

Beyond Regime Change: Middle East Studies and Academic Cooperation in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings

by Florian Kohstall

Abstract

The Arab uprisings are a watershed event for Middle East Studies. They allow us not only to critically reflect on our own scholarly output, but also on the relation between foreign and local scholars and appropriate formats of academic cooperation. In this article I explore some of the new research trends that have emerged after the uprisings. While under the current circumstances in the region the discipline remains fragile and fragmented, it is important to remember the vivid debates of 2011 and 2012 and to build on them for future projects of cooperation. Reviewing the literature from this period, I identify the need for more comparative analyses in Middle East Studies and stronger inclusion of local scholarship.

Academia in Transformation

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About the AGYA Working Group Transformation

Popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have had a deep impact, not only on the societies in the respective countries, but also on academic disciplines and scientific relations between Europe and Arab countries. Many of the developments that have taken place in the region are not exceptional but reflect and accelerate global trends. The importance of new media, new forms of social mobilization and new instruments of governance are not limited to the MENA. Through a transcultural perspective the Working Group Transformation of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) aims to better understand these trends. The Working Group debates how ideas, norms and concepts are diffused in a context of mutual exchange and how scientific relations between Europe and the MENA can be improved.

Beyond Regime Change: Middle East Studies and Academic Cooperation in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings

"You are asking the wrong questions!" With this sentence Jonas Lüscher (2013) starts his debut novel "Frühling der Barbaren" ("Spring of the barbarians"). The writer describes a Swiss businessman's trip to Tunisia. Initially only planning to visit one of his subcontractors, the young, fortunate entrepreneur named Preising soon travels into the desert to attend a wedding of British bankers at a lush holiday resort. While the bankers are celebrating their bodies at the pool of this artificial oasis, the British pound collapses and England goes bankrupt. Overnight, the bankers lose their jobs and, without their now blocked credit cards, they are not even able to pay their breakfast. When the resort goes up in flames, everyone tries to escape the chaos on their own. Lüscher writes a novel about the financial crisis, but he interweaves the story well with motives of the so-called Arab Spring. From the orientalist image of camels and palm tree gardens to child labor in the company of the Tunisian subcontractor; from the side effects of mass tourism to the brutal violence on Tahrir Square, everything that portrays the political present mingles in this novel without naming it.

The introductory sentence of this book resounds an often reiterated critique of Middle East Studies in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Especially political scientists studying Arab countries are said to have missed 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 and hereby overlooked the potential forces of mobilization behind the uprisings. The ouster of two lifetime presidents, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, indeed took many representatives of the discipline by surprise. Middle East scholars followed the events similar to Preising: like astonished observers in the middle of a storm that would profoundly transform the region and their objects of study.

In Middle East Studies, the Arab uprisings quickly turned into a milestone event, similar to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington in 2001. Such events dominate the scholarly debate in the discipline for years thereafter, notably because they occur so unexpectedly (Howard & 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 2011 and 2012, most panels and presentations revolved around the so-called Arab Spring. The programs provided a good overview of the hot topics in Middle East Studies at that time. Scholars were struggling with the appropriate terminology (*revolt*, *revolution* or *regime change*) as well as with new theoretical approaches to analyze the events that started in Tunisia in December 2010 and since then had affected most of the countries of the region.

It is necessary to refute the often made critique 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 a perplexed observer who is only able to note down what he sees, 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 essay, I am going to address two of the several major challenges political scientists working on the Middle East face due to the rebellions. Firstly, I argue that the uprisings provided us with new opportunities for research. Scholars could identify new actors, revisit our analytical frameworks, and benefit from increased public attention and additional research funding. This helped us to explore new fields of inquiry (see also Bank 2015; Catusse et al. 2015; Schwedler 2015). As a result the focus moved beyond the so-called inter-paradigm debate on democratization and autocracy, which primarily concentrated on regime change (Pace & Cavatorta 2012). In a second step, I will address the constraints and challenges for the further development of Middle East Studies. The uprisings did not only provide the scholars with new public attention and funding; they also brought to the forefront a number of inequalities, especially between researchers working on the ground and those observing the events from the outside. In the conclusion, I will suggest new avenues for cooperation and a more comparative approach to further develop Middle East Studies.

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

► New Trends in Middle East Studies Following the Uprisings

Five years after the uprisings, it is very hard to recall the festive atmosphere that reigned in Egypt and Tunisia after the departure of Ben Ali and Mubarak. Egypt has experienced the re-instatement of very similar configurations of power to the Mubarak era. Tunisia, the avant-garde 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 *Daesh* (the Arabic acronym for ISIS) and the continuing wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen are dominating the headlines. Europe is deeply affected by an unprecedented refugee crisis as one of the consequences of the developments in the region. This obscures the initial euphoria that sparked 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.

¹ For a more comprehensive review of the literature see for example Grimm 2015.

Times of Euphoria and Self-reflection

Current events also obscure the crucial time of self-reflection we Middle East scholars lived through at this time. Many of us had worked for decades on explaining different features of authoritarian rule, such as the use of violence, the co-optation of oppositional forces or the electoral fraud. Investigating the numerous facets of authoritarian rule was not a pleasant experience, but rather a very agnostic way of analyzing political change. After the 1990s, the expected worldwide expansion of democratic rule had not reached the Middle East (and witnessed major setbacks in other regions). When finally in 2010/2011 demonstrators overcame police cordons and dictators had 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 austere and sober analysis, most scholars were very empathic with the region they study. They had hoped that living conditions for the people would change one day. Liberating also because politics in the region received a lot of attention due to the uprisings; Middle East scholars were frequently solicited by the media and by decision-makers to explain the course of events (Anderson 2012). Research funding organizations opened new calls to study the transformation processes. This interest in the region opened new opportunities to engage in public debate and to explore new avenues of research.

Regarding Middle East Studies before 2011, one might have gotten the impression that authoritarianism was the only debate in town. Together with the focus on the role of political Islam, the literature on authoritarian resilience remained one of the most dominant subjects of inquiry for specialists of the region. The inter-paradigm debate on democratization and authoritarianism served as a point of reference for many prominent fields of study such as public policy allocation, the study of social movements and local governance in the region. This often marginalized other important developments and inhibited us to ask other questions, which would have also been worth looking at, especially with regard to the unexpected uprisings, but also with regard to ongoing transformations in the social and economic spheres. A look into my own PhD research concluded in 2009 might illustrate the need of moving 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 to implement social reforms. In Morocco party pluralism and civil society could provide a filter to channel social demands and to implement reform policies more effectively, while Mubarak's dependency on single party rule with the National Democratic Party (NDP) limited the regime's reform flexibility (Kohstall 2009). With regard to the later occurring uprisings, these were important findings. The question of why "monarchies survived the Arab Spring" reappeared prominently on the agenda after the uprising (Gause 2013). But when I concluded my PhD in 2009, I would not have dared to predict that Egypt's limited social re-

form flexibility would get Mubarak seriously into trouble one day, while Morocco sailed relatively smoothly through the troubled waters of the uprisings. King Mohammed VI was able to quickly silence the demands of the 20 February Movement, Morocco's umbrella protest organization, through another cycle of constitutional reforms. The dominant analytical current on authoritarian resilience made it difficult to imagine anything else, in particular a large scale uprising. Consequently the thesis concentrated its main findings on variations of authoritarian governance and how different regimes adjust to international and domestic pressure instead of outlining possible cracks in the regime configuration. This illustrates how a frame of analysis might neglect important developments. While agnostic to democratization, scholars also overemphasized the impossibility of change through a focus on authoritarian resilience.

A More Diversified and Yet Unfinished Research Agenda

In the wake of the uprisings many scholars turned their interests away from the dominant analysis of Islamist movements and authoritarianism. 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. Similar to what we could observe on the streets – a pluralization of political protest movements, emerging social actors and political parties – Middle East Studies also witnessed a moment of pluralization by inquiring into different new research subjects. The role of new media, negative effects of economic policies on regime stability, and the powerful mobilization of different marginalized actors became particularly prominent research subjects. None of these subjects were completely new to the discipline, but the way scholars now approached these questions differed greatly. Three out of many other trends of research that became very important after the uprisings illustrate this phenomenon well.

The first trend focused on explaining the dynamics of the uprisings. This trend concentrated especially on “politics from below”, an already established research tradition that could now celebrate a comeback (Bayat 2013; see also Harders 2009). Scholars of this trend tried to identify and categorize the different actors that had played an important role in the uprisings such as workers, women, different religious groups and graduates without a job (Albrecht & Demmelhuber 2013). By tracing back their activities, they showed how these different groups had already acquired important protest experience and how these different protest cultures merged in the 2011 mass mobilization (El Ghobashy 2011; Camau & Vairel 2015). My own contribution focused here on the role of students and professors in Egypt's uprising. While in my PhD research I had considered them as marginalized actors, now I could emphasize their fight for university autonomy under Mubarak as a step towards mass mobilization. Once the protests started, students and professors joined in massively and quickly brought them to university campuses. While they had for a long time been confined by the regime to pockets of protest, they now became an avant-garde in an uprising that included many sections of

society (Kohstall 2013). This highlights how the rebellions changed our perception and the way we approached different actors. The uprisings made developments visible that had remained under cover before.

A second trend, more centered on the “politics from above”, also benefited from developments after the uprisings. The Egyptian army, which for a long time had been off limits for researchers, now suddenly became exposed to critical public examination by seizing power. This opened new opportunities for intra- and interregional comparison of different Coup-proofing strategies, and exploring the confines of civil and military regimes (Albrecht 2015). Another central actor who had remained in the opacity of semi-legality for a long time became now exposed to a new quality of investigation: the strategies of Islamist movements and parties 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 (Roy 2012; Gerges 2013; Cavatorta 2013) with Ennahda’s ruling practices in Tunisia and Morsi’s presidency in Egypt. In different political settings, they could observe how widely unknown political organizations would operate within an existing political configuration. But 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 for the first time held in a relatively free and fair environment. This in turn facilitated the access to opinion polls and the relatively viable data on the turnout and specific results of elections. Consequently, scholars could now engage at least cautiously in electoral sociology, whereas beforehand 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 to highlight different paths of transformation, but it 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 the transition from authoritarian rule in Latin America and Eastern Europe. Applying these findings now to the Middle East could add a new, critical perspective to it.

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 wider political science discipline that had previously been less common in Middle East Studies. Studies on the mobilization of different actors relied on the literature on social movements on the one hand (Allal & Pierret 2013; Bennani Chraïbi & Fillieule 2012), and the comparison

with other revolutionary experiences (1848, 1968 and 1989) on the other hand (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 familiar with the region. But it also convinced the specialists of this area to experiment with new instruments. This contributed to the diversification of the research agenda. Yet the debate of how to adjust the discipline to these new research opportunities is still in full swing. Jilian Schwedler (2015) criticizes the concentration on regimes and social movements as dominant categories of analysis. Our obsession to compare may often neglect the local dynamics of protest and repression, as well as how neo-liberal reforms shape politics on the local level. In a similar direction Koen Bogaert (2013) argues that the Arab uprisings have to be set in 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.

Despite the trends described above, one has to admit that no new research agenda has been forged so far. As the revolutionary experience in different countries quickly developed into very different paths, we do not share the privilege of our colleagues working on other areas, such as the transitologists who gathered to study the transition from authoritarian rule in Latin America in the 1980s with shared tools and a unified approach (O'Donnell, Schmitter & Whitehead 1986). The specialists of the Soviet Bloc could join in a similar effort to study the transformation process in Eastern Europe after 1989. The Arab countries have not been shaken up by a domino effect. On the contrary, the uprisings resulted in very different developments: from the negotiation of a new constitution in Tunisia to the reversal 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 the same theoretical tools, it is even more crucial to emphasize their very specific context.

Hence, many scholars tend to point out that the only common trends in the region are the revival of the security state and an 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 to remember how much the region and Middle East Studies have diversified in the meantime. If more generalizable observations are necessary, they should not downgrade developments on the micro-level, especially not the interplay of change and continuity in different sectors (Belakhdar et al. 2014; Rivetti 2015). This might for example help us to better understand that the new wave of repression is not simply a return to the old order, but rather that increasing mobilization has been countered by a new and unprecedented spiral of violence. For Middle East scholars, the uprisings were a wake-up call to study the developments not necessarily related to regime change. The major

challenge ahead remains how to better integrate our studies into the wider discipline of political science while still paying enough attention to the local contexts. This points towards improved co-operation both with colleagues not so familiar with the Middle East, and also with our 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 catapulted another question to the forefront, namely the hierarchy of different scholars working on the region. This question is not new; however, it gained momentum through the uprisings. Scholars working on the ground also benefited from the increase of interest in the Middle East. At least in its beginnings, the events of 2011 opened a new opportunity to engage in the debate and provide the discipline with fresh analysis. Local researchers were frequently solicited by the media, think tanks and international organizations to testify on the events. They were partners in many newly set up research and cooperation projects, and they lively participated in the *ad hoc* debate of newly created online publication platforms, newsletters and expert talks. The question is whether this interest for scholars from the field had a lasting effect on the discipline. Have the questions raised by scholars working in the field been echoed in the debate? Did increased cooperation with local scholars really improve the conditions of practicing humanities and social sciences in the countries affected by the uprisings?

Academic Knowledge Production and Activism

In September 2011, Mona Abaza, an internationally trained and renowned sociologist, published an article on the newly established platform *Jadaliyya* (founded in October 2010, but catapulted to the forefront of critical debate on the Middle East through the uprisings) entitled “Academic Tourists Sightseeing the Arab Spring”. Concerned about the “international academic division of labour”, she accused Western researchers of exploiting the Arab uprisings for sensational topics and using their Egyptian colleagues as service providers, or in Orientalist 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 labour” has to be carefully assessed, especially in the context of the Arab uprisings. Still, her distinction between “Western” and “local scholars” appears like a disturbing simplification, when, in times of internationalization, scholars and knowledge circulate. Many Egyptian scholars write from European and US universities and do not necessarily share the conditions of their colleagues working in academic institutions in the Middle East. A distinction of those working on the ground and those observing developments from outside seems much more appropriate to capture the balance of power over knowledge production on the Arab uprisings.

Two tiny examples out of many others of international cooperation between local and foreign scholars may illustrate what has been achieved and what needs to be done in order to better incorporate local scholarship into international knowledge production. In April 2011 and as a representative of Freie Universität Berlin, I organized an international conference entitled “From Revolution to Transformation” in conjunction with the American University in Cairo. The symposium was a unique occasion to compare 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 from the beginning participated in the protests against Mubarak. When they turned back to the classrooms, events were still fresh and ongoing. After Tahrir, universities quickly became another site of the uprising. Many of those engaged in the protest considered that after removing Mubarak, it was also time to reform the university system. This continuous engagement was strongly reflected in the academic presentations during the symposium. Scholars focused on institutionalizing the protest culture of Tahrir, on the importance of different groups (e.g. workers) in the uprising and on concepts such as the “civil state”, opposed to the military or the religious state. Their analyses were extremely important in order to balance some of the *ad hoc* comments of the media that quickly framed the uprisings as a “Facebook revolution” and (over-)emphasized the role of the young educated middle class in the protests.

Another format of debate, jointly organized by 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.² One Egyptian and one German scholar opened the debate with a 10-15 minute input each. In most cases, the audience – composed of Egyptian students and professors, but also decision-makers and representatives from European organizations present in Cairo – reacted directly to the “Egyptian input”. Egyptian contributors focused in their presentations on what happened on the ground, while the “German input” deliberately took the observer’s “bird’s eye perspective”, more centered on comparative and theoretical questions. The CTTC format was very valuable in confronting these different perspectives. It illustrated the high interest in a scholarly-driven 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 a “retreat” and time to reflect for scholars who had become activists (if they had not already been it before). Nevertheless, it also reflected a wider challenge for the conduct of Middle East Studies with regards to the different positions of those working on the ground to those observing the events from a distance. In Cairo, first-hand accounts quickly

² For the program of the Cairo Talks on Transformation and Change and a selection of these debates on Youtube see: http://www.fu-berlin.de/en/sites/cairo/veranstaltungen/Cairo_Talks_on_Transformation_and_Change_CTTC_/index.html

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 which are of critical importance to develop the discipline further. But 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 American think tanks and universities.³ They often observe the unfolding events from the outside, where they enjoy a safe working environment. Instead of 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 in the novel of Lüscher contrasts the situation of local and foreign scholarship during times of crisis. When Preising tells his experiences in Tunisia to a Swiss colleague, the latter responds: “We both are 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).

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 engaging in revisiting their frames. This seems especially true for local scholars. As experts working in the respective country they are frequently solicited for 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 the universities as neutral academic observers, while simultaneously often directly engaging 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 also faces the consequences of restrictions on academic freedom and the uncertainty of a rapidly changing political environment. Times of political crisis feel like emotional rollercoasters. In Egypt, from the constitutional referendum in March 2011, to the events of Maspero in October of the same year when a Coptic demonstration was violently dissolved by the military, deep deceptions quickly followed initial high hopes. Keeping the necessary distance to produce academic scholarship became extremely difficult under such circumstances.

³ A recently published study on peer-reviewed articles on the Arab uprisings shows that 75% of the scholarly production comes from outside the Arab World, predominantly from the US (AlMaghlouth et al. 2015). See also the contribution of Carola Richter and Hanan Badr “Communication Studies in Transformation” in this working paper series.

Closely interlinked with this factor is the difficulty of conducting social science research in Egypt and in other countries of the Middle East. After a short period of political pluralization in Egypt, social scientists were again suffering from new waves of scrutiny. As early as the uprisings started they were directly exposed to the political struggles and violence that in many countries crystallized at the university. In the aftermath of the uprisings the university shortly benefited from political liberalization. When university presidents and deans got elected in 2011 in a step to accommodate student protests, professors started to elaborate new courses and teaching materials to integrate the theoretical perspectives on social movements and revolutions into the curriculum (Sharobeem 2015). International cooperation on various topics in social sciences 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 became prohibited, several professors linked to the Muslim Brotherhood were banned from teaching, and international collaboration again became suspicious of foreign intervention.⁴

Today social scientists face even greater difficulties than under Mubarak in doing quantitative and qualitative research: viable data remains kept as a state secret, access to archives needs long permission procedures, and potential interview partners are imprisoned or under threat (Fahmy 2016). The situation in war-torn countries like Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen is even worse. In fact, in very few countries of the region does social science research still contribute to the necessary degree 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, one could observe a vivid influx of researchers from all over the region. Lebanon, next to Morocco and Tunisia, appear today as one of the few places where social science research can be conducted and presented relatively free of concerns.

Many of the aforementioned restrictions also apply to foreign researchers, at least when they engage in long-term field research. Cases from Michel Seurat to Giulio Regeni⁵ illustrate the dangers foreign researchers are exposed to. Local researchers do feel these restrictions on a regular basis. In addition, they work in an academic environment where education does not provide similar training with theoretical tools and approaches, and where incentives for academic promotion differ. However, foreign and local researchers working on the ground are similarly affected by the political environment they work in and the restrictions authorities impose on research in the humanities and social sciences.

► Towards a More Comparative Approach in Middle East Studies

Five years after the start of the Arab uprisings it seems more important than ever to engage in a vivid debate not only on how to develop Middle East Studies further, but also on how to establish consistent forms of scientific cooperation with researchers in the country of study and how to provide

⁴ See the excellent documentation by the Egyptian organization Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE), afteegypt.org. See also Jan Völkel's contribution: "Political Science in Egypt: Talkin' bout a Revolution" in this working paper series.

⁵ The 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 25th of January 2016 in Cairo and was found dead ten days later with serious signs of torture.

them with a safe research environment. This essay highlighted how the uprisings provided us with numerous opportunities to reassess analytical tools and develop new research questions. At this stage we have explored different actors and institutional arrangements from a new angle, but due to the rapidly changing context and violence on the ground, Middle East Studies still remains fragmented and fragile: Fragmented, because the different findings could not yet build up new research agendas. Fragile, because especially locally based scholars continue to struggle with numerous constraints that re-emerged as quickly as the uprisings. The contribution of scholars working on site, however, seems more important than ever if our discipline is to seek to develop new questions and concepts and better integrate into the debates of the wider discipline of political science. Middle East Studies has to be established as a truly comparative discipline in order to face these challenges. This needs a lot of engagement and commitment from senior scholars, funding organizations and governmental authorities.

Scholars like Abaza and others often call for the development of an indigenous sociology in order to rebalance the unequal relation 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. I rather think that a more intense dialogue is needed between those engaging in Middle East Studies from the inside and from the outside. Those coming from the outside heavily rely on the first-hand knowledge provided by their colleagues working on the ground. They rely on their accounts and their address books. But for scholars observing events from the outside it is probably time to throw overboard the old perception of the countries in the Middle East as “our place for fieldwork”. We should take into account the rich academic environment of places we engage in and with. Instead of only looking for primary sources and soliciting our colleagues working in Egyptian universities as interview partners, it would indeed be very helpful if we paid them more credit through taking their debates more seriously and particularly citing their work.

In addition, it is time to rethink funding policies in order to improve cooperation 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 to the tumultuous events in their home countries. This allows them to participate more lively in the scholarly debate through the publication of peer-reviewed articles. Apart from the aforementioned series of debate, many examples of successful cooperation do exist and they do 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 different 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 often gain scholarships because they are considered experts of their own country. This undeniably has a number of advantages, as they truly master the language and do have privileged access to the sources. But it is a disadvantage with regard to the necessary distance to the field and with regard to the analytical tools they mobilize. Academic research often becomes most valuable when theory is mastered without having the numerous *idée reçus* in mind, which one unavoidably has not only about a foreign country, but also about one's own. Hence, in a second step, professors should encourage their doctoral students to work on a different country than their country of origin, and scholarship organizations should support long-term research cooperation projects and joint publications, where the local not only represents the local, but also engages in debates of the wider discipline. This could help to bridge the gap between "local" and "foreign" research, and encourage more eye-level cooperation. 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 comparable to whistle-blowing. A more comparative approach in Middle East Studies would have the advantage of emphasizing theoretical findings over the acquisition of empirical data, hereby taking the 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 on democratization and authoritarianism. This debate was at least partly shaped by the demand for policy advice of Western governments. Since the Cold War regime change has remained one of the most intriguing questions for the discipline due to the idea that such change would bring about new allies (Camau 2006). A more intense dialogue with local scholars might help us to move beyond this debate and engage more intensely into debates of daily concern of the people and the societies we study. This is not to say that they would not be concerned with democracy and human rights, good governance and accountability. On the contrary, those questions have been at the core of the protesters' demands, and they do animate the debate in Middle East academic circles. But the question of regime change is framed differently – not as an end in itself, but to achieve these goals. Looking at our "Western" colleagues in political science studying US, French or German politics or EU integration, we might quickly notice that the question of regime change 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 help us not only to join the wider debates in political science, but also to prepare us to ask the right questions, next time.

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