

# Theories of Revolutions and Arab Uprisings: The Lessons from the Middle East

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## Abstract

The recent Arab Uprisings will lead to significant rethinking of critical issues in the region as well as important topics in social theory. Social movements, the role of militaries, the politicization of the youth, and social media networks are among these issues. These rethinking efforts will also have implications for the theories of revolutions. The media as well as some of the actors involved were quick to label these uprisings as the last contemporary wave of revolutions. This article explores whether the use of this label is appropriate. Evaluating the analytical tools that the theories of revolutions offer us, the article puts forward three main suggestions that follow the lessons from the Middle East in the aftermath of these uprisings. The distinction between revolutionary situations and outcomes, between types of revolutionary change and between international and domestic determinants is discussed and suggestions are made to contribute to a new research agenda. The article underlines the need to theorize these uprisings and points out to the benefits of doing so for the new generation of theories of revolutions.

**Keywords:** Arab Uprisings, Revolutions in the Middle East, Theories of Revolutions, Revolutionary Situations, International-Domestic Interaction in Revolutions

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## Devrim Teorileri ve Arap Ayaklanmaları: Ortadoğu'dan Dersler

### Özet

Son dönemdeki Arap Ayaklanmaları hem bölge çalışmalarında hem de sosyal bilim kuramlarındaki önemli başlıkları yeniden tartışmaya açtı. Tartışmaya açılan konulardan bazıları toplumsal hareketler, orduların rolü, gençliğin siyasallaşması ve sosyal medya ağlar oldu. Bu yeniden düşünme çabaları aynı zamanda devrim kuramlarına da etki edecek-

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tir. Medya ve ayaklanmaların aktörlerinden bazıları bu ayaklanmaları en yeni devrimci dalga olarak adlandırmakta çok hızlı davrandılar. Bu makale böyle bir adlandırmanın uygunluğunu incelemektedir. Makale, devrim kuramlarının bize sunduğu analitik araçları da değerlendirerek, bu ayaklanmaların ertesindeki Ortadoğu'nun öğrettiği dersleri dikkate alan üç temel öneride bulunmaktadır. Devrimci durumlar ile sonuçlar arasındaki ayrım, devrimci değişimin farklı çeşitleri arasındaki ayrımlar ve uluslararası belirleyenler ile ülke içindeki belirleyenler arasındaki ilişki tartışılmakta ve bu başlıklarda yeniden araştırma tasarımına katkıda bulunacak öneriler sunulmaktadır. Makale bu ayaklanmaları kuramsallaştırma ihtiyacının altını çizmekte ve böyle bir çabanın yeni nesil devrim kuramlarına sağlayacağı katkılara işaret etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Arap Ayaklanmaları, Ortadoğu'da Devrimler, Devrim Kuramları, Devrimci Durumlar, Devrimlerde İç-Dış Siyaset Etkileşimleri

## نظريات الثورات والانتفاضات العربية: الدروس من الشرق الأوسط

ديريا غوتشير أفدير

### خلاصة:

تقود الانتفاضات العربية الأخيرة إلى إعادة التفكير الجاد بالقضايا الخطيرة في المنطقة إضافة إلى المواضيع الهامة في النظرية الاجتماعية. الحركات الاجتماعية، ودور العسكر، وتسييس الشباب، وشبكات الإعلام الاجتماعي هي من بين هذه القضايا. إن جهود إعادة التفكير ستكون لها دلالات على نظريات الثورات. لقد كانت وسائل الإعلام إضافة إلى اللاعبين المشاركين سريعين لتسمية هذه الانتفاضات بموجة الثورات المعاصرة الأخيرة. ويبحث هذا المقال فيما إذا كانت هذه التسمية ملائمة. ومع تقييم الأدوات التحليلية التي تقدمها لنا نظريات الثورات، يقدم المقال ثلاث اقتراحات جاءت بعد الدروس من الشرق الأوسط ما بعد آثار هذه الانتفاضات. حيث تم دراسة التمييز بين المواقف الثورية والنتائج، وبين أنواع التغيير الثوري وبين المحددات الدولية والمحلية وقدمت الاقتراحات لتساهم في أجندة بحث جديد. ويؤكد المقال على الحاجة لتنظير هذه الانتفاضات والإشارة إلى فوائد ذلك للأجيال الجديدة من نظريات الثورات.

**الكلمات الدالة:** الانتفاضات العربية، الثورات في الشرق الأوسط، نظريات الثورات، المواقف الثورية، التفاعل الدولي والمحلي في الثورات.

## Introduction

The recent Arab Uprisings in the Middle East are at times described as a revolutionary wave similar to 1848 or 1989 waves<sup>1</sup> or the dawn of a new democratic era and they are most commonly labeled by the media as the “Arab Spring”. One does not have to agree with these depictions of events to recognize the fact that these events will lead to a great deal of soul searching among the students of the Middle East and significant rethinking efforts in the study of major issues in the region. This article will explore the repercussions of such a rethinking for the study of revolutions in the Middle East.

Among these major issues, the changing role of mass mobilizations and social movements are coming to the fore mostly because uprisings were to a great extent initiated by movements from below. In a region where rebellions are frequent but mass spread urban resistance is rather rare (success in obtaining immediate demands is even rarer), the features of social movements and the degree of continuity and change between the past mass mobilizations deserve thorough research and fresh conceptualizations.<sup>2</sup> In fact a few new terms have already emerged. Unruly politics as a way to depict the leaderless street movement of Egypt is one among them.<sup>3</sup> There are now rising criti-

- 1 R Springborg, ‘Whither the Arab Spring? 1989 or 1848?’, *The International Spectator*, *Italian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2011, pp. 5-12. Also see M Almond, ‘The Arab Spring: Contemporary Revolutions in Historical Comparison’, *All Azimuth*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2012, pp. 35-54. Actually two Middle Eastern revolutions are considered as part of another revolutionary wave that of the turn of the century. See N Sohrabi, ‘Global Waves, Local Actors: What the Young Turks Knew about Other Revolutions and Why It Mattered’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2002, pp 45-79; and C Kurzman, *Democracy Denied, 1905-1915: Intellectuals and the fate of democracy*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2008).
- 2 An exceptional study in this regard is the following: J Beinin and F Vairel (eds), *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). Although Beining and Vairel’s edition was prepared before the uprisings, it is important in three aspects: firstly, it provides a background to the events of 2011 and 2012, secondly it entails a very critical theoretical introduction on rethinking theories of social movement in the light of Middle East and thirdly it concludes with an Afterword evaluating the uprisings from the angle that is developed throughout the book. On street politics in the Middle East see A Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).
- 3 Unruly Politics is a theme developed by the International Development Studies, UK. For its application to the Middle East, their blog, *Participation, Power and Social Change*, offers several short pieces on the topic: <http://participationpower.wordpress.com/category/unruly-politics-2/> On the transition from the state of unruly politics to the regular electoral politics see M Tadros “From unruly politics to ballot boxes: rethinking the terms of democratic engagement in Egypt”, *Participation, Power and Social Change*. <http://participationpower.wordpress.com/2011/11/24/from-unruly-politics-to-ballot-boxes-rethinking-the-terms-of-democratic-engagement-in-egypt/>.

cisms from the students of the region towards the social movement theory, arguing that it was the theoretical paradigm that really hindered our capacity to foresee and understand the rising protest in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> The core of the argument is that the paradigm rested on theoretical constructs that were not relevant or outdated in the context of Middle East politics.

Another topic that requires rethinking is the changing role of military in the region. Both the Tunisian and Egyptian regime changes depended on the complex role of the military in the uprising. Also the failure of the Bahrain uprisings rested on the role of the troops sent from Saudi Arabia. So, it is fair to say that the role of the military will be revisited frequently in the coming months.<sup>5</sup> It is of course no surprise for the students of revolutions as well as for the students of the Middle East that the military has a key role to play in mass mobilization periods. What is interesting in the recent uprising is the variety that one can discern in the roles played by Middle Eastern armies during the uprisings. As argued by Sayigh, “whether armies support peaceful transition, revert to repression, or fragment will be key to their ability to maintain or develop professional, corporate identities.”<sup>6</sup> The role the militaries play in these periods of upheaval is also fundamentally linked to a crucial milestone in upheavals, the absence or presence of elite defections and loss of unity among the elite. The issue of military involvement seems without a doubt a productive venue, similar to mass mobilizations that can create constructive criticism for the theoretical paradigm on social movements as well as on revolutions. One can add the role of the youth and use of social media networks as critical issues that have to be revisited.

The issue of foreign intervention/meddling is also a chief topic of discussion in the media and in academia. The issue is of course not new to the region. One only needs to recall the Eastern Question of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to see how the study of regional politics is intertwined with the

4 M Tadros, ‘Arab uprisings: why no one saw them coming’, *The Guardian* 5 February 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/05/arab-uprisings-egypt-tunisia-yemen>

5 For a recent and excellent discussion of the topic see Yezid Sayigh (ed.) “Roundtable: Rethinking the Study of the Middle East Militaries,” *International Journal Of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 43, 2011, pp. 391-407.

6 *ibid*, p. 391.

study of great power intervention.<sup>7</sup> As Halliday had argued “a recognition of the role of external powers, accurately and proportionately analysed, can provide the basis for a more measured account of the modern international relations of the region.”<sup>8</sup> This is ever more urgent today when both the countries where the rulers were toppled down and the countries that continue to undergo the period of upheaval are under intense international as well as regional pressure.

However as the last two decades in international relations theory and the rise of historical sociology (HS) in IR has shown<sup>9</sup>, the ‘international’ cannot be confined to the geopolitics only and does not only exist at the level between states but also between peoples. Indeed the diffusion of upheavals from Tunisia towards the rest of the region is a testament that foreign dimension in revolutions is not to be limited to the activities of diplomats and intelligence agencies. This regional diffusion may bring an input to both social movements theory which already has a long standing discussion on diffusion and scale shifts in social movements<sup>10</sup> and to the theories of revolutions, especially to the discussion of whether revolutions are domestic events and where we should be looking for their causes. How to exactly conceptualize this issue of foreign intervention and international-domestic interaction at times of upheaval remains a challenge for the experts of the Middle East as well as the students of social movements and revolutions.

It is clear from this short introduction that the recent uprisings in the Middle East offer challenges and opportunities to those who want to

7 M. S. Anderson, *Doğu Sorunu*, İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2001.

8 F Halliday, “The Middle East and Conceptions of ‘International Society’” in *International Society and the Middle East: English school theory at the regional level*, (eds.) B Buzan and A Gonzalez-Pelaez (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 7

9 Halliday, *Rethinking international relations* (London: Macmillan, 1994); J Rosenberg, *The empire of civil society* (London: Verso, 1994); B Buzan and R Little, *International systems in world history: remaking the study of international relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); S Hobden and J M. Hobson ed., *Historical sociology of international relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); B Teschke, *The myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso, 2003); G Lawson, *Negotiated revolutions: the Czech Republic, South Africa and Chile* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); G Lawson and R Shilliam eds. “Sociology and International Relations: Legacies and Prospects” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 23, 2010, pp. 69-86; R Dannreuther and J Kennedy, “Historical Sociology in Sociology: British Decline and US Hegemony with Lessons for International Relations,” *International Politics*, Vol. 44, 2007, pp. 369–389.

10 S Tarrow and D McAdam ‘Scale Shift in Transnational Contention’, in *Transnational Protest and Global Activism: People, Passions, and Power*, eds. D. della Porta and S. Tarrow (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, INC, 2005).

revisit established theories of social movement and revolution. As Valbjørn has argued in the context of post-democratization studies, in the past, “there has been a too narrow focus on the regime level” which led to the illusion that authoritarian regimes were “stable”.<sup>11</sup> This makes the need for revisiting our theoretical paradigms that inform our ‘focus’ and our selection of levels of analysis all the more urgent. We must also acknowledge that the persistence of Middle Eastern exceptionalism has also played a role in this narrow focus, along with the fact that the regional issues remain under-theorized. Going back to issues of social movements and revolutions, neither the past revolutions and rebellions in the Middle East nor the contemporary social movements receive the theoretical treatment that is generally reserved for European and to some extent Latin American cases (with the exception of Iranian Revolution 1979). If we had a broader understanding of contentious politics then we might have noticed the “re-emergence of new, old and transformed collective actors from all kinds of strands” in 2011<sup>12</sup> and perhaps understand the role these actors will play in the post-uprising period in the region.

The two Iranian revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the political revolutions in Turkey, previous revolts and rebellions in Palestine and Syria, and the most recent strikes, labor activities in Egypt are all very well known. However these could not prevent the resilience of Middle Eastern exceptionalism, the idea that it is somehow different from the rest of the world when in fact it shared the modern revolts and revolutions with the rest of the global history. Perhaps the reason of its resilience lies not in the lack of evidence countering it, but in the methods of our study of the evidence. If methodological nationalism<sup>13</sup> that seems to be ever pertinent in the study of the region can be transcended, that would be a better defense against Middle Eastern exceptionalism. To transcend methodological nationalism would be to revisit our levels of analysis as well as tools of analysis in approaching the issue of change in the Middle East. What Teti argues for the framework of democratization studies is perfectly valid in the case of studies of revolution: “If the ontological tools and epistemological foundations of the existing ana-

11 M Valbjørn, “Upgrading Post-Democratization Studies: Examining a Repoliticized Arab World in a Transition to Somewhere”, *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2012, p. 30

12 Ibid.

13 For a recent overview of methodological nationalism see D Chernilo, ‘Methodological nationalism and the domestic analogy: classical resources for their critique’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2010, pp 87-106.

lytical toolbox are left unexamined, it is difficult to see how one could detect – much less address – its flaws, or inquire the process which lead to existing tools being applied so selectively in the past.”<sup>14</sup>

This article proposes to revisit some of the key discussion in theories of revolution to see how these theoretical constructs fair in the face of the recent uprisings. We will go over three key issues: the distinction between revolutionary situation and outcomes; the difference between political and social revolutions; and the international dimension in revolutions. Keeping in mind that “the greatest test of any work is not the issues it resolves, but the issues where it indicates further research is possible and needed, in other words a research agenda,”<sup>15</sup> the article will end on suggestions for a future research agenda on studying revolution in the Middle East.

### Revolutionary Situations

In the many waves of theories of revolutions<sup>16</sup> a key axis of discussion is whether revolutions are rare events that cannot be theorized in the manner of other more frequent political phenomena. This is also linked to the issue of types of revolutions. Hobsbawm argues that “social science definitions (...) tend to assume the existence of a universal class of revolutions (or a single ideal type of revolution).”<sup>17</sup> The definitions matter because it is by these measures the Middle Eastern history is judged in terms of its record of and potential for revolutions.

This is of course also a question of what is unique to revolutions that other forms of political and social change do not possess. Violence that accompanies the change, the rapidness, the intensity or depth of change are all among the usual answers. The classic definition of ‘social revolutions’ to which the classic revolutions of France, Russia and China are accepted to belong, remains that given by Skocpol: “Social revolutions are rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and

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14 A Teti, “Beyond Lies the Wub: The Challenges of Democratization”, *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2012, p. 12

15 F Halliday, “The great anomaly,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 27, 2001, p. 698.

16 J A Goldstone, “Theories of Revolution: The Third Generation”, *World Politics*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 1980, pp. 425-453 and J Foran, “Theories of Revolution Revisited: Toward a Fourth Generation?”, *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1993, pp. 1-20

17 E Hobsbawm, ‘On Revolution’, in *Revolution in History*, eds. R. Porter and M. Teich, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 8

class structures; and they are accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below.”<sup>18</sup>

Another set of questions in theoretical debate involve who the actors of this radical change are and whether that matters in our characterization of events as ‘revolutions’. Indeed this part of the theoretical discussion is the only part that really took its inspiration from the region, specifically from Turkey 1923 and Egypt 1952 (along with Peru and Japan). Ellen Kay Trimberger argued that there can be two types of revolutions depending on who the actors are and how they achieve their goals. She argued that deep and radical change does not have to come *from below* nor does it have to be violent. There could be *revolutions from above* carried out by actors belonging to the elite rather than the masses and Turkey and Egypt fell in this category. Overall she declared that “there can be no general theory of revolution (or of social change) applicable to all societies at all times.”<sup>19</sup>

Charles Tilly published *From Mobilization to Revolution*<sup>20</sup> in the same year, that also rested on the assumption that there cannot be a general theory of revolution applicable to all different stages of a revolution, the long-term causes, the immediate causes, revolutionary process, short and long-term outcomes. What is most important for our purposes is firstly his distinction between situation and outcome. Revolutionary situations are marked by *multiple sovereignty* when the political authority is seriously challenged by contenders backed by a significant portion of the people and it seems that the government cannot easily suppress the contenders. Moreover, “extreme revolutionary situations do not necessarily produce revolutionary outcomes.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed Middle East history is not devoid of revolutionary situations but does not have the corresponding number of revolutionary outcomes. The recent uprisings are perfect examples of this phenomenon. Certainly in January and February 2011 life came to a halt in Tunisia and in Egypt, business as usual was simply not possible and the people reigned sovereign in the urban spaces they occupied and the overall sovereignty of the

18 T Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: a comparative analysis of France, Russia and China*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 4.

19 E K Trimberger, *Revolution from above: military bureaucrats and development in Japan, Turkey, Egypt, and Peru*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1978), p. 1.

20 C Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), p 191

21 *ibid.*, p. 199.



state was seriously challenged. When seen from the lens of situation/outcome distinction, these periods are indeed revolutionary situations.

Trimberger's intervention against a general theory of revolutions and Tilly's insistence on the distinction between revolutionary situations and outcomes were needed criticisms of the theories of revolutions at the time. Had these insights been taken on by the students of political change in the Middle East, what was deemed as stagnation in the region may well have been seen in another light. Better equipped by a critical grasp of theories of revolutionary process, we can understand how changes come about and how revolutionary situations with different outcomes have an impact on the trajectories of the country where they occur and the whole region when relevant. In the case of Egypt, Beinun underlines that 2011 was not all that unprecedented, that Egypt in 2000s experienced waves of strikes and protests,<sup>22</sup> Bush argues that there was a history of resistance to neoliberal transformation in rural areas.<sup>23</sup> If we were looking for clues in changing patterns of mobilization and organization, instead of looking at the ideal democratization model or the ideal type revolutionary outcome, perhaps the recent uprisings would not be such a surprise. The same holds for the outcome that many in Egypt for example find not revolutionary at all.<sup>24</sup> But simply judging from the outcome and declaring the whole process as not revolutionary is certainly not just to the experiences of millions in urban squares in the region. Despite the strong presence of military in Egyptian political life and the authoritarianism of the emerging regime, once we acknowledge the 18 days that led to the ousting of Mubarak as a revolutionary situation we can start to ask the other set of questions: why did they have this particular outcome and how will these affect the course of Egypt and the region.

So, *revolution* as one term to describe all the social phenomena that occurred before, during and after a rebellion that is later deemed as a failed or successful revolution should not be a part of our analytical

22 J Beinun, 'A Workers' Social Movement on the Margin of the Global Neoliberal Order, Egypt 2004-2009', in *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation*.

23 R Bush, "Coalitions for Dispossession and Networks of Resistance? Land, Politics and Agrarian Reform in Egypt", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2011, pp. 391-405.

24 Indeed at the time of the writing of this article large segments of Egyptians had taken the Tahrir Square again in protest of the new President, whom they nicknamed as Pharaoh and accuse of appropriating the revolution. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/59329/Egypt/Politics-/Packed-Tahrir-Square-defiant-as-deadlock-prevails-.aspx>

toolbox while analyzing the recent uprisings in the region. Such an all-encompassing concept is not explanatory at all but rather blinding to the nuanced questions that the cases demand. On the other hand, it is of course part of a normative toolbox whereby the media and the external and domestic actors claim legitimacy. The word revolution, despite the conservative times we live in, still carries out in itself a promise of just and better times, and an almost a priori legitimacy as it is supposed to be the culmination of the will of the 'people'. However, the distinction between revolutions and revolutionary situations that may or may not lead to a revolution help us discern the normative aspects of the depictions of radical change in the region.

Insisting on the distinction between revolutionary situation and outcome also permits comparisons within the history of the region between cases of revolutionary situations that did result in social revolutions, political revolutions or those that failed. These comparisons can be in a single domestic setting, such as comparing Egyptian revolutionary situations throughout the last two centuries including 18 days of revolt in 2011. The comparisons can also be made across the region such as the difference between Egypt 2011 and Iran 1979. These small-N comparisons might ensure that the region inspires theory generation and development just as it is, itself, theoretically treated.

The theories of revolution for the most part focus on successful and 'great' revolutions, in the words of Skocpol 'social revolutions' that lead to large-scale social transformation of the society: among all the cases of Middle East revolts and revolutions only the Iranian revolution of 1979 qualifies as social revolution.<sup>25</sup> In focusing on revolutionary situations, we also open up the possibility of drawing on other literatures on mobilization. For example, following Tarrow and McAdam we can explore why the scale shift did not occur in the protests in Iran 2009 from the local to the national and why it occurred in Egypt two years later. A further benefit of examining the rise of revolutionary situations is the possibilities it opens up for within-case comparisons, which can be crucial in developing new frameworks. A case in point is again Egypt in the past decade, specifically why the protests in 2003 or 2008 were not diffused throughout the nation to lead to a revolutionary

25 Behdad and Nomani in an unprecedented study explain the 'social' changes after the Iranian revolution spanning over 30 years. They describe in detail the shifting class compositions. B Sohrab and F Nomani. "What a Revolution! Thirty Years of Social Class Reshuffling in Iran", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 29, 2009, pp. 84-104.

situation and why that was the case in 2011. Hence, Tilly's elaboration gives us the means to explain failure as well as success and to compare whenever possible.

The added advantage of studying revolutionary situations is the welcome change to the explanandum in our research. If the research focuses on the period before the 2011 uprisings revolution and not just the increasingly authoritarian and military-dominated regime in the Egypt during the last decades of the 20th century, there is the chance to learn more about the Egyptian opposition, the liberals, the socialists, the workers and the youth, who were a constitutive part of the revolutionary situation but did not end up being a constitutive part of the outcome. In Tunisia and in Egypt it was not the secular opposition but the Islamist factions that dominated post-revolutionary elections and governments. Once the revolutionary situation is analyzed on its own right, without the bias of the outcome, then we have a better chance in answering the why questions: why was the secular opposition the lead in the multi-class alliance against the authoritarian regime, when did they exactly lose their prominence, and so on.

A crucial aspect of focusing on revolutionary situations is that it allows our lens to be processual rather than searching for fixed points in time that would miraculously explain the rise and fall of revolutionary agency. It also does not dwell much on the structural causes of the revolution, which in the case of the Middle East generally involve the manner in which the country was integrated to the capitalist system and the manner in which it was kept in the system (for example structural adjustment policies), the structure of the state, the role it has in international political system and so on. It also does not spend much time on what some theories of revolution focus such as the gap between economic development and people's expectations, demographic changes and so on. In the words of Tilly, "the basic theory predicts action from interests. Here instead we are assuming interests and dealing with the political processes which lead from organized and conflicting interests to revolution."<sup>26</sup> So, the focus is on the contenders, how they emerge, their networks, their repertoires of action, their interactions. In that sense, it is compatible with the needs of the researcher looking into the recent uprisings. The puzzle here was not to understand the interests of the actors in rebelling, but the puzzle lies in the timing and

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26 Tilly, p. 200.

success of mass mobilization. Also, as Beinin and Vairel emphasize the puzzle lies in understanding the courage “in the absence of ‘opening opportunities.’”<sup>27</sup> Distinguishing between the process and outcome allows the researcher the analytical room to make the maneuver to the stories of the peoples involved.

The ‘social media’ and ‘social media networks’ were among the highlights of 2011 uprisings and Youtube wars continue during what evolved into a full blown civil war in Syria. The 2011 uprisings demonstrated the potentials and the limitations of information and communications technologies (ICT). The potentials were most visible in the national and regional diffusion of protests especially since in the region that diffusion, as mentioned earlier, did not rely on opening up of new opportunities. They were the most limited after the protests already reached a certain maturity and resilience. They were probably ineffective in determining the depth and nature of outcome. Zivkovic and Hogan remind us that building the whole framework of revolution and resistance on ICT’s and network theory can lead us to forget that there are still not so virtual ‘palaces to seize’ and squares to occupy.<sup>28</sup> They were proven right when thugs entered Tahrir Square and when Saudi troops entered Bahrain. Indeed the 2011 uprisings force us to rethink ICTs in a new light and as such they have the potential to contribute to theories of revolutions. The use of ICTs seems to be most relevant in the context of repertoire of action of the revolutionary agency but fundamentally they seem on par with the use of telegraph in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were a fundamental part of the revolutionary process but they were neither the reason why men rebelled nor the explanation of why they failed or succeeded in their demands. The recent uprisings have shown that the informal networks such as the legally non-existent but in reality powerful solidarity networks in small or large factories, in student communities and in local neighborhoods of big cities may leave a much deeper mark on the outcome than the ICTs. In fact the

27 Beinin and Vairel, “Introduction: the Middle East and North Africa”, in *Social Movements*.

28 A Zivkovic and J Hogan, ‘Virtual Revolution? Information communication technologies, networks, and social transformation,’ in J. Foran, D. Lane, and A. Zivkovic (eds), *Revolution in the Making of the Modern World: Social identities, globalization, and modernity*, (London: Routledge, 2008). This article provides a criticism of Castells and Hardt and Negri. For an article on the Arab Uprisings and ICTs written from the opposite point of view see I Allagui and J Kuebler, “The Arab Spring and the Role of ICTs: Editorial Introduction”, *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 5, 2011, Feature 1435–1442. For an excellent summary of the debate from a multi-disciplinary perspective incorporating the Internet studies, see F Comunello and G Anzera, “Will the revolution be tweeted? A conceptual framework for understanding the social media and the Arab Spring,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 2012, pp. 453–470

'street politics' will have more prominence in the future debates as well as in Arab political imagination<sup>29</sup> than the 'Facebook revolution' and rightly so.

Lastly, revolutionary situations are moments when domestic international interaction can be most clearly seen as it is crystallized in the emergence and development of revolutionary agents, in the policies of the *ancien regime*, in the grander scheme of politics that surrounds the state and the opposition alike and finally in the way this politics is reorganized. Analyzing them on their own, gives us the empirical material to look into this constitutive interaction as it unfolds. The processual approach gives us the chance to shy away from crude generalizations that would diminish either the role of domestic agency or ignore the role of international factors.<sup>30</sup> We will return to this in the section on the international dimensions of revolutionary situations.

### Political Revolution versus Social Revolution

Another fundamental distinction can be made by comparing the outcomes of revolutions. Although the 'great revolutions' are famously described as social revolutions that resulted in fundamental social change in the class relations as well as in the regime type, Middle East as a region has experienced more political revolutions than social revolutions. The two revolutions that opened the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the region, the Iranian and Ottoman constitutional revolutions have been about change in political regime rather than the class relations. The Young Turks in 1908 did not create a social revolution but more of a political revolution that is they succeeded in creating a new political regime, with new institutions, new values, new ways of organizing political will and of mobilizing the masses, and new ways of controlling the opposition. Indeed, they proved to be able to be as oppressive as the Sultan they deposed, but they conducted these measures through temporary laws. Despite their authoritarianism they did not disregard the parliament and hence rendered the path of parliamentary regime as the point

29 For the changing Arab political imagination see M N Affaya, "The 'Arab Spring': breaking the chains of authoritarianism and postponed democracy", *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2011, pp. 463-48.

30 See Goldstone's fairly recent work where he identifies 12 stages in a revolutionary process thereby contributing to a theory of revolutionary process rather than revolution per se: J Goldstone, "Rethinking Revolutions: Integrating Origins, Processes, and Outcomes", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2009, pp. 18-32.

of no return. Indeed theirs was not the revolution that changed the empire to a nation-state but still they changed the politics of the empire in a fundamental way. Here, we can refer to Skocpol's distinction: "Political revolutions transform state structures but not social structures, and they are not necessarily accomplished through class conflict."<sup>31</sup>

Following from earlier section, the different stages of revolutionary situation/process seem to be influential as to where the major changes will occur, almost as much as the structural and contingent causes. In other words, process plays a role in the outcome. As Goldstone makes clear the elite composition and subsequent behavior at times of crisis is crucial in determining what will really change in the aftermath of the crisis. This is indeed the Egyptian experience of 2011 and 2012. There is nothing inherent in the Egyptian society, nothing immutable that leads only to rapid political and not to rapid social change. Rather it is the unfolding of events in the revolutionary process that has a direct impact on the amount of change and where the transition is leading to. Goldstone divides the contemporary revolutions into two types which roughly correspond to the political versus social distinction but goes beyond that: the color revolutions and the radicalizing revolutions. Color revolutions occur in industrialized societies with relatively moderate economic inequality, are based on a broad alliance and result in changes of the ruling elite and regime type but not radical social change. Radical revolutions occur in societies with great gaps between classes and tend to have violence in their process, including civil or international wars that radicalize the actors further and result in authoritarian regimes.<sup>32</sup>

The Arab uprisings seem to have a lot to contribute to such typologies of revolutions with their causes, processes and outcomes cross-cutting several distinctions at once. Egypt was a country with high levels of social and economic equalities. In Tunisia one of the crucial issues was the gap between the north and south regions of the country. There were radical actors present in the Islamist and in the secular camp. There was a great deal of radicalizing violence shown by the coercive forces of the state, most notably the police (also hired thugs in the case of Egypt). Yet they did not result in social revolutions. Accordingly, one

31 T Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: a comparative analysis of France, Russia and China*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 4.

32 Goldstone, "Rethinking Revolution", p. 31.

needs to revisit not the causes but the process with intervening variables to understand the outcome.

In the case of Tunisia and Egypt these intervening variables were the behavior of the ruling elites, their degree of defection, the international dimensions and last but not least the will and resistance shown by the people of these countries. Although they resisted the police they did not radicalize the situation any further that it already was radicalized by police and thugs. The army and the international pressures urged towards reconciliation protecting the state rather than the regime. The United States in the case of Egypt stood behind the Egyptian army rather than Mubarak. Finally, the dynamics between the contenders was very influential in the trajectory of the revolutionary situation. In Tunisia El Nahda and in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood acted as power brokers amidst all the other revolutionary colors, the capital, the army and the foreign powers. Also “the weakness of the organizational capacity of Egypt’s revolutionary camp has contributed to the (still shaky) triumph of the country’s passive revolutionaries, as evidenced by the Muslim Brotherhood’s provisional success in the presidential election, thereby raising serious doubts about the future of the January 25 Revolution.”<sup>33</sup> So, what some have called a coup<sup>34</sup> rather than a revolution and what others call a failed revolution and the start of a passive revolution<sup>35</sup> was not so much the result of Egyptian exceptionalism and tendency towards military rule but a reflection of the Egyptian political dynamics in conjunction with the world-historical context in which the revolutionary situation occurred.

The Tunisian and Egyptian cases stress the importance of developing a theory of revolutionary process to understand the emergence of the actors but also to understand the outcome, the failure or success, the political and/or social change. They also highlight the gaps in theories of revolutionary process (situations/conjunctures). If we look

33 C Tuğal, “Egypt’s Emergent Passive Revolution” *Jadalliya*, June 20 2012, <http://www.jadalliyya.com/pages/index/6095/egypts-emergent-passive-revolution>

34 M Tadros calls the revolutionary outcome as a camouflaged coup referring to the leading role of the military in the way Mubarak was ousted and in the following power struggles. Tadros, “Fascism: the ugly face of unruly politics”, *Participation, Power and Social Change*, 23/11/2012, <http://participationpower.wordpress.com/tag/mariz-tadros/>

35 Tuğal. On the failure of the revolutionary camps Tuğal argues that it is the absence of a leader and corresponding structure that leads to failure: “It is perhaps possible to overthrow a dictator even in the absence of leaders, experience and program. But building institutions, and formulating and executing policies and platforms are impossible without leaders to shoulder these burdens.”

at the revolutionary process to understand the outcomes then some essential parts of the process such as the 'international' seem under-theorized. Even in one of the most recent articles of the literature, it is still reduced to international war.<sup>36</sup> This article will highlight this and put forward some suggestions in the next section.

This discussion is a testament to the fact to understand the revolutionary outcome one cannot start and end with the elite structures. The 'street', the 'informal networks', the solidarities and enmities in the revolutionary coalition and between the coalition and other forces must not be taken for granted but researched and explained. The current composition of Tunisian and Egyptian politics or the fact that Syria's situation is far from being resolved cannot be explained by elite structure alone. That would be making the same mistake once again, focusing too narrowly on the regime. However, even with the inclusion of an analysis of the repertoires, solidarities, resources and capabilities of the opposition, even with the inclusion of their threat perceptions, the recent uprisings have clearly demonstrated that a crucial part of the analysis is missing: the international dimension.

### **International-Domestic Interaction**

One of the key aspects of the uprisings that will provoke discussion in the students of social movements and revolutions as well as the students of the Middle East is the role the 'international' played in the causes, process and outcomes of various upheavals across the region. Before we go into the discussion of the international dimension of 2011, we should be careful not to depict it as a new phenomenon or as unique to the region. Revolutions, as Halliday insisted, are international events and the Middle East revolutions and revolutionary situations are no exception. The two revolutions that opened the century in the region, the Iranian and Ottoman constitutional revolutions were directly linked to the international events, inspired by regionally and internationally circulating ideologies, intervened to by foreign powers and watched carefully by the international public opinion. As such they demonstrate the need to be treated not as a domestic events part of a domestically shaped 'modernization' process but as international events.

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36 Goldstone, "Rethinking Revolutions".



For example, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 when located in the national history of its aftermath emerges as a failed moment of modernization insignificant almost in the face of the successful Kemalist revolution except perhaps of its role in the entrance of the Ottoman Empire to World War I. However, when located in its international setting the Revolution emerges as a key moment in the formation of not only modern Turkish Republic but also of modern Middle East. Located in the intersection of world events including the Great Power politics over the Eastern Question, Russo-Japanese War, Russian and Iranian Constitutional Revolutions and regional issues, most importantly the Balkans, the causes as well as consequences seem international in nature and without depriving the revolutionaries of their agential powers (as it is usually the case when international factors are taken out of their context and seen as omnipotent).<sup>37</sup> When seen in this light, the modernization of the Middle East itself becomes related to Russia, to Japan, to European politics. In the spirit of path dependency, the international emerges a common factor that is present but varies in each story.

There are still such important turning points in the history of the Middle East that are part and parcel of international history and the politics of the twentieth century but which have not yet been studied within their 'world-historical context'.<sup>38</sup> The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 is only one example among many. In addition to the potentials it provides for single case studies within the Middle East studies, this opening up of new and productive research questions such as tying the knots between the formation and development of Middle East and world history is further evidence for the potential that this specific focus on international carries.

It is impossible to assess the international dimension of recent uprisings in the region here in detail. Instead as with the previous two sections, we will assess how the existing approaches in this regard fair in the face of the Middle Eastern upheavals. As a quick look at the revo-

37 For a comparative analysis of Iranian, Russian and Ottoman Constitutional Revolutions see Nader Sohrabi, "Historicizing Revolutions: Constitutional Revolutions in the Ottoman Empire, Iran and Russia, 1905-1908", *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol.100, 1995, pp. 1383-1447.

38 One of the few exceptions is Maryam Panah's study on Iranian politics which includes the causes and consequences of the Iranian Revolution (1979) as well as the post-revolutionary politics. Panah successfully locates Iranian politics in international politics as well as in the uneven global economy and rewrites a well known narrative afresh from this angle. *The Islamic Republic and the World: Global Dimensions of the Iranian Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

lutionary situation and outcome showed, we need a stronger theory of revolutionary process. A quick look at the international shows that in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we need to have a more full-fledged approach to the 'international' that encompasses geopolitics but goes beyond that and incorporates the interaction at multiple levels. Such a new approach also has to have a more critical tone and a deep understanding of century old imperialist mechanisms at play in regions such as Middle East, of how they evolve and finally how they crystallize in moments of radical change. Historical Sociology in International Relations as mentioned above has the potential to produce such a theory of the international. However, as with many other theoretical frameworks it remains to be seen what HS in IR can accomplish when rethought in the context of the Middle East. That would be a critical test because: "One can indeed ask of any theory of international relations what it can contribute to the study of a region: in this case of the Middle East, if it cannot help to explain the region, it cannot fly as an IR theory of general scope."<sup>39</sup>

The basic premise of HS in general and HS in IR in particular is that no realm of social life is external to another. This means dispensing with the binaries of 'international-domestic' politics, 'inside-outside' distinctions and reaching a holistic account of social change.<sup>40</sup> This focus on a holistic account of social change should hold for most of the topics that are studied in the field of Middle East. However the prevalent tendency is to start by stating the importance of the international setting for the particular case at hand yet this setting is not really incorporated to the actual unfolding of the story. Stories are usually narrated within the borders of a nation-state. Many accounts of social change in Middle Eastern countries lack the substantial treatment of even their immediate international setting.

The obvious problem in assessing the immediate international setting of the Arab uprisings was a problem of neglecting one or the other side of a bifurcation that HS in IR argues to be redundant in the first place. Namely either the domestic aspect of the events was exaggerated to the point where it seemed everything emerged in a vacuum,

39 Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 22.

40 For a detailed overview of the HS tradition see *Handbook of Historical Sociology*, ed. Gerard Delanty and Engin F. Isin (London: Sage, 2003). Also see Dennis Smith, *The Rise of Historical Sociology*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991) and Theda Skocpol (ed.), *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

not connected to the rest of the globe, the global economic crisis, the failing paradigm of neoliberalism and so on or the external element was exaggerated to the point where the domestic agency was rendered meaningless and it was all a plot of foreign powers. Middle Eastern studies is no stranger to both exaggerations and that is all the more reason that to take the lesson of Arab uprisings to heart: treating the international with the complexity that it actually possesses on the ground. To achieve that complexity this article argues that the mutually exclusive poles of international and domestic should be dispensed with and instead we should see that the international factors, whether structural, ideological or geopolitical, are not posited as merely 'constraining' or 'enabling' the domestic agency but as being 'constitutive' of the agency. The opposite is also true, the domestic agency is capable of constituting the international setting and is not simply pre-determined by it. Indeed at moments such as February 2011 it becomes crystal clear that domestic social change is also an intervention to international politics.<sup>41</sup>

The causes of the revolutionary situation in Egypt are a perfect example of this intertwined nature of the international and domestic politics. Among the most common causes listed in the general literature the weight of international and domestic factors are quite balanced. Moreover they are very much interrelated. For example, the seemingly domestic factors such as the long history of labor movement in Egypt<sup>42</sup> are very much intertwined with the global and regional adaptations of neoliberalism. "As a result of the neoliberal structural transformation of the region, the struggles of workers and of unemployed or underemployed professionals – the "lumpen intelligentsia" – are particularly salient."<sup>43</sup> Indeed the rise of workers as part of the revolutionary agency is constituted by neoliberal decade that cuts across the region and the globe. So is the rise of parts of the Egyptian elite as crony capitalists. A similar process of neoliberalization had started in Syria<sup>44</sup>, although

41 And indeed, "HS examines processes as evolving over time, identifying those deeper structural factors that both limit, and also potentially empower, the actions of agents." Dannreuther and Kennedy, p. 376.

42 On the importance of previous labor movement for the 2011 uprisings in Egypt see Beinin, "A Workers' Social Movement"

43 Beinin and Vairel, pp. 20-21.

44 On the political economy of authoritarianism in Syria see B Haddad, "Syria, the Arab uprisings, and the political economy of authoritarian resilience", *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2012, pp. 113 – 130.

there the intervening international variable to the process turned out to be not just of economic but also of political and later of even military kind.

One of these political variables that intervened to the Syrian political scene was what is famously called as the demonstration effect: “What tilted the calculus of individuals and groups in Syria in terms of going to the streets is the feeling that, NOW, after Tunisia and Egypt, they can actually do something about it.”<sup>45</sup> The same demonstration effect was at work after Tunisia in Egypt as well. However, one should remember that demonstration effects are not limited to ‘wave-like’ periods. When Egyptians protested in Cairo over the Palestinian intifada or US actions in Iraq, which then spread to the rest of the region, this was also an instance of demonstration effect. This just shows that international structural factors, such as neoliberal nature of global economy or international contingent factors such as solidarities towards and inspirations from other peoples is ever present in the domestic scene and their mere presence does not explain the timing of the uprisings. Indeed when looked only from the international angle, there would be no sound way to explain the Tunisian uprisings. As such the international cannot be taken on its own as an *explanans*.

Yet international is part and parcel of the causes of revolutions. In the introduction we mentioned the crucial role played by the militaries of the region during the Arab uprisings. It is hard not to notice the internationally constituted nature of Egyptian army. Starting from the amount of aid it receives, to its importance due to Israel-Palestine conflict, Egyptian army is an international construct as much as it is a national construct. Even the 1952 coup when the roots of the militarized regime in Egypt were laid was a result of a very specific international-domestic interaction. So, one of the important actors of the Egyptian political scene is an international actor as well.

This also has important implications for the unfolding of the revolutionary situation. What really explains the political change in parts of the ruling elite and the limited nature of social changes in Egypt after February 2011 is the role of the army, its linkages to Middle Eastern regional security and to the United States. Indeed, Robert L. Tignor lists the ‘the relations with the United States and Israel’, alongside with

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid*, 121.

the role of religion as one of the issues that has divided the opposition across the region.<sup>46</sup> However the role of the US was not simply an issue of perception but also outright intervention. US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated the following on 8 February, 2011: "I think that the Egyptian military has conducted itself in an exemplary fashion during this entire episode. And they have acted with great restraint. And -- and, frankly, they have done everything that -- that we have indicated we would hope that they would do."<sup>47</sup> So not only the opposition or the old guard but also the army that is supposedly positioned in between is constituted by the international factors. The Saudi intervention to Bahrain is such an obvious external intervention that hardly requires further explanation beyond the point that the external interventions may occur at various levels. Their absence at one level should not cross them out altogether from our analyses.

Despite these obvious crystallizations of the international-domestic interaction at revolutionary situations, the theories of revolutions lack a complex conceptualization of the international, especially during the revolutionary situation. In the structural accounts the international is reduced to 'war and economic pressures'. In processual accounts such as Goldstone's it is again understood as the absence or presence of war as a radicalizing factor. This article suggests without acknowledging the multi-layered, asymmetrical yet still mutual aspect of international-domestic interaction, the revolutionary situations, including the most recent ones, cannot be explained. The trap of methodological nationalism would still be there to fall into. Perhaps the crucial lesson of 2011 and 2012, especially with the way the Syrian situation is unfolding, was to show the importance of regional dynamics within these international-domestic interactions. Why Syrian situation militarized the way it did and how it differs from the other cases cannot be explained solely by Syrian domestic factors. One has to resort to various kinds of interactions between regional powers and Syrian opposition and the foreign powers. So, in causes and in process, the international has to be part of theoretical and empirical endeavors of understanding failed or successful revolutions.

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46 R L Tignor, "Can a New Generation Bring About Regime Change?", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 43, 2011, p. 384.

47 PBS Newshour, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/world/jan-june11/egypt2\\_02-08.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/world/jan-june11/egypt2_02-08.html) accessed last on 01 May 2012.

## Conclusion

From the discussion above the lessons of these uprisings for the student of theories of revolution seem as follows. Firstly, given the variety of outcomes and the fact that none of the uprisings resulted in social revolutions, the need to differentiate between revolutionary situations and revolutions becomes crucial. Otherwise, treating these uprisings as revolutions would be analytically unsound and historically wrong. However, denying the revolutionary agency that has risen in these situations would also be equally mistaken. So we need to fine tune our tool box and differentiate between the process and outcome and as such open up the venue for discussion as to how one led to another. By using this differentiation we also make ourselves a whole different toolbox available: the resources, capabilities, perceptions and intentions of actors, the dynamics between contenders, the elite composition and behavior, all of which are indispensable in understanding why the 18 days unfolded in Tahrir the way they did. We also render them comparable to cases across the globe.

Secondly, we looked at the international as the most under-theorized aspect of the analysis of revolutionary situations and underlined the lessons of the Arab uprisings in this regard. It seems clear from even a brief look at 2011, that both the actors of revolutionary situation as well as the specific unfolding of day to day events, have an international dimension that go beyond mere diplomatic relations. So, a new theory of revolutionary process has to include international not as an ad hoc dimension but as an integral component that explains, if only, partially the rise and fall (or victory) of revolutionary agency.

All efforts that go into theorizing these uprisings, would also be contributions to the theory itself. They would also be contributions to the major issues in the region that will be revisited in the coming years, such as the role of military, the role of youth or new media in the region. Time has long come to treat Middle East just like any other region from the experiences of which these theories are built in the first place and the rewards of doing so would be worthwhile indeed.

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