjection: to foreign rulers and colonialism to domestic autocrats. This history has not rendered the region politically impotent. The region has a long history of political activism—from anti-Ottoman protests to the uprisings of 2011—which should be neither shocking to Western observers nor disregarded by them. The invented and reductionist collective identities are part of a knowledge-making process in the field of Middle Eastern politics that has become embedded in the dialogue of Western culture towards Islam and Arabism. However, it is imperative that a rhetorical opposition to this attitude emerges. As the individuals within each society come together to define their post-uprising national identities and negotiate their political, social and economic futures, it is critical that the discourse in the Western media be reflective of their individual agency and collective self-determination.

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