


Global Epistemologies: Concepts, Methodologies, and Data Systems

Reflections on the Study of Contentious Politics in the Middle East and North Africa

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The essay reflects on the study of social movements and contentious politics in the Middle East and North Africa region, especially after the wave of uprisings that started in 2011. It argues that these uprisings have been a watershed in contentious politics, yet they have not been adequately scrutinized to develop existing theoretical paradigms in mainstream sociology and political science. Rather, these events were mostly straitjacketed to fit the predominant paradigms of democratic transitions and social movement theory. It concludes by providing preliminary reflections on how the currently dominant methodologies and epistemologies in social sciences might be limiting theoretical development informed by events outside the global North.

INTRODUCTION

Contentious politics takes different forms, some more loud and visible than others. This article will reflect on the study of contentious politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, specifically the Anglophone literature coming from sociology and political science, signaling some significant positive shifts and raising some flags regarding voids and challenges that characterize the canon of this literature. Rather than providing a comprehensive review of this vast literature, the article hopes to shed light on some positive trends and what might be limiting potential paradigmatic shifts in the field and a deeper understanding of events.¹ It argues that understanding contentious politics as a dynamic process imbued in history and context rather than as singular events is imperative for the scholarship to avoid earlier mistakes. These uprisings, which unfolded in 2011, marked a shift in the literature and provided the opportunity for paradigmatic shifts in the study of contentious politics across the social sciences. However, the full potential of these advancements is restricted by imbalances in knowledge-production dynamics between the region and the Global North—specifically, with the parameters of research agendas drawn primarily elsewhere, and the predominant theoretical paradigms derived from experiences of the United States and Europe.

For decades, though, the social science scholarship on contentious politics and its agents in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was predominantly focused on regime-level politics, Islamist movements, and formal organizations of civil society. Excellent contributions showing the diverse forms of contention and movement building, and their protagonists, were outliers.² This “invisibility” of ordinary people and their different forms of collective action and dynamics of contention became obvious with the eruption of the 2011 uprisings, known as the Arab Spring.³ Turning to the scholarship in order to understand the unfolding events, there was not much there except for a few studies that chronicled the rise of some new actors. Forced to shift attention, the increased scholarly study of contentious politics following the uprisings is a welcome change. However, more than a decade later, with these uprisings fading, the scholarly focus is shifting back to regime-level dynamics, this time under the rubric of “democratic backsliding.” In doing so, this scholarship deals with the uprisings as insular events rather than episodes in an unfolding process. Accordingly, it is missing many nuances and forgoing attempts at understanding the far-reaching impacts they carry.

The following section focuses on when and why the study of contentious politics in the region moved to the forefront and what this reveals about the overall direction in social science scholarship. The second section argues

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¹ For thorough reviews of the literature, see, for example, Yom 2015; Allam et al. 2022.

² For example, see Bayat 1997, 2000b, 2002; Abdelrahman 2002, 2009; Singerman 2006; Clark and Schwedler 2003; and Shehata 1992.

³ This label is controversial given the participation of non-Arab populations in these regional uprisings, and the dramatic events and toll these uprisings took on the lives of people in the region. Nevertheless, it is the most commonly used term.

that once the uprisings pushed contentious politics front and center, the scholarly production turned to the democratic transition and social movement theory (SMT) literature at the expense of other relevant literature and alternative forms of theorization. The overlaying of these paradigms with a very different genealogy from the events they were meant to explain limited a broader understanding of contentious politics in the region. The third section examines the overarching logics behind the bulk of the research, and how an interest in establishing causality, rather than a more curious exploratory direction, could undermine its explanatory power. It highlights the need to move toward a transdisciplinary approach to contentious politics, overcoming the parochialism of some research methodologies, and the pertinence of historicization and contextualization as epistemological approaches for understanding such complex phenomena.

The article then moves to highlight two fixtures in the literature: the Islamists and the secular “youth.” It argues that this dyadic framing of agents of contentious politics in the region is reductionist, masking the plurality of actors and subsuming the multiplicity of dynamics of contention under the Islamist-secular divide in formal politics. Building off of this analysis, the final section advocates a more in-depth understanding of contentious politics in the MENA region, including the uprisings in their own right. It argues that such accounts should not be relegated as “case studies” for preexisting paradigms, but rather as an opportunity for new theorization for the field at large. Specifically, it concludes that a broader definition of the “political” that transcends the binary of contentious versus traditional politics is needed, and the deemphasizing of procedural and formalistic understandings of political processes is pertinent.

THE STORM AND ITS AFTERMATH

At least a decade before the eruption of the uprisings in 2011, the region was already experiencing different forms of collective action, the rise of new actors, and contention outside the electoral realm. For the most part, these were glossed over as “nonevents” until the uprisings. Few took note of the range of groups who came to be the agents of the 2011 uprisings, smaller episodes of contention (e.g., local protests for state services and socioeconomic demands), and subtle forms of collective action (e.g., legal contention through court cases).⁴ Across the region, mass mobilization in support of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000 and against the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 marked the first years of the new millennium. This was followed by prodemocracy mobilization and the rise of movements such as Kifaya (Enough) in Egypt and the Green Movement in

Iran. Youth networks were formed, using social media, blogs, and later Facebook to highlight issues of political and economic importance and to mobilize. The region also witnessed collective action by different groups for socioeconomic demands, land seizure by farmers and labor strikes in Egypt since the late 1990s, a mass movement for women’s rights in Morocco in 2004, the Gafsa protests in Tunis in 2008, and protests in Algeria in 2010, to name a few. It is not clear whether these events and their diversified actors did not garner enough attention because the scholarly “gaze” is trained to see the region mainly through Islam and Islamism, as part of the othering that Edward Said elaborately explained, or if it is due to a predetermined focus on formal actors and elite politics. Probably, both.

For a long time, the scholarly focus was concentrated on understanding the “authoritarian resilience” of the region’s regimes and the dynamics of its electoral politics—or the lack thereof—at the expense of the study of contentious politics and social movements (broadly defined). As political scientist Gregory Gause (2011a, 2011b) noted in a couple of self-critical papers, social scientists working on the MENA had focused much of their energy on trying to understand the longevity of autocratic regimes in the region and had not paid as much attention to the potential for popular mobilization. Despite early criticism of this imbalanced focus (Anderson 2006), the pattern persisted. When the literature did take notice of mobilization or contentious politics in the region, it was always in response to “major” events such as the Iranian Revolution in 1978–79, to a lesser extent the so-called Bread Riots in Egypt in 1977, or to episodes that involved Islamists, major casualties, or both—for example, the Hama uprising in Syria in 1982, the Kurdish uprising in Iraq in 1991, or the Algerian Civil War in the 1990s. Partly understandably, social movements, protests, and different forms of overt mobilization had subsided in the MENA—as elsewhere—by the end of the 1970s. Except for sporadic episodes, the long-haul movements of the 1960s—labor, student, feminist—were eclipsed by the rise of Islamist movements. Most of the few studies done—some of great value—focused on Islamist movements (e.g., Schwedler 2007; Wickham 2002; Wiktorowicz 2004). Overall, contentious politics and social movements in the region were missing from the mainstream body of social science, and when such work appeared, it was mostly focusing on Islamists.

Subsequently, scholars were caught off guard when the avalanche of uprisings visibly cascaded through the region in 2011, bringing to the fore different actors and unraveling seismic shifts in the political landscape. As expected in such events, they were unpredictable.⁵ The problem, though, was not enough groundwork done earlier to help understand the shifts rather than expecting them. Accordingly, it was not “entirely clear what questions should be

4 There were exceptions such as Bayat 2000a; Beinun 2009; Abdelrahman 2009; Denoëux 1993; Ismail 1996, 2006; Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006; and Kraidy 2009, to mention a few.

5 For an excellent debate on the scholarship and predictability of the uprisings, see Howard and Walters 2014, Lust 2014, and Lynch 2014.

asked, what puzzles they presented, or even how they should be ‘cased’” (Allam et al. 2022, 63). Rather, the sudden interest of the scholarly literature was a match with that of the media. While the media frequently used the term “awakening” to describe what was going on in the region, implying that most people were in a coma or deep sleep, the sudden scholarly interest reflected a similar understanding. The most predominant question was: where did the movements come from?

Yet many quickly started theorizing about the events, sometimes using “thin” accounts. Political scientists and sociologists, many who were new to the Middle East’s contentious politics, rushed to provide explanations.⁶ As Kasaba puts it, this “messy affair, whose origins and ultimate outcome are still far from being clear, was almost immediately put on the bed of theoretical analysis and ‘explained’ by several disciplinary sociologists (see Perez-Oviedo 2015; Beck 2014)” (Kasaba 2016, 93). From 2011 through spring 2015, “more than two hundred English-language academic books and over a thousand journal articles in all languages concerning the Arab Spring were published” (Yom 2015, 684). In a dataset of all MENA-focused articles published in thirteen leading political science journals between 2000 and 2019, Cammett and Kendall (2021) found thirty articles on the topic of “social mobilization.” Disaggregating this number, the magnitude of change is clearer: in the period 2000–2010, there were only seven articles coded under the theme; in the following decade (2011–2019), this number more than tripled, with twenty-three articles (El-Mahdi 2024). Similarly, in sociology, a “jump occurred in 2013, reflecting the interest in the Middle East in the wake of the ‘Arab Spring’” (Kasaba 2016, 99). A lot of this analysis, though, lacked in-depth knowledge of the region and was rushed to meet a rising trend.

Fortunately, shortly after the euphoria had settled, the scholarship on contentious politics in the region made some positive strides thanks to the uprisings. Sari Hanafi (2020), an acknowledged sociologist himself, concludes that “the post-2011 Arab social research debate shows some reconciliation between different paradigms,” labeling this a “Cognitive Arab Spring” for social sciences in the region. Similarly, an accomplished group of political scientists concludes that “research on the 2011 uprisings has both expanded our understanding of mobilization and regime change in the Middle East and made meaningful theoretical and methodological contributions to broader debates” (Allam et al. 2022, 66). In tandem with these shifts, future research might benefit from overcoming three limitations to further build on existing contributions. Specifically, these are (1) an affixture to dominant paradigms; (2) a preoccupation with causality at the expense of understanding; and (3) the application of universalist categories. Even though these limitations are intertwined,

the following sections examine each at length, highlighting along the way examples of research streams that attempt to transcend them.

DOMINANT PARADIGMS

Some scholarly work in political science and sociology recognized the dramatic positional shifts across analytic categories exposed by the uprisings, and provided a nuanced application of existing paradigms. For example, works on democratization have investigated debates around ascendant Islamism by adopting a political economy approach, explaining the success of such parties and the regional blunders that obstructed democratic consolidation (e.g., Sallam 2022; Masoud 2013). Others contextualized the global impact of the uprisings through the analysis of the political economy of world-systems (e.g., Moghadam 2017; Talani 2014), thus deterritorializing the important roles that peripheralized actors and regions play on the global stage. Moreover, other strands of research broke away completely from the dominant SMT approaches, bringing the events under closer examination and highlighting the diversity of its actors.⁷ Providing a historicized reading of political subjectivities in the region revealed not only how they were shaped by institutions and social structures, but also how they played structuring roles themselves (Elyachar 2017; Ghannam 2013; Hanafi 2012; Tripp 2013). Others interrogated the pathways between protest culture and the use of digital spaces (Markham 2014), as well as the role of emotions and affect in the uprisings (Volpi and Jasper 2018; Pearlman 2013). Such research, of which the above are a few examples, revealed facets of contention that have been missing from mainstream scholarship. They are mentioned here not to the exclusion of other equally valuable work, but as harbingers of the potential plurality of research frameworks to understand contentious politics in the region, and not just the uprisings.

Straitjacketing events into predominant paradigms tends to cardinalize distinct parts of these complex, unfolding processes. Attempts prioritize process-oriented and universalistic conditions, on the one hand, and uphold organized movements, their opportunities and resources, as the locus of change, on the other. In doing so, this scholarship tends to sideline many important developments, paying disproportionate attention to the “big” and “visible” outcomes, particularly change in regime type or the lack thereof. Even though they were less than traditional revolutions, these uprisings were speaking to the structural problems within the postcolonial state model in the region. While democratic transition remains an unfulfilled aspiration of this wave of contention, the unfolding of these uprisings and their repercussions are much more complex

⁶ The late sociologist Mona Abaza (2011) dubbed it “academic tourism.”

⁷ For example, see Abdelrahman 2014; Bou Khater and Majed 2020; El-Ghobashy 2021; Khatib and Lust 2014; A. Said 2023; and Yousef 2017.

than can be reduced to one outcome. Dislodging the longest and most stable regimes of the region (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, and Sudan), unleashing protracted internecine conflicts (Syria, Yemen, and Libya), and giving rise to an economic-financial crisis of unprecedented magnitude, these uprisings have left myriad impacts on the region that have yet to be studied—and cannot be fully understood using the democratic transition models based on experiences of regime change dynamics in the last century in Latin America or Southern Europe, or with the so-called Colored Revolutions more recently, all markedly different from the Middle East in the twenty-first century.

Likewise, social movement theory might not be the best-suited framework to explain events that were driven by a host of disparate actors and immediate-action groups, rather than “social movements” in the formalistic, classical sense. Despite variations, the main approaches of SMT (the political process model, culturalist approaches, resources mobilization, and new social movements) were all predominantly derived from European and North American experiences—and to a much lesser extent Latin American—of the twentieth century. As such, the divisions they make between formal and informal actors and relationships, “traditional” versus “networked” movements, or how collective action arises and is sustained derive from epistemological categories of these societies. While some analogies could be made, reaching out for these approaches to understand dynamics in which informality is key and historical grievances are very different masks a lot of important details: For example, the many forms of networks, groups, and everyday acts that are not expressly political but end up having significant political implications (Anceschi, Gervasio, and Teti 2014; Bayat 2012; Cavatorta 2012; Volpi and Clark 2019). Or the new imaginaries surrounding gender relations, cultural norms, and human rights, all of which are of significance to the everyday lives of MENA citizens.

UNDERSTANDING VERSUS EXPLANATION

Perhaps as a result of upholding certain paradigms, much of the post-uprisings contentious politics research prioritized explanation over understanding. This is reflected in the overemphasis on research questions trying to establish correlations between certain variables as the causes of the uprisings or, alternatively, their so-called failure. Using the Iranian Revolution as an example, sociologist Charles Kurzman (2004) argued earlier that “to the extent that revolutionary experience is characterized by confusion, then understanding this experience may disconfirm all explanation” (328). He further reiterated this point in warning against analyzing the Arab uprisings solely along the calculus of measurable variables (Kurzman 2012). Similarly, political scientist Mona El-Ghobashy (2021) laments how the social sciences scholarship has increasingly segregated the

different aspects of the Arab uprisings. Even worse, in some instances, the research questions reflect an interest in testing the validity of the existing theories more than in understanding the events in their own right. In doing so, neither Kurzman nor this article is suggesting that explanation is unattainable or should be sacrificed. After all, that is one of the main purposes of the social sciences enterprise. Rather, it suggests the need to move beyond the current overemphasis on establishing causality and correlations (sometimes even mechanical) to providing “thick descriptions” and unearthing less-apparent accounts and mechanisms.

In that respect, there is a need to move away from the myopic breakdown of complex issues and static application of concepts, stripping them of their analytical power.⁸ For example, in analyzing the use of one of the key concepts in SMT literature, “repertoires of contention,” sociologist Atef A. Said (2022) warns against the “presentist” use of this concept in understanding contentious politics in the region. He argues that by focusing only on successful mass mobilization as opposed to the longer dynamics of contention as a “process,” such scholarship strips even the classic Tillyian concept of cycles and repertoires of contention of its prowess. While uprisings and revolutionary situations are rare occasions, they are not insular forms of contention; rather, they are episodes in longer processes. In that respect, this presentism, as Said presents it, is symptomatic of a broader trend sidelining both history and context in the prevalent analysis of contentious politics of the region.

In contrast, historicization and contextualization of events, coupled with a nonmechanical application of concepts, allows the research to provide very different readings of the dynamics of contentious politics in the region, including the 2011 uprisings (Abdelrahman 2014; Chalcraft 2016; De Smet 2016). For example, one of the main chants early on in the Egyptian uprising was “al-gaysh w’al-sha’b id wahda” (the people and the army are one). Taken at face value, the slogan could be read as an expression of authoritarian affinities by the masses, or even as a survival tactic trying to deflect possible repression by the army. However, factoring in the historical production of citizen perceptions of the Egyptian military—the armed forces’ role in the fight for independence, the support of social justice by the 1952 military regime, and its image as a bulwark against the constant regional threats by Israel—the depth of this slogan is revealed.

Similarly, contextualizing the research puzzles can further illuminate hidden dimensions of the popular imagination and provide potentially predictive value for the successful strategies of mobilization and transition. For instance, the dynamic economic realities under neoliberal reform were catalysts for many isolated protest actions prior to the uprisings; what made possible the sudden convergence of different class positionalities to displace regimes in the region, and why did this devolve shortly

⁸ I am grateful to sociologist Atef Said for drawing my attention to this point.

after? The answer might lie in the different meanings of the unified slogan of the uprisings, “al-Sha’b yurid istqat al-Nizam” (down with the regime system), which meant very different things to different people based on their social class (El-Mahdi 2018). These meanings stem from the history of nation-state development in the region, its correlation to existing regimes, and changing class alliances. However, these relations cannot be deciphered without an in-depth knowledge of the histories, culture (including language), and makeup of these societies, which is reflected predominantly in the work of scholars of the region compared to others (see, for example, El-Ghobashy 2021; Bayat 2013, 2017; A. S. Said 2023).

Another issue that arises in prioritizing explanation versus understanding stems from an imbalanced focus on positivist methods and neat research models to explain the messiness of contentious politics. As Resat Kasaba (2016) has noted, “[t]he more ‘scientific’ sociology has tried to become, the more it has focused on methodological rigor that is built on (preferably quantifiable) aspects of social phenomena. This has put a growing distance between sociological research and what is euphemistically referred to as the ‘real world,’ especially... areas like the Middle East” (83). Similar critiques have been made for even longer about the literature coming out of political science (Shapiro 2002). This is a general disciplinary trend, not specific to research on contentious politics of the region. However, given the complexity of history and layers of culture of different countries of the region, including colonialism, postcoloniality, the construction of ethnicities, and the religious composition of societies—just to name a few—the confinement to certain research methods tends to have compounded limitations. For example, in understanding the dynamics of the 2011 uprisings, Charles Kurzman (2012) gives an example of how “bravery” was key but also how it cannot and should not be quantified into a measurable variable. Rather, it can only be understood based on human accounts, stories, and observations. Unfortunately, in attempts to explain contentious episodes in the region, focusing on nationwide causal factors has come at the expense of interpretive, inductive, and exploratory logics. This predominant impulse, however, may be missing the forest for the trees.

PREDOMINANT CATEGORIES

As the monumental shifts of the uprisings changed the political dynamics and brought new actors to the foreground, the scholarship expanded its scope of what is being studied, and how. Expectedly, the academic commitment to study Islamists, as one of the region’s main actors, continued after the uprisings. However, there was a steady positive move away from categorical lumping of Islamists together as a unitary archetypal model. The post-2011 work shed light on the variation within Islamists and the nuances of their interactions among each other and with the state and society at large (e.g., Cammett and Luong 2014; Lacroix and Shalata 2016; Grewal et al. 2019; Brooke 2022). While some questions are less researched—such as why the al-Nahda

Islamists in Tunisia behave differently than the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, or why the socially conservative Islamist Salafis split politically—the overall direction, at least among scholars of the region, has been to underscore the nuances among the so-called Islamists.

However, this might have been replaced, at least temporarily, with the rise of a new predominant unit category: the (secular) “youth.” For many who follow contentious politics, images of mass mobilization in the squares of the different capitals across the region resonated with those of the Prague Spring, the student movement of the 1960s in Europe, the Eastern European protests of 1989, and the color revolutions of the 2000s. For the media, it was a colorful image, with “modern” educated middle-class youth who use social media and resemble their peers in the Global North (El-Mahdi 2011). Soon there was an outpouring of scholarship on youth, creating a new “unitary” category. In part, evidence for a collective youth category is tied to the use of social media, the digital propagation of demands and grievances, and the sporadic, horizontal manifestations that defied the vertical leadership structures common to social movements in the region. These factors played a vital role in the sustained activities that led to the fall of authoritarian regimes. Hence Karl Manheim’s concept of “youth” as an actor gained a lot of resonance in the literature (see, e.g., Herrera 2014; Murphy 2012; Tohamy 2016; Rennick 2018).

Notwithstanding the important contribution of some of this scholarship, much of the literature from the time of the Arab uprisings used the term “liberal secular” or “revolutionary” youth to designate and even romanticize those who were assumed to be the main moving force behind the uprisings. In holding these “good” youth to represent the collectivity of younger generations in the Middle East, key affiliations and differences within the youth that would aid in explaining the devolution of these democratic openings were neglected. And while a large, diversified segment of the youth population was able to coalesce for the shared goal of toppling incumbent regimes, they soon differed on future directions, political agendas, and even their identity as a collective (see, e.g., Holdo 2017). Many who subsume contentions in the region under the “secular youth versus Islamist” divide dismiss important divisions within these two imagined constructs (e.g., Cole 2014). Not all youth face marginalization or hold progressive orientations, including some leading activist groups. Both the secular and the Islamist movements have a core constituency of youth.

Especially in a region where more than 65 percent of the population is below the age of thirty, it is not very useful let alone accurate to use age as the sole axis of differentiation. The younger generation has equally strong yet varied affiliations by class, geography, and sometimes ideological preferences (Khatib and Lust 2014). Many young people are part of other active groups and movements, such as the Ultras sports fan groups in Egypt, the movement of the unemployed in Morocco, and the LGBTQ groups in Lebanon, to name a few. Some scholarship was attuned to this diversity of actors and forms of contention. These scholars produced work on different mobilizers of protest, such as

the trade union activists in Tunisia (Yousfi 2013), the labor movement in Egypt (e.g., Beinin 2012, 2016; Alexander and Bassiouny 2014), and the movement of the unemployed and other peripheral actors in Morocco (Bennafla and Badimon 2011). Others provided sociological and political accounts of gender dynamics among the football fan groups (the Ultras), the historical presence of women in public and private space, and women's participation in uprisings (Hasso 2018; El-Husseini 2016; Khalid 2015). These works open doors to understanding how gender issues contributed to the uprisings and how gender relations and attitudes are being rewritten, one of the less-discussed outcomes of the uprisings. In doing so, they show the multifaceted dimensions of contentious politics and the need for deeper engagement with them.

One of the many dangers of fixation on specific actors is that it also diverts attention from the different, more subtle forms of contention. Thus, once the height of political mobilization in the streets and elections ended, once the conflict between the Islamists and the non-Islamists was drawn to a conclusion, there was a retreat in the study of contentious politics in the region. Since the two main protagonists are not visible, there is, concomitantly, less to study. Yet different forms of citizen contention and different actors were and continue to be present, and they are not circumscribed within the street, the mosque, or the ballot box—the overly examined arenas of participation in the region. The continued contention over gender relations and socioeconomic demands and the fight for an open public sphere are still ongoing, despite being less visible than mass street protests in Cairo, Tunis, or Baghdad. While they escape media attention, they should not evade the scrutiny of scholarship.

CONCLUSION

The uprisings across the MENA region since 2011 present a watershed in contentious politics in the region and beyond. This is an opportunity to provide groundbreaking additions to that field of study in the social sciences at large and not just contentious politics in the Middle East. The uprisings were one of the few times where positionalities of the center-periphery relationship seemed to be reversed. The cycles of contention in MENA countries (usually peripheralized) inspired similar logics and actions in the center (the United States, mainly, and Europe), in a way decentering them. Indeed, what came to be labeled the Arab Spring was part of a global wave that was neither solely Arab—it included mass protests in Turkey, and earlier in Iran—nor even Middle Eastern. Rather, the emotions, strategies, and demands of the Arab uprisings were manifested during Occupy Wall Street in the United States and the United Kingdom and the anti-austerity movement in Spain, among others. Similarly, following the retreat of these uprisings and the renewal of authoritarian dynamics in the region, the world—not just the Middle East—was hit by a rising wave of the ultra-Right. The global tendrils of these uprisings should prompt a different direction in theory building

where they serve as a source for generating new paradigms instead of being cased into existing ones.

Critical perspectives on the scholarly treatment of the MENA region had resulted in positive changes before. The persistence of critiques of neo-Orientalism and Arab exceptionalism continues to push the research away from implicit biases and predispositions toward the region. In the same vein, there is a need to avoid implicitly Western and Eurocentric explanations as *universal* paradigms for understanding contentious politics in the region. Paradoxically, the opposite is true in extending lessons learned in the MENA region to global debates and understandings. This speaks more broadly to the continued tension between specific area knowledge and the aspiration for generality, which is unfortunately very much a reflection of continued Eurocentrism in academia. It is important here to note that this tension in integrating findings from the Middle East into mainstream theory building does not pertain to the generalizability of frameworks built on Euro-American cases. For example, Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, and Alain Touraine, among others, are thought of not as Americanists or Europeanists but rather as household names in the field, even though their theoretical contributions both within SMT and contentious politics at large were derived from the study of European and American cases. Thus, scholarly accounts with deep knowledge of the region should not be reduced to being just “empirical” cases but should also serve as the basis for new theorization.

Finally, confinement to certain theoretical paradigms and research methods, adherence to a limited set of topics and actors, and an emphasis on the universal rather than the particular (e.g., democratic transition, the impact of neoliberalism, and now democratic backsliding) are limitations that exist more pervasively within the literature on contentious politics coming out of political science and sociology. In doing so, this research unwittingly omits unique regional and local factors from the analyses. Given that contentious politics in the MENA region takes different forms steeped in history and colored by contextual factors, some forms are louder and more visible than others. Yet, that should not be an indicator of the importance of one over the other. Similarly, the boundaries between the expressly political and the assumed non- or apolitical actions in the region are fluid, porous, and often blurred.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

I state that no competing interests exist.

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