

3 Middle East Studies and Academic Cooperation in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings

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“You are asking the wrong questions!” With this sentence, Jonas Lüscher (2013) starts his debut novel *Frühling der Barbaren* (Spring of the Barbarians), which describes a Swiss businessman’s trip to Tunisia. Initially planning only to visit one of his subcontractors, the young, fortunate entrepreneur named Preising instead winds up traveling into the desert to attend a wedding predominantly attended by British bankers at a lush holiday resort. While the bankers are partying in this artificial oasis, the British pound collapses and England goes bankrupt. Overnight, the bankers lose their jobs, and with their credit cards now blocked, they are unable to even pay for their breakfasts. When the resort goes up in flames, everyone tries to escape the chaos on their own. Lüscher’s novel is ostensibly about the financial crisis, but he skillfully interweaves his story with themes drawn from the so-called Arab Spring. From the orientalist images of camels and palm-tree gardens to the children working in the Tunisian subcontractor’s company, from the side effects of mass tourism to the brutal violence on Tahrir Square, the political present is portrayed in this novel without ever being named.

The introductory sentence of Lüscher’s book repeats an often-reiterated criticism of the field of Middle East studies in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Political scientists studying Arab countries are said to have missed forecasting this major transformation because they had asked the wrong questions. For decades they seem to have overemphasized the stability of authoritarian regimes on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, thereby overlooking the massing forces of mobilization that drove the uprisings. And indeed, the ouster of two presidents-for-life, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, did take many in the discipline by surprise. Middle East scholars followed the events in a manner similar to Lüscher’s character Preising: as astonished observers in the middle of a storm that would profoundly transform the region and their objects of study.

Within the discipline of Middle East studies, the Arab uprisings were quickly recognized as a milestone event, comparable to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 or the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington in 2001. Such events dominate scholarly debate for years after taking place, in no small measure because they occur so unexpectedly (Howard and Walters 2014). At the annual conferences of the American Middle East Studies Association (MESA) and the German Middle East Studies Association for Contemporary Research and Documentation (DAVO) in both 2011 and 2012, most panels and presentations revolved around the so-called Arab Spring. The conferences' programs provide a good overview of the hot topics in Middle East studies at that time. Scholars were struggling with the appropriate terminology (e.g., revolt, revolution or regime change), as well as with the development of new theoretical approaches suitable for analyzing the events that started in Tunisia in December 2010 and subsequently affected most of the region's countries.

It is necessary to refute the often made criticism that scholars should have anticipated the events (Heydemann 2002; Gause 2011). But it is also essential to admit that scholars sometimes find themselves in the position of perplexed observers, able to do no more than record what they see without necessarily being able to explain it. Lüscher's book reminds us not only of the complexity of such events, but also of the pitfalls of narrating them.

In this article, I will address two of the several major challenges political scientists working on the Middle East today face due to the rebellions. First, I argue that the uprisings provided us with new opportunities for research. Scholars were able to identify new actors, revisit analytical frameworks, and benefit from increased public attention on the field and additional research funding. This helped us explore new fields of inquiry (see also Bank 2015; Catusse et al. 2015; Schwedler 2015). As a result, our focus moved beyond the so-called inter-paradigm debate on democratization and autocracy, which primarily concentrated on regime change (Pace and Cavatorta 2012). In a second step, I will address the constraints and challenges that hamper further development within the field of Middle East studies. The uprisings not only provided scholars with an increase in public attention and funding; they also brought a number of inequalities to the forefront, especially between researchers working on the ground and those observing the events from the outside. In conclusion, I will suggest new avenues for cooperation and propose employing a more comparative approach in the further development of the field of Middle East studies.

The observations in this article are largely based on my own research trajectory. They are far from comprehensive, and reflect a rather selective way of reading through the enormous amount of academic literature produced in the past five years.¹ In addition, the article is based on observations from my personal experiences as coordinator for research and teaching programs and director of the Cairo Office of Freie Universität Berlin since 2010.

New trends in Middle East studies following the uprisings

Six years after the uprisings, it is very hard to recall the festive atmosphere that reigned in Tunisia and Egypt after the departure of Ben Ali and Mubarak. In Egypt, configurations of power very similar to those that defined the Mubarak era have been reinstated. Tunisia, the first and probably most pioneering of all “Arab Spring” countries, is still struggling to achieve internal security and political stability. On a regional level, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Daesh) and the ongoing wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen continue to dominate headlines. Europe has been deeply affected by an unprecedented arrival of refugees that is a direct consequence of developments in the region. This obscures the initial euphoria that accompanied the events in 2011, when Egypt’s long-term President Hosni Mubarak, who had governed the country for 30 years, was ousted by mass demonstrations.

Times of euphoria and self-reflection

Current events also risk overshadowing the crucial period of self-reflection we Middle East scholars lived through at that time. Many of us had worked for decades to explain various features of authoritarian rule, such as the use of violence, the co-optation of oppositional forces and the presence of electoral fraud. While not a pleasant experience, investigating the numerous facets of authoritarian rule represented a very agnostic way of analyzing political change. After the 1990s, the expected worldwide expansion of democratic rule failed to reach the Middle East (while suffering

1 For a more comprehensive review of that literature, see (for example) Grimm 2015.

major setbacks in other regions). When in 2010–2011, demonstrators finally overcame police cordons and dictators were forced to flee, many scholars shared the joy of the protesters on Tahrir Square and elsewhere. For me and many of my colleagues alike, the events of 2011 were a liberating experience. Liberating because, despite their austere and sober analysis, most scholars were very empathic with the region they studied. They had long hoped that living conditions for the region's people would ultimately improve. Liberating too because the region's politics received considerable attention due to the uprisings; Middle East scholars were frequently asked by the media and by decision-makers to explain the course of events (Anderson 2012). Research-funding organizations made new calls for the transformation processes to be studied. This interest in the region opened up opportunities to engage in public debate and explore new avenues of research.

Observing the field of Middle East studies before 2011, one might have gotten the impression that authoritarianism was the only debate in town. Along with the focus on the role of political Islam, the issue of authoritarian resilience had become one of the most dominant subjects of inquiry for specialists in the region. The inter-paradigm debate on democratization and authoritarianism served as a point of reference for many prominent fields of study, including examinations of public policy allocation, social movements and local governance in the region. This often marginalized other important developments and inhibited us from asking questions that were also deserving of study, especially with regard to the unexpected uprisings, but also with regard to ongoing transformations in the social and economic spheres.

A look back at my own Ph.D. research, concluded in 2009, might illustrate the need to move beyond the debate on regime change: In this research, I compared the university reform politics of two authoritarian regimes. Taking Egypt and Morocco as examples, I concentrated on a specific policy sector and presented how both regimes negotiated with international donors and adopted different reform measures to internationalize higher education. The thesis demonstrated that Morocco possessed greater flexibility than Egypt with regard to the implementation of social reforms. In Morocco, party pluralism and civil society were able to provide a filter with which to channel social demands and implement reform policies more effectively, while Mubarak's dependence on single-party rule through the National Democratic Party (NDP) limited the regime's reform

flexibility (Kohstall 2009). These were important findings for the uprisings that occurred later.

The question of why monarchies survived the “Arab Spring” reappeared prominently on the agenda after the uprising (Gause 2013). However, when I concluded my doctorate degree in 2009, I would not have dared to predict that Egypt’s limited social reform flexibility would get Mubarak into serious trouble one day, with Morocco sailing relatively smoothly through the troubled waters of the uprisings. King Mohammed VI was quickly able to silence the demands of the 20 February Movement, Morocco’s umbrella protest organization, through the implementation of another cycle of constitutional reforms. The dominant analytical current on authoritarian resilience made it difficult to imagine any other outcome, in particular a large-scale uprising. Consequently, my thesis concentrated its main findings on variations of authoritarian governance and how different regimes adjust to international and domestic pressure instead of outlining possible weaknesses in regime configuration. This illustrates how a set frame of analysis can lead to the neglect of important developments. While agnostic with regard to democratization, scholars also overemphasized the impossibility of change through a focus on authoritarian resilience.

A more diversified but unfinished research agenda

In the wake of the uprisings, many scholars turned their interests away from Islamist movements and authoritarianism, previously the dominant subjects of analysis. The uprisings presented a golden opportunity to observe history as it unfolded. This contributed to an important shift in the discipline, from the study of authoritarianism to the study of new actors and emerging institutional processes. On the streets, we were able to observe the pluralization of political protest movements, emerging social actors and political parties; in an analogous fashion, the field of Middle East studies also experienced a moment of pluralization through its inquiry into new and different research subjects. The role of new media, the negative effects of economic policies on regime stability and the powerful mobilization of various marginalized actors became particularly prominent research subjects. None of these themes were completely new to the discipline, but the way scholars now approached these questions differed greatly from the pre-uprisings era. I will illustrate this by focusing on just three

out of the many research trends that became very important after the events in the region.

The first trend focused on explaining the dynamics of the uprisings, with a particular focus on the idea of “politics from below”, an already established research tradition that was now experiencing a comeback (Bayat 2013; see also Harders 2009). Scholars following this trend sought to identify and categorize the different actors that played an important role in the uprisings, such as workers, women, various religious groups and unemployed graduates (Albrecht and Demmelhuber 2013). By tracing back these different population groups’ activities, the scholars showed how each had already acquired important protest experience, and how these different protest cultures merged in the 2011 mass mobilization (El Ghobashy 2011; Camau and Vairel 2015). My own contribution here focused on the role of students and professors in Egypt’s uprising. While in my Ph.D. research I had considered members of this group to be marginalized actors, I could now emphasize their fight for university autonomy under Mubarak as a step toward mass mobilization. Once the protests started, students and professors joined in large numbers, quickly launching demonstrations on university campuses. Long confined by the regime to being isolated pockets of protest, universities now became the avant-garde in an uprising that included many sections of society (Kohstall 2013). This highlights how the rebellions changed our perception and the way in which we approached various actors. The uprisings made developments visible that had remained hidden before.

A second trend, focused more on the issue of “politics from above”, also benefited from developments after the uprisings. The Egyptian army, which had long been off limits for researchers, suddenly became exposed to critical public examination through the act of seizing power. This opened new opportunities for intra- and interregional comparison of different “coup-proofing” strategies, and for the exploration of the confines of civil and military regimes (Albrecht 2015). Another central actor whose role had been long obscured by semi-legality now became exposed to a new quality of investigation; Islamist movements and parties’ strategies became clearer once they entered the electoral race without self-restraint and gained power in Tunisia and Egypt. For a long time, scholars had described the Muslim Brotherhood as a moderate movement (Rutherford 2006; Hamzawy 2005; Al Anani 2010). Now researchers could confront the moderation hypothesis with Ennahda’s ruling practices in Tunisia and Morsi’s presidency in Egypt (Roy 2012; Gerges 2013; Cavatorta 2013). In

different political settings, they were able to observe how broadly unknown political organizations operated within an existing political configuration. However, Morsi's short presidency in Egypt probably illustrated best that the moderation hypothesis was difficult to apply to a political setting where all actors refused to set up a clear political framework.

To give a third example, researchers also rediscovered institutions such as electoral processes and constitutional arrangements. In Egypt in 2011–2012, elections were held in a relatively free and fair environment for the first time. This in turn facilitated access to opinion polls and relatively viable data on electoral turnout and results. Consequently, scholars could now engage, at least cautiously, in electoral sociology, whereas before they had mainly concentrated on “the menu of manipulation” of elections under authoritarianism (Schedler 2002). Comparing constitutional change and electoral processes in Tunisia and Egypt was not only instructive in highlighting different paths of transformation, but was also a way to critically assess the literature on founding elections (Gervasio & Teti 2011; Kohstall 2014). Founding elections had played an important role in transitions from authoritarian rule in Latin America and Eastern Europe. Applying these findings to the Middle East now enabled scholars to add a new, critical perspective to the study of this issue.

Summarizing these trends, I argue in accordance with André Bank (2015) that the uprisings contributed to a more comparatively informed study of Middle East politics. Scholars brought in fresh approaches from the broader political science discipline that previously had been rather infrequently applied in Middle East studies. Studies on the mobilization of diverse actors relied both on the literature on social movements (Allal & Pierret 2013; Bennani Chraïbi & Fillieule 2012) and on comparisons with other revolutionary experiences, such as those of 1848, 1968 and 1989 (Harders 2011; Stepan & Linz 2013; Wallerstein 2011; Weyland 2012). What many characterized in the beginning as a “Facebook revolution” subsequently attracted the attention of scholars not intimately familiar with the region. But it also convinced specialists in the area to experiment with new instruments. This contributed to the diversification of the research agenda. Yet the debate over how to adjust the discipline to these new research opportunities is still in full swing. Jilian Schwedler (2015) criticizes the focus on regimes and social movements as dominant categories of analysis. Our obsession with comparison may lead to the neglect of purely local dynamics of protest and repression, or of questions such as how neo-liberal reforms shape politics on the local level. In a sim-

ilar vein, Koen Bogaert (2013) argues that the Arab uprisings have to be set in the context of the transformation of global capitalism during the past 30 years. Instead of asking whether a given regime is democratic or authoritarian, it would be more relevant to investigate how authoritarian practices have changed over the past decades he says.

Despite the promising new trends described above, it is evident that no new research agenda has been forged so far. As the revolutionary experiences in the various countries quickly developed along very different paths, we do not share the privilege of our colleagues working on other areas, such as the transitologists who studied the transition from authoritarian rule in Latin America in the 1980s using shared tools and a unified approach (O'Donnell, Schmitter & Whitehead 1986). Similarly, Soviet-bloc specialists were able to join in an analogous effort to study transformation processes in Eastern Europe after 1989. By contrast, the Arab countries experienced no domino effect. On the contrary, the uprisings resulted in very different developments: from the negotiation of a new constitution in Tunisia to the ouster of an elected president in Egypt; from the brutal repression of demonstrations in Bahrain and Syria to foreign intervention in Libya and Yemen. Rather than approaching these different developments with a single set of theoretical tools, it appears crucial to emphasize their very specific contexts.

Hence, many scholars tend to point out that the only common trends in the region are the revival of the security state and increasing fragmentation of the political order (POMEPS 2015; Perthes 2015). While these trends are real, and while structuralist, non-culturalist explanations for the longevity of authoritarian regimes in Arab countries remain valid (Kienle 2012), it is worthwhile remembering how much the region and the field of Middle East studies have diversified. Even if more generalizable observations are necessary, micro-level developments should not be disregarded, especially with regard to the interplay between change and continuity in different sectors (Belakhdar et al. 2014; Rivetti 2015). This might, for example, help us to understand better that the new wave of repression is not simply a return to the old order, but that increasing mobilization has rather been countered by a new and unprecedented spiral of violence. For Middle East scholars, the uprisings were a wake-up call to study developments not necessarily related to regime change. The major challenge ahead remains one of better integrating our studies into the broader political science discipline, while still paying enough attention to local contexts. To do so, scholars in the field will have to improve cooperation with both colleagues

who are less familiar with the Middle East and with colleagues living and researching in the countries we are observing.

Local versus foreign scholarship

Besides providing the opportunity to discover new actors and revisit analytical frames, the uprisings also cast a spotlight on another underexamined issue — that of the hierarchy of scholars working on the region. This question is not new; however, it gained attention as a consequence of the uprisings. Scholars working in the region also benefited from the increase in interest in the Middle East. At least in their early days, the events of 2011 opened up new opportunities to engage in debate and to provide the discipline with fresh analysis. Local researchers were frequently asked by the media, think tanks and international organizations to give their perspective on the events. They were partners in many newly established research and cooperation projects, and they participated actively in the ad hoc debate provided by newly created online publication platforms, newsletters and expert talks. The question is whether this interest in the viewpoints of local scholars have had a lasting effect on the discipline. Have the questions raised by scholars working in the field been echoed in the broader debate? Did increased cooperation with local scholars really improve the conditions under which humanities and social sciences were practiced in the countries affected by the uprisings?²

Academic knowledge production and activism

In September 2011, Mona Abaza, an internationally trained and renowned sociologist, published an article on the newly established Jadaliyya platform (which was founded in October 2010, but was catapulted to the forefront of critical debate on the Middle East thanks to the uprisings) entitled “Academic Tourists Sightseeing the Arab Spring”. Concerned about the “international academic division of labor”, she accused Western researchers of exploiting the Arab uprisings as a sensational topic, and of using their Egyptian colleagues as mere service providers, or in Orientalist

2 For a similar concern about translocal cooperations, see also the contribution of Barbara Winckler and Christian Junge in this volume.

terms, as “*les indigènes de service*” (Abaza 2011). Abaza’s text provides ample material for reflection on the role of local scholarship and its constraints. Her argument about an “international academic division of labor” has to be carefully assessed, especially in the context of the Arab uprisings. Still, her distinction between “Western” and “local” scholars appears to be a disturbing simplification in a time of internationalization marked by the circulation of scholars and knowledge. Many Egyptian scholars write from European and US universities and do not necessarily share the conditions of colleagues working in academic institutions in the Middle East. A distinction between those working on the ground and those observing developments from outside seems a much more appropriate way to capture the balance of power regarding the production of knowledge on the Arab uprisings.

Two tiny examples of international cooperation between local and foreign scholars, drawn from a much larger universe, may illustrate what has been achieved and what still needs to be done in order to incorporate local scholarship into international knowledge production better. In April 2011, as a representative of the Freie Universität Berlin, I organized an international conference entitled “From Revolution to Transformation” in conjunction with the American University in Cairo. This symposium offered a unique occasion for the comparison of the revolutionary events in Egypt in 2011 with those in East Germany in 1989. Many of the Egyptian scholars we had invited presented first-hand accounts from Tahrir Square. Like many other professors, they had participated in the protests against Mubarak from the beginning. When they returned to their classrooms, events were still fresh and ongoing. After Tahrir, universities quickly became another site of the uprising. Many of those engaged in the protests considered that after Mubarak’s removal, it was time to reform the university system. This continuous engagement was strongly reflected in the academic presentations during the symposium. Scholars focused on the institutionalization of the Tahrir protest culture, the importance of different groups (e.g., workers) in the uprising, and on concepts such as the “civil state” as opposed to the military or religious state. Their analyses were extremely important in balancing some of the media commentary that had framed the uprisings as a “Facebook revolution” and (over-) emphasized the role of the young educated middle class in the protests.

Another series of events jointly organized by the Freie Universität Berlin, Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) confirmed these observations. In the Cairo Talks on

Transformation and Change (CTTC), a series of debates held between April 2011 and February 2015, scholars discussed crucial aspects of Egypt's transformation process, from the constitutional amendments in March 2014 to the state of the economy after the uprising.³ Each time, one Egyptian and one German scholar opened the debate, each giving a 10 to 15-minute presentation. In most cases, the audience — composed of Egyptian students and professors, as well as decision-makers and representatives from European organizations present in Cairo — reacted most directly to the Egyptian scholar's talk. In their presentations the Egyptian contributors focused on what had happened on the ground, while the Germans tended to take a somewhat distant observer's perspective, centered more on comparative and theoretical questions. The CTTC format was very valuable in confronting these different perspectives. It illustrated the high level of interest in a scholarly debate on the social, economic and political implications of the uprisings. Establishing CTTC as a forum for academic debate only a short distance away from Cairo's Tahrir Square also meant providing scholars who had become activists (if they had not already been so before) a "retreat" and time to reflect. Nevertheless, it also reflected a broader challenge for the conduct of Middle East studies with regard to the differing positions of those working on the ground and those observing the events from a distance. In Cairo, first-hand accounts quickly became the knowledge of the moment, while scholars observing the events from outside often asked how they could insert these observations into established analytical frames.

Local scholars and those based in the country provided the audience with crucial knowledge on the rapidly unfolding events, thereby raising new questions that remain of critical importance in the discipline's further development. Yet despite this important contribution to knowledge production, the academic debate remains largely shaped by scholars observing events from the outside. Knowledge production on the Arab uprisings in peer-reviewed journals is dominated by researchers working at US think tanks and universities.⁴ They often observe the unfolding events from the outside, where they enjoy a safe working environment. Instead of

3 For the program of the Cairo Talks on Transformation and Change, see: http://www.fu-berlin.de/en/sites/cairo/veranstaltungen/Cairo_Talks_on_Transformation_and_Change_CTTC_/index.html.

4 A recently published study on peer-reviewed articles on the Arab uprisings shows that 75 percent of this scholarly production comes from outside the Arab World,

being confronted with the choice of joining the protests or sharing their experience in a lecture hall, they might choose the luxury of writing instead of acting. One passage described in the introduction to the Lüscher novel captures the contrasts between local and foreign scholarship during times of crisis. When Preising relates his experiences in Tunisia to a Swiss colleague, the latter responds: “We are both captured in this inability to act, but Preising managed to see this inability as a virtue, while I suffered a lot from it. If we wanted to change something, we would have to act” (Lüscher 2013 — author’s translation).

Especially on site, times of political crisis like the transformation period following the Egyptian uprising seem to privilege the production of ad hoc knowledge to the disadvantage of academic scholarship. Scholars have to cope with rapidly unfolding events at a time when they are adjusting their tools and re-examining their analytical frameworks. This seems especially true for local scholars. As experts working in the countries involved, they are frequently asked to give media interviews and expert talks. They are considered to be the local voices. At the same time, they have to choose between different intellectual positions. They present themselves at their universities as neutral academic observers, while often simultaneously engaging directly in activism or choosing to adopt the position of an adviser or the critical role of the intellectual.

Political uncertainty and restrictions on academic freedom

Local knowledge production is not only bound by the choice between activism and scholarship. It is also hampered by restrictions on academic freedom and the uncertainty of a rapidly changing political environment. Times of political crisis feel like emotional rollercoasters.⁵ In Egypt, as the constitutional referendum in March 2011 gave way to the events of Maspero in October of the same year, when a Coptic demonstration was violently dissolved by the military, initially high hopes were quickly replaced by deep disappointment. Keeping the necessary distance to produce

predominantly from the United States (AlMaghlouth et al. 2015). See also Carola Richter and Hanan Badr’s contribution in this volume on the problem of visibility of local knowledge.

- 5 For a personal account of these “rollercoaster” emotions, see also the contribution by Sarhan Dhouib in this volume.

academic scholarship became extremely difficult under such circumstances.

Closely interlinked with this factor is the difficulty of conducting social science research in Egypt and other countries of the Middle East. After a short period of political pluralization in Egypt, social scientists were again exposed to new waves of scrutiny. Even early in the uprisings, they were directly exposed to the political struggles and violence that emerged within universities in many countries. In the aftermath of the uprisings, Egyptian universities benefited from political liberalization for a short time. When the selection process for university presidents and deans was changed to an electoral model in 2011, in a move to accommodate student protests, professors started to develop new courses and teaching materials in order to integrate theoretical perspectives on social movements and revolutions into the curriculum (Sharobeem 2015). International cooperation on various social science topics flourished. But this was a short honeymoon for the social sciences in Egypt. With the overthrow of President Morsi in 2013, political activity on campus was prohibited, several professors linked to the Muslim Brotherhood were banned from teaching, and efforts to engage in international collaboration again drew suspicions of foreign intervention.⁶

Today social scientists face even greater difficulties in doing quantitative and qualitative research than was the case under Mubarak. Accurate data is treated as a state secret, gaining access to archives requires lengthy permission procedures, and potential interviewees have been imprisoned or remain at risk of persecution (Fahmy 2016). The situation in war-torn countries such as Iraq, Libya, Syria or Yemen is even worse. In fact, in very few countries of the region does social science research still make any appreciable contribution to the cause of freedom and autonomy. When the Arab Council for Social Sciences, created in March 2011, held its second annual conference in March 2015 in Beirut, a lively influx of researchers from all over the region was evident. Lebanon, along with Morocco and Tunisia, today appears as one of the few places in the region

6 See the excellent documentation of this issue by the Egyptian organization Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE), afteegypt.org. For an insider's perspective on Egyptian universities, see also Jan Claudius Völkel's contribution in this volume.

where social science research can be conducted and presented relatively free of concern.⁷

Many of the aforementioned restrictions also apply to foreign researchers, at least when they engage in long-term field research. Examples ranging from Michel Seurat to Giulio Regeni⁸ illustrate the dangers faced by foreign researchers. Local researchers feel these restrictions on a regular basis. In addition, they work in an academic environment where education does not provide the same training in theoretical tools and approaches received in Western universities, and where the incentives for academic promotion differ. However, foreign and local researchers working on the ground are similarly affected by the political environment and the restrictions authorities impose on research in the humanities and social sciences.

Toward a more comparative approach in Middle East studies

Seven years after the start of the Arab uprisings, it seems more important than ever to engage in an active debate not only on how to develop Middle East studies further, but also on how to establish consistent forms of academic cooperation with researchers in the countries being studied and provide them with a safe research environment. This article has highlighted how the uprisings provided us with numerous opportunities to reassess analytical tools and develop new research questions. At this stage, we have examined different actors and institutional arrangements from new angles, but due to the rapidly changing context and the continuing violence on the ground, the field of Middle East studies remains fragmented and fragile, fragmented because the diverse new findings have not yet coalesced into new research agendas, fragile because locally based scholars in particular continue to struggle with numerous constraints that reemerged as quickly as the uprisings themselves appeared. The contribution of scholars working on site, however, seems more important than ever if our discipline is to

7 See the contribution by Bilal Orfali, Rana Siblini and Maha Houssami in this volume on the new ways of teaching the Arab language in Beirut after the uprisings.

8 French sociologist Michel Seurat died in 1986 while being held hostage by the Islamic Jihad in Lebanon. Giulio Regeni, a doctoral student from Cambridge, disappeared on January 25, 2016, in Cairo and was found dead 10 days later with the body evincing extensive signs of torture, presumably inflicted on him by the police and state security.

develop new questions and concepts and become better integrated into broader political science debates. In order to face these challenges, Middle East studies must be established as a truly comparative discipline. This will require considerable engagement and commitment on the part of senior scholars, funding organizations and governmental authorities.

Scholars such as Abaza and others often call for the development of an indigenous sociology in order to rebalance the unequal relationship between “Western” and “Eastern” scholarship on the Middle East. I do not think that more reading and deeper exegesis of the famous Arab sociologist Ibn Khaldun and other indigenous pioneers would necessarily save the discipline in Egypt’s academic environment. Instead, I think that a more intense dialogue is needed between those engaging in Middle East studies from inside and outside the region. Those coming from the outside rely heavily on the first-hand knowledge provided by their colleagues working on the ground, benefiting from their local colleagues’ contacts and descriptions of events. But for scholars observing events from the outside, it is probably time to throw overboard the old perception of the countries of the Middle East as “our place for fieldwork”. We should take into account the rich academic environment in the areas we engage in and with. Instead of limiting ourselves to looking for primary sources and treating our colleagues working in Egyptian universities as interview partners, it would be very helpful if we accorded these colleagues more respect by taking their debates more seriously and citing their work.

In addition, it is time to rethink funding policies in order to improve co-operation further. Local scholars benefit considerably from foreign funding when it enables them to pursue research stays abroad, where they can spend time in libraries and establish the necessary distance from the tumultuous events in their home countries. This allows them to participate more actively in the scholarly debate through the publication of peer-reviewed articles. Even apart from the aforementioned debate series, many examples of successful cooperation do exist, but need further support to be institutionalized. However, a truly comparative approach is needed to engage scholars from Europe and the Middle East in a dialogue on relevant theoretical tools and concepts.

Too often, doctoral candidates coming from the Middle East are encouraged to work on their own country when they study at European universities. Senior scholars from Egypt are often awarded scholarships because they are considered experts on their own country. This has a number of undeniable advantages, as they have a true mastery of the local language

and privileged access to sources. But it is a disadvantage with regard to enabling the necessary distance from the field, and with regard to the analytical tools they mobilize. Academic research is often most valuable when theory is mastered without being swayed by the numerous existing *idée reçus*, which one unavoidably holds not only about foreign countries, but also about one's own. Hence, as a second step, professors should encourage their doctoral students to focus on countries other than their country of origin, and scholarship organizations should support long-term research cooperation projects and joint publications in which the local not only represents the local, but also engages in the discipline's broader debates. This could help to bridge the gap between "local" and "foreign" research, and encourage cooperation on a more even playing field. Of course, much has to be done to overcome the current and past limitations of the humanities and social sciences in the countries of the Middle East. It will take a long time to convince paranoid governmental authorities that independent research is not necessarily intended as whistle-blowing. A more comparative approach in Middle East studies would have the advantage of emphasizing theoretical findings over the acquisition of empirical data, thus drawing attention away from the raw data of fieldwork to scholarly debates and innovative questions in the discipline.

The participation of scholars doing research on the ground seems crucial if the discipline aims to develop further. The uprisings have illustrated the limits of the inter-paradigm debate on democratization and authoritarianism. This approach was at least partly shaped by Western governments' demand for policy advice. Since the Cold War, regime change has remained one of the most intriguing questions for the discipline, thanks to the idea that such change could create new allies (Camau 2006). A more intense dialogue with local scholars might help us to move beyond this debate and engage more intensely with questions of daily concern to the people and societies we study. This is not to say that such debates would ignore issues such as democracy and human rights, good governance and accountability. On the contrary, these issues have been at the core of protesters' demands and animate the debate in Middle East academic circles. But the question of regime change is framed differently — not as an end in itself, but as a means of achieving these goals. When we look at our "Western" colleagues in political science studying US, French or German politics or EU integration, it quickly becomes evident that the question of regime change here is more softly embedded in questions of daily concern. Thus, the debate on regime change should not be our only point of

reference. We should be equally concerned with protest movements, questions of social inequality and public policy. This might not only help us to join the broader political science debates, but also prepare us to ask the right questions next time.

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