

# The Arab Spring: Ten Years After

*By Khalid Lyamlahy*

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**What remains of the Arab Spring? By gathering diverse and heterogeneous material related to the uprisings and analyzing circulation and transformation dynamics at a transnational level, this edited volume uses archives to rethink both the memory and contemporary significance of the revolutions.**

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Reviewed: Leyla Dakhli (ed.), *L'Esprit de la révolte. Archives et actualités des révolutions arabes* [The Spirit of Rebellion: The Archives and Contemporaneity of the Arab Revolutions]. Éditions du Seuil, 2020, 320 p., 24 €.

The tenth anniversary of the Arab uprisings of 2010-2011 has revived debate on the successes and disillusion of a wave of protests whose effects continue to shape the region's political landscape and imagination. Rather than continue the debate about these revolutions, the volume edited by Leyla Dakhli, a historian of the contemporary Arab world and a scholar at the CNRS, takes a step backwards, offering a document-based overview of this popular uprising. The goal, to borrow from the book's subtitle, is to reconstruct the "archives and contemporaneity of the Arab revolutions" through an effort to compile, update, and analytically compare relevant documents.

The volume's project thus rests on a shift in perspective. As Dakhli maintains in her introduction, "the point is not to understand the uprisings in terms of their outcome; it suffices, at times, to return to their origins, to what determined them and made them exist, to the traces they left –in short, to their archives" (p. 8). Considering interpretations of the uprisings that rely on concepts such as transition, democratic

revolution, or social and generational fractures, Dakhli demonstrates the weaknesses and often reductive postulates of such analyses.

By way of contrast, Dakhli's volume offers an immersion in the uprising's archives, allowing for "a brief but considered restoration of the event in its multiple incarnations [and] heterogeneous forms" (p. 12). This choice is apparent not only in the profiles of the contributors, who hail from disciplines as varied as history, anthropology, sociology, political science, and journalism, but also in the variety of formats, narratives, and events it addresses. The underlying idea is that the Arab uprisings require an approach that is substantively and conceptually pluralistic, far removed from the simplistic assumptions implied by the outdated notion of an "Arab spring" or the reductive hypothesis of a "surprise revolution."

As the fruit of a collective research project, the volume aspires, in short, to reinterpret and render newly relevant the Arab revolts with the help of archival discourses. Rethinking the revolutionary process in terms of its memory –that is, a combination of its key figures, witnesses, and traces – contributes to a temporal and sociopolitical reconstruction of the events. The book rightly deems that the diversity of the Arab revolutions is part of the events themselves: it characterizes them and influenced the positions and actions of their actors.

## **Bodies and territories**

The book's first part addresses the mobilization of bodies and territories in the revolutions' sociopolitical field. From the desire to leave the country to the transformation of burials into "protest performances" (p. 91), the uprisings profoundly unsettled relationships to territory. In the same vein as Mohamed Bouazizi and his predecessors, who are often neglected by revolutionary narratives, protest assumed dramatic and enduring forms, which triggered, in turn, strategies on the part of authorities to discredit them.

In some cases, the revolt resulted in a "reversal of affiliations" (p. 39): attitudes to one's nation became a border conflict, both literally and figuratively. Thus transgressing red lines and the practice of home sit-ins participated in a challenge to the established order and categories that restricted political activism. The dynamic of revolt was reinforced by various forms of discrepancy and rupture. For instance, the

famous video of a Tunisian activist and lawyer chanting the end of fear in Tunis' streets is an "off screen" moment (p. 26) that became part of the revolution's legacy.

Another contested site is language, which is inextricably tied to bodies and territories. The slogan "*dégage*" ("go away!"), like the variants used from Algeria to Lebanon, expressed the protestors' "desire for a clean slate" and contained "an array of implicit statements" (p. 43) that contributed to forging and preserving the coherence of their demands. A revolt also depends on the power of its symbols, such as a lawyer's robe that embodied the commitment of an entire profession or a broom through which the collective cleaning of public spaces was transformed into a legitimation strategy, while also establishing a new relationship to space.

Finally, the Arab revolutions were characterized by the participation of long marginalized groups: children became committed protagonists as well as the manipulable targets of propagandistic discourse, working women unsettled labels and demanded a place in the struggle, and sexual minorities were drawn into the dynamism of community work.

## **The production of commonality**

Drawing on this overview of corporeal and spatial mobilization, part two seeks "to document the mechanisms that forged the production of commonality" (p. 101) through the circulation of speech and bodily commitment. In the same spirit as the first two verses of "The Will to Live," the famous poem by the Tunisian poet Abū al-Qāsim Shābbī, written in the 1930s and chanted –and at times reshaped– during demonstrations as well as on their sidelines, "reappropriations of national heritage" (p. 103) allowed the people to assert their will and desire to be free of paternalistic diktats.

The revolution's collective dynamic also resulted in ways of occupying public space. From Kasbah Square in Tunis to Pearl Roundabout in Manama, by way of Tahir Square in Cairo and Martyr's Square in Beirut, the occupation of public squares constituted an act of "territorialization" (p. 114), which promoted not only sociability but also political structuring. The emergence of such iconic figures as the martyr, the militiaman, or the sniper created ambivalent fields of reference, interpretation, and justification, which laid bare the violence of repression and which, at times, crossed over into the realms of worship and fantasy.

A common *esprit de corps* was also forged in the act of naming and organizing demonstrations. The January 2011 tracts in Egypt and the revolutionary committees in Syria featured new ways of mobilizing the public and legitimating political action. Challenging the "organizational failure or theoretical poverty" (p. 128) for which academic studies frequently reproach the Arab revolutions, the volume proposes initiatives for rethinking the organization of common life and the regeneration of political imagination.

For instance, the names chosen for Friday demonstrations call attention to the uprisings' different stages while also contributing to a strategy of bolstering solidarity and appealing to the international community. The consolidation of a common space also entailed the mobilization of "a varied, local, and transnational repertory" (p. 139) of revolutionary chants, such as national anthems, humanitarian songs, and supporters' slogans. Moreover, the use of the phrase "Allah akbar" ("God is great") – sometimes in a religious vein, sometimes in a secular one--complicated the various registers of protest language and brought back memories of past revolts.

In public spaces, the concept of "the common" revolved, once again, around powerful and eloquent symbols. If bread "embodied the idea of a threshold... beyond which personal dignity is maligned" (p. 147), while also bringing attention to problems of price stability and resource distribution, the national flag transcended its role as a marker of identity and nationality to become, metonymically and in keeping with the pace of change, "the site of the performance of protest" (p. 155), attuned to the unity, emotion, and visual power it symbolized. Finally, the exposure of female bodies, like that of the "girl in the blue bra" who was beat up by security forces in Cairo in 2011, confirms the prominence of questions of women's rights and equality between the sexes in the revolts' dynamic.

## **Strategies of reinvention**

One of the book's strengths is that it approaches the Arab uprisings as ongoing and dynamic processes, rather than fixed historic events. Hence, in third and final part, its exploration of the modalities of revolutionary reinvention. These modalities are introduced as "ways of *coping*" (p. 188) that are informed by transnational influences and open to dynamics of circulation and transformation.

First, the demonstrations revived various forms of performance. For example, the *dabke*, the famous synchronic dance, was used in Syria as a sign of solidarity and defiance, but also as a "combat ritual" (p. 208). As for song, it can either celebrate a martyr's memory, as with the "song of the first dead," composed in Menzel Bouzaiane in Tunisia, or to reverse a dictator's words, as with the famous reappropriation of one of Gaddafi's speeches. This subversive strategy can also be seen in recourse to humor, the absurd, satirical, and often improvised character of which effectively illuminates the revolutions' political paradoxes.

Participating in uprisings often implies a redefinition of the scope of individual action. The invention of new forms of diffusion resulted not only from the inescapable work of bloggers and cyber-dissidents but also the important role of citizen-journalists, who contributed to the tasks of testimonial and archiving, and of revolutionary poets, whose writing captures the breath of the streets. The transformation of the revolutionary dynamic also depended on the mobilization of specific tools. If social media posts made it possible to strengthen the solidarity of activists and their adherence to a common cause, cell phones functioned as "extensions of the protestors' bodies and gazes" (p. 252). Throwing shoes –an activity made famous by an Iraqi journalist in 2008– was reappropriated to express scorn, disgust, and the rejection of humiliation.

Understanding the reinvention of the revolution makes it necessary to consider strategies of censorship and negation, such as those associated with the use of ammunition. Confronted with the brutality of repression and its discourses, protestors responded with the slogan *silmiyya* ("peaceful"). The latter term, which refers to the Algerian Hirak Movement of 2019, functioned as a "performative act" (p. 192) in that it could be used to defuse and prevent violence. Moreover, resistance required artistic creation, as seen in the reuse of the symbolism of eye wounds, and defiance, as evidenced in the picture of an Egyptian protest standing before an armored vehicle, which constituted both a "demystification" (p. 212) of police authority and redefinition of power relations.

## **From archives to cartography**

As the volume's attention to recent uprisings in Algeria and Lebanon makes clear, the memory of the Arab revolutions remains alive and dynamic. The epilog is

right to remind us that the ongoing nature of the uprisings is tied to various forms of creativity: requisitioning buildings, improvising meals and care, and decorating public spaces are so many examples of initiatives that can turn revolutions into continuous learning processes. The organization of actions, the subversion of codes, and the production of a "counter-society" (p. 276) seeking to introduce new values while preserving individual dignity and communal cohesion are the various dimensions that constitute the "spirit of revolt" (p. 278). This spirit mirrors the revolt itself: it is forged in rebellion, reinventing its forms and disseminating its traces.

But what remains of the Arab Spring? There is no denying that the volume achieves its goal of bringing together an impressive array of archival material. Texts, narratives, communiqués, slogans, images, individual gestures, and collective movements are restored and analyzed both in their original context and in light of recent developments. Furthermore, the chapters dedicated to the "icons" of the Arab revolts, such as the Yemenite activist Tawakkol Karman, the Sudanese protestor Alaa Salah, and the city of Kafr Nabl in northern Syria make it possible to restore the revolutionary dynamic through the decisive encounter of the individual and the collective. By systematically identifying the countries referenced in each archive or news item relating to the Arab revolts, the volume compiles a veritable cartography of sources, shedding light on similarities and parallels between different countries.

This cartography is completed by a detailed and transnational chronology found at the end of the volume, which allows one to read the full course of the uprisings over a decade, from the self-immolation of Bouazizi on December 17, 2010 to the suspension of demonstrations in Iraq on March 21, 2020. By considering the Arab Spring and its archives over the long term and in relation to earlier movements, such as the Palestinian Intifadas, the book shows that only a comprehensive approach, one that is both inclusive and transversal, can restore the uprisings' depth and richness.

## **Towards a sociopolitical history**

It is worth noting, however, that the archival approach has inherent limits. Despite attempts to contextualize the archives throughout the book, Dakhli admits up front that "the question of these documents' representativeness was difficult to establish" (p. 14). The reason is that the archives of the Arab uprisings, like the

revolutions themselves, quickly became the target of strategies of reappropriation, reformulation, and even propaganda. Recognizing this fact, the book endeavors, in many chapters, to restore both "the heterogeneity of archival materials" (p. 14) and "the uncertainty of actors as to the meaning of what was happening as they lived it" (p. 12).

Even so, the reader can feel disconcerted by the volume's wide-ranging and varied material. Organizing it by archive type or by a catalog of different kinds of actions and mobilizations might have allowed for a better grasp of the uprisings' traces and legacies. Furthermore, while the focus on the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Syrian experiences is largely justified, given the centrality and reach of the uprisings in these countries, one may regret the comparatively little attention given to other experiences, such as those in Sudan, Jordan, and Bahrain. Finally, from a methodological standpoint, it would have been helpful to list the names of the contributors involved in the writing of each chapter, as well as the criteria according to which the various data were gathered, presented, and organized.

The fact remains that this collective volume represents without any doubt a major contribution to the sociopolitical history of the Arab revolts. By choosing to recount and rethink the uprisings through and in terms of archival materials, the volume manages to unsettle conventional wisdom and shed light on experiences by reinterpreting them based on their context and through their points of intersection and convergence. This instructive and detailed restoration both opens new vistas of historical and sociopolitical interpretation and encourages us to rethink the relationship between particular societies and the uprisings' concepts, practices, and objects.

While the revolutions are far from over and revolutionary time is "elastic" by definition (p. 13), the memory of the Arab Spring remains a hotbed of experiences, testimonials, and sacrifices that elicit dynamics of transmission and reconfiguration. In this context, the archives are as much dynamic traces of an historical moment as invaluable keys to understanding present challenges and future perspectives. Grasping the Arab revolts requires demanding and pluralistic thinking. One lesson of this useful volume is that hearing individual and collective memories makes it possible to transform traces –which are often neglected, stamped out, and misunderstood, into a bright, mobile beam, illuminating historical intervals as well as the trends and uncertainties that emerge along the sociopolitical horizon.

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