

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02863-0 - The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World

Edited by Fawaz A. Gerges

Excerpt

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I

Introduction

A Rupture

Fawaz A. Gerges*

A psychological and epistemological rupture has occurred in the Arab Middle East that has shaken the authoritarian order to its very foundation and introduced a new language and a new era of contentious politics and revolutions. A revolutionary moment of political emancipation and self-determination challenges conventional ways and dominant thinking about the region, such as the durability and resilience of authoritarianism and the ability of autocratic rulers to police the status quo. There is a reinvigorated academic interest in bottom-up politics, workers, ordinary people, social movements, public space and resistance, the decay of hegemony, the crisis of authority and the role of agency in general – a refreshing departure from the past fixation with top-down politics and the elite.¹

* I would like to thank several colleagues who critically read this essay and provided me with their feedback: Charles Tripp, Robert Lowe, John Chalcraft, John Sidel, Tariq Tell, and Mohamed Ayoob. Of course, whatever shortcomings remain, they are mine and mine alone.

¹ Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Karima Khalil, *Messages from Tahrir* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2011); Salwa Ismail, 'The Syrian uprising: Imagining and performing the nation', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 11/3 (2011); Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel eds., *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); N. Marzouki, 'From people to citizens in Tunisia', *Middle East Report*, 259/41 (Summer 2011); and John Chalcraft, 'Horizontalism in the Egyptian revolutionary process', *Middle East Report* 262 (Spring 2012).

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Far from over, this revolutionary moment is still unfolding before our eyes, an open-ended struggle that will play out in the coming years. If history serves as a guide, revolutionary moments – as opposed to revolutions that swiftly overturn a society's social, economic and political structure, all within a relatively short time frame – will take time and space to produce a revolutionary outcome. In the process, they might be aborted, hijacked, co-opted, institutionalized, or face setbacks. Therefore, it is critical to distinguish between two processes: (1) reconstructing the conditions and settings that led to the overthrow of the Zine El Abidine Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and of the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt; and (2) examining transition from political authoritarianism in various countries and the prospects of sustaining the cohesiveness and unity of the masses of protesters as the struggle turns to building a governing coalition, a new system for allocating power.

The shift from a revolutionary moment to a constitutional moment is fraught with uncertainties, tensions, and differing conceptions of the political. In Tunisia, Egypt, perhaps in Libya, and maybe even eventually in Syria, one might dare to hope, we might be seeing transitions from authoritarian regimes to democracy – in other words, 'regime transitions' along the lines familiar to scholars of Southern Europe in the 1970s, Latin America and parts of Asia in the 1980s, and Eastern Europe and other parts of Asia and Africa in the 1990s and 2000s, rather than revolutions *per se*.

Despite uncertainties and risks about democratic change, what has transpired in the Arab world is a watershed comparable to transformative historical developments like the French Revolution and the uprisings in Eastern Europe and Indonesia – and to a lesser extent in Latin America – in the 1980s and the 1990s. What happened in all these cases is that the agenda of political and economic possibilities suddenly expanded. It is critical to recognize the significance of this revolutionary chapter in the modern history of the Middle East and the creative conceptions and articulations of resistance that shattered the system of domination, particularly the popular roots of these uprisings amongst the urban and rural poor. Regardless of what the outcome(s) will be, this revolutionary moment has turned the wheels of history in a direction of progress. Given the fragility of institutions in the Arab arena and the structural socio-economic and political crisis there, the social and political turmoil that has engulfed the region after the Arab uprisings is natural and to be expected – part of the painful birth pangs of a new world.

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Signposts and Worldviews

It is worth capturing the heartbeat of this revolutionary moment. Bread, freedom, social justice, and human dignity (*al-karama*) were the rallying cries that echoed from *mayadeen al-tahrir* (liberation squares) in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and elsewhere. Millions of Arabs revolted against *al-istibdad* (repression), defying fear and bullets and daring to call for effective citizenship and more representative and egalitarian political and economic systems. Arabs across national boundaries united in their opposition to injustice and political authoritarianism. Taking ownership of public space, symbols of liberation from colonial rule, Arabs from different ideological persuasions, imaginations, and sensibilities ‘performed the nation’ as united citizens, in a quest for political emancipation and civil and economic empowerment. The will of the people and electoral legitimacy echoed as a call for action, a marked departure from previous waves of social protests and discontent in Arab states.² Amidst this effervescence, new stories are told and new narratives of resistance, hope and determination are articulated. Decades of political authoritarianism and repression, coupled with a development failure, neither extinguished the flame of resistance nor enforced authoritarian rule. The public reclaimed effective agency and regained its voice, which had been stifled and muffled by the elite.

The authoritarian order was far from durable, as the dominant narrative had it. Instead, it crumbled under the blows of popular resistance and cleavages within ruling coalitions, particularly forming around the military institutions. In Egypt and Tunisia, popular mobilization has been enabled if not impelled by splits within the regimes, especially in the context of ongoing succession struggles if not crises, and has been championed or in due course quarterbacked by the urban middle class and business elements, in a pattern familiar from other transitions elsewhere. In Tunisia and Egypt, as the public revolt gained momentum, senior echelons of the military sacrificed Ben Ali and Mubarak, respectively, in favour

² Al-Ghad Al-Ordoniya, ‘Slogans of the Arab Spring Confirmed the Unity of the Arabs’ [in Arabic], *Al-Ma’had Al-Arabi*, 21 April 2012, <http://www.airss.net/site/2012/04/21/Wa'i-Al-Talabah>, ‘Youth of Arabic Spring Spread Slogans of Arab Revolutions in Rap Songs’ [in Arabic], *Al-Talabah*, 15 February 2012, <http://www.altalabah.com/index.php/2010-06-17-23-59-23/2010-06-18-01-31-53/4226-2012-02-15-15-23-42.html>; El-Nashra, ‘Hassan Mneimneh: The Civil State is the Arab Spring Slogan’ [in Arabic], *El-Nashra*, 31 March 2012, <http://www.elnashra.com/news/show/457357/>. See also Juan Cole’s contribution (Chapter 3) to this volume.

of their institutional and economic interests. In Libya and Yemen, the situation was more complex because the armies splintered along opposition and regime lines. In contrast, the security apparatus in Syria, including the core of the armed forces, has remained loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, thus prolonging the ferocious battle between the opposition and the regime. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates intervened militarily in neighbouring Bahrain to assist in crushing the uprising and rescuing the royal family.³

Despite important differences and specificities of the various uprisings, a unifying thread runs through all of them: a call for dignity, empowerment, political citizenship, social justice, and taking back the state from presidents-for-life, as well as from their families and crony capitalists who hijacked it. This has been a call for representative government and social equity and justice. From Tunisia to Egypt, from Libya to Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, the slogans, songs and street art of protesters testify to their collective psychology and worldview, one anchored in freedom from want and oppression and desire for equality. *Silmiya* (peaceful), not *Islamiya* (Islamic state), was a common theme of the uprisings even when the regimes unleashed their thugs to terrorize protesters. In Libya and Syria, respectively, force deployed by the Qaddafi and Assad regimes transformed largely peaceful revolts into armed struggles.⁴

On the whole, demonstrators behaved in a dignified manner, displaying a sense of solidarity with one another, a commitment to principled action and unity of purpose and ranks. While authoritarian rulers sought to drive a wedge between various communities and fragment the public, for the most part protesters performed the nation and exhibited a sense

³ Political scientists have surprisingly little to offer when addressing the issue of who defects and when: Djazairress, 'The Egyptian Army Abandons Mubarak and Declares Legitimacy of People's Demands' [in Arabic], *Djazairress.com*, 1 February 2011, <http://www.djazairress.com/ouarsenis/1697>; Dunia Al-Watan, 'The Hidden Military Coup: The Tunisian Army Chose between Ben Ali Leaving or to Overthrow and Kill' [in Arabic], *Al-Watan Voice*, 19 January 2011, <http://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2011/01/19/166463.html>.

⁴ Adil Latifeh, 'The Arabic Spring between Peaceful Transition and Decisive Bloody Destruction', *Al-Jazeera*, 4 September 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.net/analysis/pages/da49d1da-84cb-47f9-a7e5-9ac2f9ffco24>; Dia' Al-Issa, 'The Peacefulness of the Arab Spring Revolutions' [in Arabic], *Akhbar al-Yom*, 12 September 2012, <http://www.akhbaralyom.net/articles.php?lng=arabic&id=69298>; Jadaliyya, 'Syria Is Witnessing a Peaceful Popular Revolt for Freedom and Dignity' [in Arabic], *Jadaliyya Reports*, 8 July 2011, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2090/>; Al-Jazeera, 'Continuing of Peaceful Demonstrations in Syria' [in Arabic], *Al-Jazeera*, 14 September 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/pages/5cb4881c-7b5b-48d2-9953-a23e8405d8e3>.

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of maturity and cosmopolitanism that defied segmentation and common stereotypes. In Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Tunisia, a rainbow coalition – of men and women, Muslims and Christians, young revolutionaries, the poor, embattled lower and middle classes, Islamists, leftists, nationalists, and secularists – joined the protests and forced entrenched authoritarian incumbents from power.⁵

In Egypt, Muslims and Christians fraternized together and guarded each other while they prayed – a symbolic act of toleration and refutation of a clever ‘regime-craft’ of divide and rule.⁶ To maintain backing by the Western powers, particularly the United States, Arab rulers portrayed themselves as protectors of women and Christians; the latter would suffer discrimination and persecution if the opposition, painted as Islamist and extremist, gained the upper hand. In fact, Mubarak’s last years in power witnessed an escalation of religious tensions between Muslims and Christian Copts, as well as armed skirmishes. Many Egyptians believed these were orchestrated by the internal security services to divert attention from Mubarak’s crisis of authority and grooming of his son, Gamal, to inherit the presidency. Based on conversations with Egyptians of all political colours in the last decade, there existed a consensus about the use and abuse of the ‘religious card’ as part of Mubarak’s regime-craft to divide and rule, as well as to impress on its superpower patron one of the significant functions it performed at home.⁷

In a rebuff to autocratic rulers who cleverly manipulated minority issues, women played a prominent role in all the uprisings, showing how the public constituted itself in a drive to overthrow the existing order.⁸ Resistance by women undermined a key aspect of regime-craft that targeted progressives and leftists at home and Westerners abroad. For example, both Ben Ali and Mubarak touted progressive legislation empowering women, contrasting their enlightened rule with their reactionary Islamist rivals. As protests gained momentum in Yemen, President Ali Abdullah Saleh tried to fragment and discredit the protestors by arguing that *ikhtilat*, the mixing of men and women, was un-Islamic. In

⁵ Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: The power of the people is greater than the people in power* (London: Harper Collins, 2012); Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns, *Tweets from Tahrir* (New York: OR Books, 2011).

⁶ Atfih Halawan, ‘Mass Demonstrations Warns of Chaos and Confirms the Extent of Relationship between Muslims and Christians’, [in Arabic], *Al-Abram*, 12 March 2011, <http://www.ahram.org.eg/The%20First/News/66924.aspx>.

⁷ Author’s interviews, 2002–present.

⁸ See Chapters 6 and 9 by Charles Tripp and Sami Zubaida, respectively, in this volume.

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response, protestors planned a co-ed march to oppose Saleh's discrimination and divide-and-rule tactics.⁹

Although subsequently the ruling generals in Egypt seemed to have unleashed thugs who attacked women protesters, the attempt to humiliate women and divide dissidents produced opposite results; it reinforced the solidarity of the newly constituted public and caused a backlash against the perpetrators and elements of the old regimes.¹⁰

The newly constituted public included ideologically rival groups, such as Islamists, leftists, and nationalists, a rivalry fuelled and encouraged by the old regime. In particular, authoritarian rulers had co-opted an important segment of the Arab left and deployed it as an effective weapon against their Islamist nemeses. Before the 2011 uprisings, Arab leftists – and, to a lesser extent, nationalists – frequently expressed hostile attitudes towards Islamists, including mainstream religious-based organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, and justified their cooperation with autocratic rulers as the lesser of the two evils.¹¹ Nevertheless, both camps briefly suspended their differences and joined ranks to oust the autocratic incumbents.

What distinguished the large-scale popular uprisings in 2011 from past small-scale protests was the active participation by urban and rural workers and the poor in general. That was a tipping point overlooked by the old regimes and their security apparatus, surprising even the young revolutionaries who had been agitating to mobilize the public. In Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria, the sources of discontent lie as much in abject rural poverty, neglect and discrimination as in urban poverty belts. For the first time, the rural and urban poor turned out in large numbers and

⁹ See Chapter 13 by vom Bruck et al. in this volume. Also, Gabriele vom Bruck, 'When will Yemen's night really end?' *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 2011, <http://mondediplo.com/blogs/when-will-yemen-s-night-really-end>.

¹⁰ See Chapter 9 by Sami Zubaida and Chapter 13 by vom Bruck et al. Also, 'Egyptian women protestors sexually assaulted in Tahrir Square', *The Guardian*, 9 June 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/09/egyptian-women-protesters-sexually-assaulted>; Masress, 'Colonel Al-Sisi: "Virginity Tests" were done to protect the army from possible accusations of rape', [in Arabic], *Masress.com*, 27 June 2011, <http://www.masress.com/moheet/18380>; Masress, 'Female Protestors confirm that they were forced to undergo virginity tests by army soldiers', [in Arabic], *Masress.com*, 29 June 2011, <http://www.masress.com/gn4me/3929587>; Yumna Mokhtar, 'Izza that tried to help the blue bra girl: "I shall take the soldier to court"', [in Arabic], *almasryalyoum.com*, 1 January 2012.

¹¹ Author's interviews with leftists in various countries including Rifaat Al-Said, then chairman of Hizb al-Tajammu (National Progressive Unionist Party).

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played a key role, a development that hastened the removal of Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Saleh.¹²

The various constituencies of the public came together and discovered one another after decades of segmentation and political apathy. Villagers and college students mingled together with urban workers, human rights activists, professionals, and the unemployed. Mothers, fathers, and children filled public squares, creating a festive atmosphere, with poetry and music performed live by artists and food donated by citizens who could hardly afford to feed their own families.¹³ The nations were on display in all their glory, diversity, hope, and wretchedness. This was testament to the creative vitality of the peoples and their courage to overcome fear, mistrust, and apathy. Half a century of political authoritarianism has neither devoured civil society nor broken its will to resist.

The uprisings were not all united and harmonious. There also existed a struggle of domination inside the public squares within the protests, most notably between religious conservatives and liberal-leaning groups. In Yemen, independent protesters were beaten and incarcerated by Islamist hard-liners of the Islah party and their allies who share business interests and clan ties with the ruling elite. A few months after the outbreak of the uprising against President Saleh, hierarchies were established amongst demonstrators, which the youth activists resented. Thus, the protest movement was manipulated and taken advantage of by powerful players who had been looking for an opportunity to get at Saleh and settle scores with him. In this regard, activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkul Karman admitted recently that the general secretary of Islah, Abdulwahab al-Anisi, had told her early in the uprising that she should not shout the slogan ‘the people want to oust the regime’, but focus only against Saleh. Islah and its allies were personalising the revolution. They were not opposed to the authoritarian regime itself, but rather wanted to get rid of Saleh and gain power themselves.¹⁴

¹² See chapters in this volume by Rami Zurayk and Anne Gough (Chapter 5), Ali Kadri (Chapter 4), John Chalcraft (Chapter 7), vom Bruck et al. (Chapter 13) and Roger Owen (Chapter 11).

¹³ Samir Assayyid, Mohamed Hijab, and Abir al-Morsi, ‘Unity of the people and army sees victory in the Second Friday of Anger’, [in Arabic], *Al-Abram*, 28 May 2011, <http://digital.ahram.org.eg/articles.aspx?Serial=520706&eid=2265>

¹⁴ Mareb Press, ‘Tawakkul Karman: Secretary General of Reform can reject slogan “People want downfall of regime”’, [in Arabic], *Mareb Press*, 14 August 2012, http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=46550&lng=arabic; Stacey Philbrick Yadav, ‘Opposition to Yemen’s opposition’, *Foreign Policy*, 14 July 2011; Laura Kasinoff, ‘Yemeni Official Puts Uprising’s Toll at “Over 2,000 Martyrs”’, *The New York Times*, 19 March 2012.

In Tunisia, Salafis intimidated and attacked secular-oriented activists. Similarly, in Egypt, women and young revolutionaries faced intimidation and assault by extremists of the Salafi variety and elements of the old regime.¹⁵

With presidents Ben Ali, Mubarak, Gaddafi, and Saleh out, the struggle within has intensified. Peoples react differently to the new emerging order and struggle over the distribution of power. More importantly, there exists a fierce conflict over the identity of the state between religious-based activists and secular-leaning ones, a clash that has deepened the divide and exacerbated social tensions and contradictions. Egypt and Tunisia are cases in point. In the Arab revolts – like others in the past – dormant power struggles have come to the fore and self-interested factions have acted as spoilers.

But the power struggle is not surprising because the institutionalization of diversity and the ‘parliamentarization’ of politics will take time. Trust amongst political actors is in short supply, and the old regimes went to great lengths to deepen the divide and mistrust between political groups. The performance of the nation by the protesters included people with different ideas and conceptions of the political and the social – a diverse coalition whose members may also deeply mistrust each other. Diversity cannot be wished away. The challenge facing the post-authoritarian order is to institutionalize diversity, establish a broad electoral coalition and rebuild political trust – a prolonged and complex task fraught with risks. In the meantime, we should not be blinded by the dust of political turmoil bursting out in the aftermath of the revolts. We should not confuse the revolutionary moment with the unfolding outcomes and the fierce social and political struggles. Instead of proclaiming the end of the so-called Arab Spring, analysts should focus on understanding the sources of vulnerabilities facing the transition in separate Arab societies and the drivers behind the political-ideological struggles among dominant groups. Not unlike Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Indonesia, contentious politics in the Arab world will be accompanied by political storms, unstable coalitions, and street protests until the

¹⁵ Turess, ‘The Salafists in Tunisia . . . What do they believe in . . . and what do they want?’ [in Arabic], *Turess.com*, 5 December 2011, <http://www.turess.com/alchourouk/516960>; Turess, ‘The Salafists in Tunisia: A Minority that scares women and the press’, [in Arabic], *Turess.com*, 6 December 2011, <http://www.turess.com/alhiwar/23509>; Walid Balhadi, ‘The Salafist Movement in Tunisia: The citizen is scared . . . the secularists and modernists reject them . . . and the government has not been resolved yet’, [in Arabic], *Turess.com*, 27 February 2012, <http://www.turess.com/almasdar/8802>.

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dust settles and institution-building is consolidated. One should not be surprised by inter-ethnic and inter-religious turmoil following the dictators' departure because they had relied on divide and rule and exclusion of critical segments of the population.

The Drivers

There is no single cause that explains the social eruptions that have shaken the Arab political system to its foundation. In the social sciences, neatly delineated single causes, though appealing, rarely capture society's nuances and complexities. Analysts focus on either political variables or economic vulnerabilities as the drivers behind the uprisings. Focussing on one without the other is a simplification of a more complex reality. Freedom, bread and social justice – a slogan repeatedly chanted by protesters – sums up the sociopolitical and socioeconomic drivers behind the Arab uprisings. *Al-Karama* (dignity and pride), the demonstrators' most popular rallying cry, reflects the economic and political disenfranchisement suffered by most citizens and their humiliation at the hands of the regimes' *mukhabarat* and the repressive police.

Tunisians, Egyptians, Yemenis, Libyans, Bahrainis, and Syrians revolted because of dismal economic conditions and living standards, abject poverty, lack of hope, as well as blockage in the political system that failed to renew itself with new blood and integrate rising new social groups, particularly the youth, into the process. Equally important, the revolts were driven by a widespread belief that chronic systemic corruption by autocratic rulers and their families and associates turned the state into a family-based *uzba* (fiefdom) in which the state no longer belonged to the people but became the property of crony capitalists and their foreign allies. While the nouveau riche, a tiny class, flaunted their wealth and put their decadence on public display, half of the population languished in poverty and misery.

A few statistics are in order, even though the numbers do not portray the gravity of the social crisis in Arab lands and economic development failure in general. In stark contrast to the image of rich Arabs that dominates the Western imagination, about 50 per cent of the population live in poverty, surviving on less than \$2 a day and spending more than half of their income on basic food necessities.¹⁶ Although there are wealthy

¹⁶ David Rosenberg, 'Food and the Arab Spring', *Gloria Center*, 27 October 2011. http://www.gloria-center.org/2011/10/food-and-the-arab-spring/#_edn37; 'Arab World Initiative for Financing Food Security', *Region MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA*,

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individuals in the Arab world, particularly the ruling elite and the crony private sector, the majority of working Arabs are poor. According to the Texas Income Inequality Database, the Arab world exhibits the highest income inequality of all regions in the world and one of the lowest and poorest quality per capita growth rates of all regions in the last three decades.¹⁷

Neither the steady increase in export revenues – mainly oil-related, by an average of 2 per cent annually since 1985 – nor the improvement in macroeconomic indicators and external account balances across the Arab world had ‘trickled down’ to national populations. In fact, GINI coefficients – which measure wealth inequalities – had remained static and even slightly worsened, and the proportions of national wealth held by the top 10 per cent of the populations had, in general, increased significantly.¹⁸

There is increasing evidence that economic restructuring under the Washington Consensus (opening economies to international competition and investment), which had been the dominant economic approach since the 1980s, has produced the opposite results from its intended consequences. Neoliberal reform policies adopted since the 1980s led to the enrichment of a small section of the population and the pauperization of the majority. Economists note that while the real GDP per capita for the region grew at a respectable rate in the 1970s (an average of 5 per cent), it declined in the 1980s to an annual rate of 3.43 per cent and increased at a low rate of 0.34 percent in the 1990s, and when it picked up again in early 2000, it was hollow and inequitable growth. Misguided macroeconomic policies, particularly declining investment rates in productive sectors coupled with inequitable distributional arrangements, caused a chronically

Report No. AB6559 (21 April 2011), <http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSPContentServer/WDSP/IB/2011/05/27/000001843.20110601143246/Rendered/PDF/P126506000AWIFS000PID000ConceptoStage.pdf>; League of Arab States, Ataqir al-Arabi Almouwahad, various years.

¹⁷ Ali Kadri, ‘A Depressive Pre-Arab Spring Economic Performance’. According to the Survey of economic and social development in Western Asia 2005–2006: ‘According to the University of Texas Inequality Project (UTIP), every ESCWA member country, with the exception of Yemen, ranks above the fiftieth percentile in the inequality scale among 140 countries. Some in the GCC, namely, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar, rank above the ninetieth percentile’, <http://utip.gov.utexas.edu/data.html>

¹⁸ George Joffe, ‘As Spring Moves Towards Autumn: The Arab Intifada in Perspective’, *POLIS*, University of Cambridge (working paper, 2013); Joffe, ‘The Arab Spring in North Africa: Origins and Prospects’, *POLIS*, University of Cambridge (working paper, 2011).