

TALES OF FREEDOM INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND DEMOCRATISATION IN THE ARAB WORLD

ARTICLE

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Introduction

The road to political freedom in the Arab world has been a long one, with many impediments. In this article, I explore two paths and tales in the pursuit of freedom within the region. The first is undertaken by regimes that throughout the decades have sought to realise the freedom of their “states” from other states in the international system, be they former colonial powers and/or regional rivals. In their tales of freedom, they have emphasised ideals of national independence, sovereignty, and national unity. The second pursuit is driven by various social forces seeking freedom of the “people” from these regimes. In their tales, they have emphasised individual freedoms and dignity, democracy, and equality. I argue that often these two pursuits have clashed, making the realisation of freedom in the Arab world very difficult.

Tales, past and present

Tales are stories that political actors tell themselves and the world. Like narratives, tales tell us a story about the identity of a political actor: their grievances, traumas, cultural and political markers, and, ultimately, mission. Like narratives, tales mobilise the people offering the social reasons to justify social action – be it peaceful or violent. Tales construct and deconstruct the world. They are plausible social lies; plausible because they have some truth to them. They enable and constrain political action. Crucially, tales link the past to the present and from it to the future.

Tales of freedom in the Arab world are shaped by the past. It is, thus, impossible to study the present Arab world without an understanding of the past, namely the legacy of state formation. Studying the past offers many benefits, but I demarcate three reasons here. First, understanding the past enables us to explore how socio-political changes at a certain point in time continue to shape the present. Socio-political changes could be an industrial revolution, a war, or the emergence of an idea (such as democracy or fascism). Second, and relatedly, exploring the past matters because certain “fateful events”, as Max Weber calls them, set path-dependent trajectories that constrain/enable the actions of future generations. For example, many regimes in the present Arab world are products of events

that took place in the 1950s and 1960s. Lastly, as Charles Tilly's work has shown, the past matters because events (e.g., Chinese revolution), political systems (e.g., democracy), and ideas or concepts (e.g., authoritarian populism) offer models and vernaculars for future political actors to emulate.

The Arab world: the weight of the past

What is now the Arab world was mostly under the control of the Ottoman Empire (circa 14th to 20th centuries). The weakening of the Ottoman Empire since the end of the 17th century, largely due to internal rebellions and European expansion to the region, and then its total disintegration by 1920 was a major event in the region. The sweeping change stirred intellectual, social and political activism, paving the way to the modern "Middle East". The shifting political borders, the emergence of "state" boundaries and imported concepts like nationalism and sovereignty, and colonial control by France and Britain (and to a lesser extent Italy and Spain) aroused many questions on identity. Intellectuals of the 19th and 20th centuries had to address several questions: Who am I? What (political) community do I belong to? How is the region going to be organised politically? Which identity and/or ideology will form the basis for the new political order? Arab and Muslim intellectuals provided three answers and visions: Arab nationalism, Islamism, and nation-state projects.

Each of these visions addressed core questions on identity and political order. These ideas served to offer individuals and groups a sense of meaning about the self and community, tales that spoke to the past, addressed the present and aimed to construct the future. In many ways, these visions were also state-and-nation-building projects. Among many others, Antoun Saade (1904-1949) theorised for Syrian nationalism, a project to unite the Levant. Michel Aflaq (1910-1989) and Salah al-Din Bitar (1912-1980) theorised for Arab nationalism, founding the Ba'ath (Revival) Party, which would rule Iraq and Syria in the post-WWII period. Hasan al-Bana (1906-1949) envisioned an Islamic umma and founded the Muslim Brotherhood. Jawad Boulous (1900-1982) imagined a Lebanese nation/state as distinct from the Levant or the Arab world. Misr al-Fata struggled for Egyptian nationalism. Political leaders, like Sheriff Hussein (1853-1931), Emir of Mecca, wanted to unite the Arabs in one state, only to be betrayed by Britain, which had divided the region with France into spheres of influence in the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) – another fateful event that would have a long-lasting impact on the region.

These ideological visions offered important frameworks and tales to diagnose social and political transformations in the region and provided avenues to realise political goals. Despite their ideological differences, most political movements wanted independence and freedom from colonial powers – and from one another!

Tales: constructing the future (1940-1980)

Most of these ideologies would find their way to the political arena, first in the form of political movements and parties in many countries, such as Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Tunisia, Jordan and others, and later through the military institutions. The struggle against

British and French colonialism predominated all political discourse and activism in the period 1920-1950. Zionist expansion in Palestine and the British Balfour Declaration (1917), which promised a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine, aggravated the opposition to colonialism.

The rise of the Soviet Union and the US post-WWII offered crucial avenues for political change in many Arab countries. A major military coup, which transformed into a social revolution, took place in Egypt in 1952, offering not only a model for other regimes to emulate, but actual political and economic support. The 1952 revolution brought the charismatic and populist leader Jamal Abd Al-Nasser (1918-1970) to power. Like all movements that came to power after him, the Nasserite revolution identified three key goals: national independence, end of colonialism, and social justice. Nasser’s revolution engraved a key tale in Arab politics, emphasising national freedom, which would be an influential instrument in his and other regimes’ attempts to preserve power.

Nasser’s revolution would be followed and emulated by others in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya, with failed attempts in Lebanon, Jordan and the Arab Gulf. As regimes were consolidating their power usually against their rivals, which in some cases were key players in the initial revolution, they began to repress the opposition. Nasser, Hafez al-Assad (1970-2000), Saddam Hussein (1978-2003), Mu’amar al-Qaddafi (1969-2011) and others all used their tales of freedom to repress opposition to their regimes, clamping down on political parties, activists and communities that threatened their powers. They monopolised the ideological spheres: defining who is “patriotic” and who is a “collaborator” with external forces. Regimes’ tales of freedom became the source of suppression of domestic quests for freedom. External attempts to topple rival regimes (say, US attempts to topple Saddam Hussein or Libya’s Qaddafi), usually by supporting domestic rivals, offered some ingredients to regimes’ tales of freedom. Both regimes’ and their rivals’ tales emphasised the freedom of the “people”, a vague but powerful tale that stressed unity, but masked the disunity of the various groups seeking change. The two tales of freedom clashed.

Tales of an “Arab Spring”: the Arab uprisings (2011-2018)

The Arab uprisings, a wave of political revolts against authoritarian regimes, which started in Tunisia in 2010/2011 and then spread to most of the Arab world, formed another important event in the history of the region. After decades of authoritarian rule, economic hardships, and, ironically, a deficit in national sovereignty, peoples of the region revolted. The quest for freedom, this time of the individual against repressive regimes, made a disruptive claim: *The people want the fall of the regime!* The claim was, largely, met in Tunisia with the fall of Ben Ali (1936-2019) and in Egypt with the toppling of Housni Mubarak (1928-2020). The uprisings formed critical moments when the people, or some of them, entered a conversation with their rulers – a conversation of two tales.

In their tales and performances, the revolutionaries skilfully and dramatically reclaimed certain values from the regime. They emphasised their “unity”, the unity of the people, deconstructing regimes’ attempts to divide and rule. In Syria, protesters spoke of themselves

as “the Syrian people”: “not Sunnis or Alawis, we want freedom,” they claimed. In Egypt, they emphasised that they were *Eid Wahda* (lit. one hand, united) and that their protest was peaceful (or *Silmiya*), despite their ideological differences and the violence of the first few days of the Egyptian revolution. The revolutionaries’ tales spoke to their regimes and the hesitant members of the public. They performed the alternative, utopian society, largely to debunk regime attempts to frame them as external collaborators. In Egypt, for one example, demonstrators carried the cross and the Qur’an; Christians safeguarded the Midan as their Muslim peers were praying. The peoples’ tales were gaining ground.

But regimes continued to threaten people with tales that not only cautioned against foreign intervention, but also ones that distinguished between chaos (which regimes hastened to remind could be caused by the protests) and *stability* which (regimes claimed) they guaranteed.

However, the failure to consolidate democracy in Tunisia and Egypt and the constrained transition to democracy in Syria, Libya, or Yemen, which revealed deep socio-political divides – not unity – and, in some cases, willingness to enter alliances with external forces to topple incumbent regimes, restored regimes’ tales of freedom and acts of repression. Regimes have returned to the discourse of “stability”, “national independence”, “order”, “national unity”, and to the accusation of the opposition, real or imagined, as “fomenters of chaos”, “traitors”, and “collaborators” with “external forces” – tales of silencing and repression.