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Introduction: The Arab Spring in the Arabian Peninsula and its aftermath

In the Arabian Peninsula, mobilizations in 2011 against authoritarian rulers took various shapes and followed different rationales. For that matter, Yemen, Bahrain and Oman, where mass-mobilizations took place, are very different from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates where only a small segment of intellectuals demanded reforms. Contestation also met with varying levels of success. As such, Yemen, where President ‘Alī ‘Abdallāh Ṣāliḥ was forced to resign, is again different from Bahrain where repression apparently preserved the so-called “stability (istiqrār)” of the country. Hence, a comparative analysis at the sub-regional level adds to the assessment that monarchies and resource-rich states were better equipped than republics to deal with protest. However, regardless of their initial success, these mobilizations triggered long-term processes of change everywhere and at various levels of the social and political order.

The Arabian Peninsula’s most populated country, Yemen, has recently been the focus of several recent publications in addition to a number of op-eds and short analytical papers written by researchers with extensive fieldwork experience. This interest is not only due to the large scale of the “Yemen Spring” but also to the existence of a significant batch of “Yemenologists”. Freedom of movement for Europeans and North Americans, liberal visa regulations, the presence of foreign research institutions like the Centre Français d’Archéologie et de Sciences Sociales (CEFAS) and the American Institute of Yemeni Studies (AIYS) — or Yemeni institutions like the Yemen Center for Studies and Research — and a true fascination for the country’s history and its society have structured academic interest for Yemen despite increasingly precarious security conditions. Relative freedom of expression has allowed Yemeni researchers to publish their share of analyses regardless of the dire economic situation of universities there. As a result, our understanding of the country has been greatly enhanced thanks to ethnographic studies of Change Square in Sanaa, inquiries into the role of political parties, particularly al-İṣlāḥ, the effect of mobilization on the various conflicts in Sa’da, the South and against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, as well as studies of the political transition process as specified in the Gulf Co-operation Council initiative. However, there is still much to be done and numerous constraints, the insecurity in particular, increasingly limit our collective capacity to address fundamental issues and processes.

Analyses of the dynamics of the “Arab Spring” among the six Gulf monarchies differ widely in terms of quantity and approaches. Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait, which saw mass-protests, mostly fostered research in domestic politics. Whereas, in the case of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, where no such mobilization occurred, protests were mostly addressed from a geopolitical and diplomatic perspective.

The Bahraini uprising and its repression have generated most of the writings by academics and experts. Few works however have analyzed the mobilization process per se and the larger context in which it took place. The bulk of the existing literature very much revolves around various aspects of the sectarian divide between Sunnis and Shias and, in particular, the sectarian paradigm through which the regime dispenses repression. Events in Bahrain have even given rise to a series of books specifically focusing on sectarianism in the Gulf monarchies in a comparative perspective. Only a handful of works have tried to offer an understanding of the factional dynamics at play in the regime’s pre- and post-uprising policies. As compared with the wealth of contributions focusing on Bahrain, protests in Oman and Kuwait have attracted little attention. Yet Oman has witnessed a surprisingly large and long-lasting mass-mobilization contrasting with the – apparently – apathetic political life since the end of the Dhofar war in 1975. This lack is probably due to the fact that there are so few
academics and experts usually working on Oman. Despite the field being easily accessible and many keen observers, events in Kuwait also generated little research, all of which underline the continuity of the political crisis both before and after the “Arab Spring”.  

Focusing on foreign policy issues, works on Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have generally eluded the timid demands for reform that were articulated in some segments of civil society. Also, most academics’ approaches have focused on the “counter-revolutionary” policies of Saudi Arabia and of the United Arab Emirates, for instance in Egypt. Saudi Arabia has been described as “leading the counter-revolution” and being chiefly responsible for the new upsurge of sectarianism at the regional level that followed the repression of the Bahraini uprising and which it helped to orchestrate. Very few works have tried to understand the causes of the failed attempts at organizing protest inside the kingdom, or the mobilizations in the Shia areas. The ambiguous role of Qatar in the Egyptian and Syrian protests sparked a wealth of works and commentaries that have fed the debate on this small state’s creative foreign policy. Geopolitical analyses have framed the rivalries and conflicting strategies of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the case of the Egyptian revolution and the Syrian civil war but have by and large overlooked the foreign policy decision-making processes in these states.

There are still blind spots in the literature on the “Arab Spring” in the Peninsula, which for instance has generated little if any comparative work. While the papers presented in this special issue of Arabian Humanities can in no way offer a comprehensive look at the many kinds of mobilizations, the reactions to them and their aftermath, they contribute to filling a few of these analytical or geographical gaps. Much to our frustration, this special issue does not include a contribution on mobilizations in Saudi Arabia. All of them dealing with domestic issues, these papers first add to the analysis of mobilization processes and of their actors, in particular in some little-known countries like Oman and Kuwait. They also look at the lasting effects of these mobilizations on political, cultural, social and institutional structures with specific emphasis on the sectarian divide and on the changing social pact.

### Mobilizations and Actors

Most of what was published on the “Arab Spring” in the Peninsula in the months after 2011 has been shaped by enthusiastic accounts of mobilizations, with an emphasis on youth and the difficult relations between those independent “civil society” actors who initiated the uprisings and institutionalized political parties or forces. Evidently, analyzing the “revolutionary moment” remains a necessity. How did these mobilizations unfold? Who was mobilized and by what means? The mobilizations that took place in the seven countries of the Peninsula are still to a large extent unacknowledged. Uprisings outside of the capitals remain largely under the academic radar. However, gender-based approaches, focusing on sectoral mobilizations, “reactionary” forces and cultural practices are likely to foster important contributions.

L. Bonnefoy and J. Kuschnitzki, F. Dazi-Héni, H. Al-Hasan, K. Hennessy and M. Valéri each give us insight into the mobilization phases. The added value of their articles lies not only in their capacity to account for events, actors and places that have been largely overlooked but also, like in the case of Yemeni revolutionary theatre, to give flesh to the formidable creativity at such times. Thus, K. Hennessy’s analysis of plays written or presented in Sana’a during the revolutionary uprising is a window into the history of Yemeni theatre and its cultural institutions, but most of all it is an insight into the debates and practices that emerged in the process of mobilization. Through theatre, K. Hennessy analyses the way in which intellectuals and the wider Yemeni public gradually became aware of the necessity of a revolution that would not only target authoritarian institutions but also the very cultural foundations of their society. L. Bonnefoy and J. Kuschnitzki focus on the role which Salafis in Yemen played during the mobilization phase and on how this triggered a significant inflection in their relation to institutional politics, to the point that some of them formed a party and mobilized in favor of the transition process.
The special issue also gives insights about the relations between social change and protest. M. Valéri’s contribution shows how social anomie contributed to render ineffective governmental techniques traditionally used by the regime to prevent and deal with political chaos. One of these has been to give tribal leaders the official status of intermediaries between the government and society, thus striving to maintain the social order by institutionalizing — and at the same time reshaping — tribal modes of organization. These mediations proved inefficient when the regime mobilized them to disband the 2011 protests, which mainly erupted in the city of Ṣuḥār where the creation of an industrial port meant to be a showcase of Omani development disrupted established modes of social regulation while causing deep frustration and resentment.

The contribution by F. Dazi-Héni on Kuwait also highlights how social change among the tribal populations is a key factor accounting for the emirate’s new political dynamics. The youth movements which have proliferated in the past few years have proved unable to become sustainable organizations but have nonetheless fostered new mobilization techniques, which include more and more confrontational mass-demonstrations in the public space, in stark contrast with past practices of peaceful mobilizations within the semi-private space of the diwaniyyas, typical Kuwaiti informal home-based gatherings.

The Sectarian Divide

A general consensus has emerged that one of the major consequences of the uprisings in Bahrain and Syria has been a surge in Sunni/Shia tensions across the region. As such, the advance of the Houthi movement in Yemen in 2014 and early 2015, and the Saudi-led military intervention in March 2015 only strengthen our argument. The rise to power of this once marginal Zaydi revivalist movement is fundamentally restructuring the political field in Yemen, along with the religious spectrum. While distinct from Twelver Shias, Houthis have redefined Zaydi identity and in turn are creating an impetus for reframing Sunni identity. The Salafi Rashad party, for instance, as analyzed by L. Bonnefoy and J. Kuschnitzki in their article is affected by such an identity process and builds on a redefinition of the meaning of Salafism.

Evidently, political tensions and violence in Yemen cannot be reduced to their sectarian nature. Conflicts are fuelled by many other motives. The failure of the transition process when interim President ‘Abd Rabbuh Maṣṭur Ḥādī resigned in January 2015 and the institutional marginalization of the Muslim Brotherhood-leaning Islāḥ party have multiple explanations ranging from economic failure, corruption and mismanagement, to regional pressure and authoritarian resilience. Nevertheless, the sectarian divide, as it came into being and departing from the convergence dynamics of religious identities, is increasingly becoming a lens through which actors in Yemen are framing their own conflicts. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is evidently the most active in such a construction. The Houthi leadership has been pro-active, in the course of 2014, to reach out to non-Zaydi groups but with only limited success. Salafis of the Rashad party in Yemen appear to be caught between their desire to appear as reasonable actors in the transition process and the defenders of Sunni identity.

Sunni/Shia tensions have reflected with particular resonance in the Gulf monarchies. On the domestic level, the uprisings in Bahrain and in the oil-rich, Shia-populated Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia have sparked anxiety in some neighboring countries over a surge of protest or subversive activities among their own Shia populations. At the regional level, in particular as the Syrian crisis worsened, Shia mobilization has revitalized the “Shia crescent” paradigm that emerged in the aftermath of the Iraqi regime change to analyze the change in Middle Eastern geopolitics. As part of their counter-revolutionary strategies, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia broadcast across their media outlets the idea that their domestic Shia mobilization was remote-controlled by Iran. This has had a dramatic impact on Arab public opinion overall. Hence while other popular protests gained sympathy and were often seen as legitimate precisely because they were endogenous, the Bahraini uprising has been seen as an attempt by Iran to pursue regional hegemony. Within Gulf civil societies, the Bahraini uprising and the Syrian civil war have had a significant polarizing effect. While Sunnis feel sympathy for the Syrian rebels and
are suspicious of the Bahraini opposition, their Shia fellow citizens on the contrary tend to support Bashar al-Assad and stigmatize the Bahraini regime as “sectarian” and anti-Shia.

Some of the papers presented in this special issue help to refine our understanding of the dynamics of sectarianism in the Gulf (R. Azoulay and C. Beaugrand, H. al-Hasan). First, they confirm that the Bahraini and Saudi situations cannot serve as archetypes of Sunni/Shia relations everywhere in the Gulf. The most striking example is Kuwait. In this country, which includes a numerically significant and politically powerful Shia population, the various Shia political groupings have converged since 2009 towards unconditional support to the government. This configuration is the product of a very specific context where two phenomena reinforced each other. On the one hand, the government has been the object of relentless attacks by an opposition dominated by Sunni Islamists and tribal MPs. On the other hand, the Shias have faced increasing hostility on the part of these same constituencies since the Iraqi regime change that brought Shias to power in Baghdad. In dire need of support within parliament, the government hascourted Shia MPs of all persuasion and the latter have come to conclude that the government is their best ally to confront the opposition’s hostility. While it has put the Kuwaiti government in an uncomfortable position in the midst of the repression of the Bahraini uprising, this interest-based alliance has turned out to be long-lasting.

Second, in addition to the study of the aforementioned Salafi Rashad party in Yemen, this special issue provides new insights about new Sunni sectarian actors who emerged in the course of the Arab Spring protest. The case of the Gathering of National Unity in Bahrain analyzed in detail by H. al-Hasan had until now been touched upon only in shorter papers and there was a need for a monograph grounded in fieldwork. Beyond the historical roots of the movement and its diverse components, the article provides us with interesting hypotheses about the dynamics of community building in the Bahraini context, which should be further investigated. The difficulty of the Gathering of National Unity to rally the Sunnis behind it as the Shia al-Wifāq has been doing for almost fifteen years shows that the Sunnis, despite their status as a demographic minority, do not exist as a community, that is, as a group capable of collective action based on its religious identity. Sunnis are more than ever politically scattered between rival political and religious trends, as well as between different ethnic and social belongings, which nurture alternative lines of politicization. Moreover, they have difficulties to position themselves vis-à-vis the government, torn between a genuine desire for change and the fear that any reform will strengthen an opposition they see as bound by an exclusive Shia identity.

The Social Pact

This special issue also looks at the social dimension of the “Arab Spring”. The protests in some Gulf monarchies (Bahrain and Oman) did indeed have a clear social backdrop, and the same can be said of the counter-revolutionary strategies, which everywhere included various types of distributive measure. M. Valéry’s contribution offers a compelling analysis of the social underpinnings of the Omani uprising. The transformation of Suḥār from a sleepy provincial city into an economic hub at the hands of the economic oligarchy around the palace aroused resentment. By contrast, in Bahrain where demands were chiefly political in nature and expressed by a wide array of different people in terms of economic status, Omani protestors were mostly young unemployed or low-skilled, low-income workers demanding that their social difficulties be addressed and, beyond that, that obstacles to social mobility be removed.

There is widespread social discontent in the three low-rent economies of the Gulf, namely Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman, which have less fiscal room for maneuver to deal with the opposition and maintain social stability through generous distributive policies, as their wealthier neighbors do. The welfare state in the Gulf has been the cornerstone of the regimes’ legitimacy since the 1970s oil boom, which enabled rulers to have ambitious labor, housing, health and family policies. As shown in L. Louër’s contribution, this social pact has been in a state of crisis since the emergence, in the course of the 1990s, of mass unemployment among nationals. In order to tackle this problem, all Gulf governments, with varied levels of success and seriousness, have reformed their labor policies based on a labor market segmentation.
between nationals and expatriates on the one hand, and between public and private sector on the other. The “Arab Spring” has pushed governments to accelerate labor market policies aimed at encouraging nationals to seek employment in the private sector. They can even be considered an integral part of the counter-revolutionary arsenal. Far from being politically benign however, these reforms have far reaching and sometimes unexpected effects on the relations between state, business and labor. More specifically, they are the engine of a pro-labor policy shift that is appearing in new stricter regulations as well as in increased labor costs for the private sector. Moreover, in order to generate support for these new labor policies and to pressure the private sector to effectively implement them, the governments of the low-rent states are choosing to empower organized labor, including in the form of full-fledged trade-unions, and are experimenting with formal tripartite negotiations, hence creating the conditions for a more bargained social and political order.

In Yemen, where the capacity of the state to redistribute resources is very limited, the “Arab Spring” started a reflection on the social and national pact. A nine-month long National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in 2013 was designed to address the multiple challenges of Yemen and redefine the nation through the establishment of a federal constitution. One of the prime focuses during the NDC has been on justice as S. Steinbeiser’s contribution highlights. With the revolutionaries’ slogans calling for dignity (karāma), debate on the meaning and process of justice, including of transitional justice, became a central point of contention. Debates had to build on the history and existing practices in Yemen but also implied some theoretical discussions.

Such debates on justice in Yemen and on state distributive policies in rentier states are just two of the many policies that mobilizations have triggered in the Arabian Peninsula since 2011. Despite authoritarian resilience, repression, failure of transition and obvious pessimism among citizens, reflection on the social, national and political pact highlights how profound a change the region is undergoing and how “Arab Spring” mobilizations have affected the very structures of states and societies.

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Notes

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