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Introduction

In late December 2010, in a Tunisian provincial town, familiar patterns of protest developed in new directions. Self-immolations, such as that of the soon-to-be well-known vendor, Muhammad Bouazizi, on 17 December 2010, were nothing especially new. Desperately trying to make a living and provide for families in survivalist enterprise, several men had in previous months protested the corruption and brutality of the police and the indifference of the authorities by setting themselves on fire in public. Not much had come of it. Familiar enough, in turn, were demonstrations and strikes, such as those over unemployment, government neglect, unfair contracting, and the indifference of much of the union leadership that briefly inspired the Gafsa mining basin of Tunisia in 2008. In late 2010, however, the confrontations with police that typically accompanied such protests only sparked wider mobilizations. New constituencies were drawn in: bloggers, lawyers, ever larger numbers of labour unionists, educated youth in the cities, satellite media, gang members, journalists, smugglers, women, and even members of the ruling party (Allal 2013; Hmed 2012). Someone, somewhere, started to demand that the people should bring down Ben Ali's long-entrenched regime (*al-sha'b yurid/isqat al-nizam*). This new slogan, its import unthinkable only weeks before, was taken up and roared all over the country with extraordinary force. Those who flooded into the streets signalled their disgust with a *status quo* declared unendurable. Suddenly, the well-worn poetry of Tunisia's national anthem took on a new life:

> If, one day, a people desires to live
> Then fate will answer their call
> Darkness must dissipate
> And must the chain give way
>
> (Colla *et al.* 2012)

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Those on the streets called not for Islam, the most common (but not the only) protest frame in the region for decades, but for bread, dignity and freedom. Once the demonstrations were joined, and pitched battles with police successful, continuous occupations of key, urban public spaces emerged: the people would not go home until their demands were met. When the army refused to shoot on these masses of civilians, Ben Ali, strong-man president since 1987, boarded a plane for Saudi Arabia and never came back.

The region was electrified. No one had seen the fall of an entrenched Arab 'president for life' (Owen 2012) as a result of mass protest. All but one of the ruling regimes in the independent states of the Arab world had endured, with personnel changes only, since Colonel Gaddafi's Free Officer's revolutionary coup had seized power from King Idris in Libya under the banners of pan-Arab national liberation in 1969. The only exception was Iraq. Saddam Hussein's strong-man rule there since the Ba'thist coup of 1968 had been broken by the US-invasion of 2003. This was an exception that seemed to prove a simple rule – the people could *not* bring down the regime. Indeed, the mass uprising of 1991 in Iraq had been smothered in blood. The last great popular uprising in the region, the *intifada* of 1987–91, had not resulted in a national state for the Palestinians. It was, in any case, directed not at a domestic dictatorship but a colonizing occupation. Nor had the Bahrainis won a constitution or an independent parliament through the long protests of the 1990s. Bread riots and crowd actions in the 1970s and 1980s had at best been only able to slow the pace of IMF-led structural adjustment programmes. The resurgence of strike action among workers and civil servants in Egypt after 2004 had likewise only blunted privatization. The vast energies of Islamist movements had not been able to topple a single regime, with the major exception of non-Arab Iran in 1979. The assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat by Islamists in 1981 had not sparked the anticipated popular uprising or dislodged the rule of the military. Many among the poor had hunkered down, thinking less of revolution or reform and more of migration opportunities abroad and survivalism at home. This meant 'weapons of the weak': the use of informal networks, the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' (Bayat 1997), and everyday modes of resistance in order to acquire goods and services and make claims on the propertied and powerful. These were interstitial manoeuvres in the gaps and fissures

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of the power structure that avoided overt, organized collective action, doctrine or programme.

In spite of this recent history, or perhaps because of it, the months following Ben Ali's fall on 14 January 2011 witnessed an outpouring of contentious mobilization which included mass uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria and protests in many other parts of the region. In little more than a year, three more dictators fell or were dislodged, albeit in increasingly complicated ways, from power. On 11 February 2011, it was the turn of Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, president since 1981. On 20 October 2011, Colonel Gaddafi of Libya, president since 1969, was killed. On 27 February 2012, Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen, president since 1990, finally ceded power. In Bahrain there was repression; in Syria a civil war and the advent of a new, rival Islamic state; in Egypt, elections, a Muslim Brotherhood presidency, at least one more popular uprising (30 June 2013), quickly followed by a counter-revolutionary military coup (3 July 2013). In Tunisia, there were elections and forms of liberal democracy. In Saudi Arabia, around 8 per cent of the country's GDP was re-distributed to head off dissent by socio-economic concessions. Within and without the region, elites and regime incumbents remade their calculations, manoeuvred for influence, and sometimes sent in their militaries. In the aftermath of these uprisings, whether for better or for worse, nothing was quite the same as it had been.

Puzzles and goals

The 2011 Arab uprisings are only the most proximate reminder of the rationale for researching and writing a wide-ranging history of protest in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Even if they did not announce the new millennium, or cause a fundamental rupture with the past, they still serve to demonstrate that contentious politics is an important topic, raises a variety of puzzles, and intensifies the sense that not enough research has been carried out. They showed to a wider-audience than usual that it is not adequate, in writing the history of the region, to ignore contentious politics, or to cede the basic dynamics of change to external powers, securitocracies, ruling monarchies, the politics of ruling parties and their clients, or crony capitalism. They emphasized the revolutionary modern history of the

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region. And they vivified questions about the complex role played by contentious politics in the history of the MENA.

No straightforward narrative of progress and popular emancipation could be attached to the Arab uprisings as a whole. The mobilization already led by the end of March 2011 to a NATO military intervention in Libya (Prashad 2012). Even before then, Saudi Arabia had sent troops to crush the popular uprising in Bahrain. This was by no means the first time that protest movements had precipitated the arrival of foreign armies. Britain occupied Egypt, for example, in the wake of the ʻUrabi movement in 1881–2. The uprisings on Mount Lebanon in 1821, 1840 and 1858–60 also brought in French imperial intervention. The repression wielded by the Syrian regime, which started to carry out air-strikes on its own population by the end of 2011, had also been seen before: in Hama, for example, in 1982. The Syrian president Asad's response to the uprising of 2011, meanwhile, bore similarities to the French response to the anti-colonial, patriotic armed struggle in Syria of 1925–7. On the other hand, there were surely gains in 2011. The fall of dictators was not nothing. Both Algeria and Saudi Arabia stepped up their rent-fuelled provision of socio-economic goods. There were political concessions in Algeria, Morocco and Jordan. Tunisia made progress to liberal democracy. Egypt for a time was under the control of no one, and a whole generation was politicized. Gains had been seen before in the region likewise. Nasserist and Baʻthist land reform, labour rights, and women's literacy and education programmes in the 1950s and 1960s followed decades of protest over the need for social and economic reform. Hizbullah had managed to force Israel to terminate its illegal occupation of south Lebanon in May 2000. British and French imperialism had been dismantled in South Yemen (1967) and Algeria (1962) respectively in the wake of popular and nationalist armed struggles. In short, the Arab uprisings were a reminder that the role of contentious politics in the region had been complex. Neither a modernist narrative of progress, democracy, liberation and socio-economic redistribution, but nor some Orientalist story of chaos, violence and hatred. Historians, and social scientists, nonetheless, by no means had the kinds of histories at their disposal that had tried to pursue, on a broad-canvas, the complex role that contentious mobilization has played.

The Arab uprisings also vivified a subtle paradox in regard to the explanatory strategies scholars have used to understand contention:

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how to explain, without explaining away? On the one hand, the episode of contention had exhibited innovation, creativity and surprise. New constituencies and new groups had undoubtedly been politicized and made a forceful entry into the political arena, for whatever reason. Football fans, and smugglers, for example, had not been seen on mass demonstrations and protests in the region for years. New sorts of identities and frames had been activated and constructed amid these new mobilizing projects. The idea of the people was suddenly infused with activist meaning. New claims were made to bread, dignity and freedom. New goals emerged: very few had called in any half-way realistic fashion for the 'overthrow of the regime' at least not in secular mode, and in mass protests, for many years. New modes of coordination, through the Internet, for example, and new forms of leaderless organizing had come into being. And there were new strategies and tactics, such as the determined occupation of major public squares and spaces, and pitched battles against the police. There were also amazing, immediate achievements, such as the fall of dictators, that no commentator or government had predicted. Innovation, moreover, was nothing new in the history of the region's contentious politics, as this book will make abundantly clear.

On the other hand, these innovations, as many pointed out, did not drop from the sky. New liberal protests had become more common in the region in recent times; new groups, such as educated students and liberal militant bloggers, had appeared, as well as liberal figures and movements contesting dynastic succession in putative republics. The labour movement had been moving *en masse* in Egypt since 2004. And, in Tunisia, the lower ranks of the major union, the UGTT, had kept up a steady stream of mobilization on social and economic rights. Indeed, perhaps the Arab uprisings were merely the expression of these trends? There are also many ways to explain these uprisings in more structural and contextual terms. The spread of the new media, including satellite television, Internet and mobile phones, the economic crisis, corruption, police violence, and so on, were invoked as factors which created grievances and provided reasons for mobilization.

There is a problem here. Genuine creativity on the one hand, and complete explanation on the other, add up to an explanatory paradox. How could creativity co-exist with such explanation? How can we explain innovation, without explaining it away? How can explanatory strategies be developed that do justice to forms of innovation, and

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figure out how to understand how they come about, without turning them into an epiphenomenon of something else? We note, of course, that explaining 2011 in terms of prior rounds of contestation is to beg the question. It leaves aside the question of what could explain those prior rounds of contestation. It also occludes the forms of innovation that did take place. The question revolves in part around the extent to which scholars should pay attention to initiative, agency, appropriation, attribution and the like, and to what extent to the solidity of pre-existing forms of organization, structure, objective opportunity and so on. The resort to 'anti-explanation' and the construction of 'the lived experience of the moment' (Kurzman 2004), however provocative and interesting, is ultimately an unsatisfactory answer to this conundrum, because protests happen in inherited contexts, and are not completely random, unfathomable or absolutely unpredictable. If so, then what explanatory strategies exist in which creativity can be allowed for? How can one avoid explanations for the new which resort to one form or another of immanence – i.e. the idea that the result was already lurking in complete form somewhere in the start conditions? How could we be surprised, but not perpetually so? How can creativity be satisfactorily situated? This is an important conundrum, highlighted by the debates over the Arab uprisings, but never satisfactorily resolved. It is a puzzle that has been lurking for some time in the long history of the region's contention.

A third and final question was vivified by the uprisings. The leaderless, relatively spontaneous, and even horizontalist organizations of the urban youth scored an impressive success in evading security services and organizing protests, and helped to bring down a regime or two. On the other hand, their capacities and powers dissipated rapidly, at least in Egypt in the aftermath of the uprising, and pyramidal-type organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, made major gains in subsequent elections. Then, partly because the Brotherhood, anxious to secure its place in the state, had abandoned popular mobilization and the revolutionary coalition to its fate during 2011, it was in turn left without allies when it needed them on the streets in the wake of the 3 July 2013 military coup. These events certainly implied that spontaneity, informalism and so on were no panacea. More importantly, they brought to the fore basic questions about the role of leadership, organization and mobilization in the study of social movements. The question of leadership can be posed in relation

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to mobilizations all over the region: it is hard, for example, to explain the prolongation of the first *intifada* in the Occupied Palestinian Territories in 1987–1991 without taking into account the way leaderships mobilized amid the initial uprising; conversely, why was the Egyptian uprising of January 1977 so short-lived? Perhaps this had something to do with the reluctance of the Left and liberals to engage in building up mobilizing structures. To what extent, in fact, have leaderships in the region, and the characteristics, strategies and tactics of the mobilizing projects with which they are associated, played a role in their own successes and failures? Can leadership be safely ignored in the face of other forces? How can leadership be understood without recourse to the unsatisfactory and voluntarist reliance on the existence of thinkers and heroic individuals?

These puzzles can be summarized in the basic questions posed in this book. First, what contribution did contentious mobilization make to overall patterns of historical change? Second, to what extent can we speak of innovation and creativity in relation to contentious mobilization? If there is creativity, then where does it come from, and how can it be characterized, understood and situated? And, third, to what extent did the nature of what I will call mobilizing projects, complete with forms of leadership, organization, identities and principles, goals, strategies and tactics, determine the course and outcomes of contentious mobilization? The main goal of this study is to explore and shed light on these three basic questions. The book also aims to gather together a rich-array of new and quality scholarship, leavened by primary research, to provide a wide-ranging introduction to the important but under-studied history of contention in the MENA from the late eighteenth century to the present.

In answering these questions, the book makes a pitch for the existence of unruly, transgressive and creative contentious politics in the history of the MENA. At certain points there have been new entrants into the not-fully-policeable boundaries of the political field; these new entrants take political matters into their own hands, and, once they get organized, push forward a mobilizing project that is innovative above all in relation to the collective subject it proposes. In contrast with top-down and power-institutional histories, the book aims to explicate the many ways in which protest has mattered in the political struggles and dynamics involved in the making of the modern region. Against conventional views, the book aims to show that contentious

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mobilization is not merely about the reactions of Muslims and Arabs to the impact of the West, an epiphenomenon of socio-economic change, or an expression of prior processes of colonizing discursive inscription. To do justice to the role played by agency, this book aims to show that the dynamics and vectors of transgressive mobilization owe a good deal to ideas and intellectual labour, translocal appropriation, normative commitments, leadership strategies and contingent interactions. Against purely constructionist and agency-laden accounts, however, the book suggests that transgression does not come out of nowhere, but above all finds enabling conditions in the failures and weaknesses of hegemonic incorporation, the dessication of sites of articulation, and the contraction of existing forms of hegemony at the level of the political community as a whole. Borrowing in unconventional ways from the Italian thinker, Antonio Gramsci, the book steers between objectivist historical sociology and subjectivist social constructionism to offer a new history of the MENA, couched in the dynamics of hegemonic contestation.

Survey histories

No wide-ranging history of protests, social and political movements, uprisings and revolution in the region in modern times exists. Edmund Burke's research pioneered this kind of work (Burke 1990) but he never wrote a book-length survey of the sort attempted here. Readers will find much that is complementary in our approaches, but probably conclude that the analysis presented here breaks with the structuralist historical sociological tradition that is so vital in Burke's work. Joel Beinin has offered the only survey history of workers and peasants, an invaluable resource (Beinin 2001). The present study aims to be a lot more inclusive of a wide variety of collective action, and to pursue a much narrower thematic focus on mobilization, leadership, identities, principles and interactions in the political field, as opposed to political economy, class formation and the like. The overlap between the two books is therefore not that great. This book constructs a history of contentious politics which is much more acculturated and political than Beinin's. Tripp's landmark study of resistance in the region, *The Power and the People* (Tripp 2013), situates contestation firmly in structures of domination; it considers not just economic, but also coercive, administrative, gendered and discursive power; it offers a rich

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exploration of the intersection of contestation with space, performance, communication and art. In contrast with Tripp, the analytic core of the present book, in order to sidestep too heavy an emphasis on the sometimes amorphous figure of power, is rooted less in domination/resistance, and more in hegemonic articulation/re-articulation. This book is more concerned with change over time, its structure is more historical than thematic, it is more 'eventful', foregrounds specific leaderships, what they believed, and what they did, and it covers a much longer period.

Many of the other surveys of the history of the region, regardless of their other strengths and riches, do not give a strong sense of the role played by contentious mobilization. Diplomatic and political histories (Holt 1966; Lewis 1961; Vatikiotis 1969; Yapp 1987, 1991) tend to see politics as a matter for Europeans, diplomats, officials and modernizing elites. There may be outbursts of local popular anger from time to time, but these are mere bush-fires in a landscape otherwise carved out from above. Holt's key study of the Mahdi of Sudan in the 1880s, from which this study draws much, was an exception to this (Holt 1970). Other important surveys of Arab politics, such as those that focus on modernization and political legitimacy (Bill and Leiden 1979; Hudson 1977), while suggesting that modernization unleashed a wide variety of social demands, do not focus on those demands or related social or political movements, but rather on rulers' capacity to engage in political development in order to keep order. While Albert Hourani's well-known history of the Arab peoples pays serious attention to social and economic history, popular contentious politics is more or less absent (Hourani 1991), just as it is in his intellectual history (Hourani 1962) and seminal work on the politics of the notables (Hourani 1994). More recent political histories of the region certainly give a fuller view of social forces (Cleveland 2004; Gelvin 2005; Kamrava 2005), but they do not explore the role of contentious politics in any systematic way. In survey analyses of state power and political economy (Ayubi 1995; Luciani 1990; Owen 1981, 2004a; Richards and Waterbury 1990), popular politics is almost invisible. These studies tend towards a 'hard' power, institutional view in which hegemony, consent and contention are residual matters compared to concentrations of military, economic and political power. Agency became much more important in Owen's later work (Owen 2012) but it was that of elites learning from each other to construct ruling systems.

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Orientalism and neo-Orientalism

There is a long Orientalist and now neo-Orientalist tradition of writing about protest in the MENA. After 1945, this tradition gradually migrated away from the university as its colonial assumptions of civilizational and racial superiority, and its ethnocentrism, exceptionalism and cultural essentialism, became ever harder to defend among serious researchers (Lockman 2004: 66–98). Nonetheless, this tradition is important, because blended and modified, it still has a powerful presence among pundits, think-tanks and the media, and enjoyed a revival in universities, especially in security and terrorism studies, during the War on Terror in the 2000s (Lockman 2004: 215–67).

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial officials, sometimes those directly involved in repressing anti-colonial protest, set the tone. According to Mercier, for example, a figure high in the French political establishment in the late nineteenth century, the mass-based Algerian rising of 1871 was simply about the personal opportunism of a key leader, Al-Muqrani, who was styled as 'a rebel, an ingrate, and a traitor' (Mercier 1901: 31–2). Or, the millenarian uprising of the Mahdi in Sudan in the early 1880s was seen by Sir Francis Wingate (1861–1953), a highly decorated British colonial official, and Governor General of Sudan after 1899, as being about a 'dangerous group of religious fanatics out to conquer "infidel" countries' (cited in Tschacher 2011: 74). For British colonial officials in Egypt in the 1920s, liberal nationalists, most of whom were land-owners, Pashas or lawyers, and sought to achieve independence by legal means, were simply known as 'Extremists'. In Libya in the 1920s, the Italian general Graziani saw the inhabitants of Cyrenaica as little more than beasts (Atkinson 2000). During his attempted conquest of Egypt (1798–1801), Napoleon told one of his generals:

> The Turks can only be led by the greatest severity. Every day I cut off five or six heads in the streets of Cairo ... It is necessary to take a tone that will cause them to obey, and to obey, for them, is to fear (Cole 2007: 104–5)

It was a violent trope that was to echo in the corridors of power from the France of elusive Oriental glory to the Israel of the Iron Wall (Shlaim 2000).

The idea that protestors were backward, uncivilized, chaotic, irrational, violent, opportunistic, fanatical, recalcitrant and dangerous

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