



**Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to  
Human Rights Defenders**

**“ARAB REVOLUTIONS”  
FACING THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRATIC COHABITATION**

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### ***“Arab revolutions”: how are they interpreted?***

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If we put aside the controversy about the denominations (upheavals, riots, revolts, revolutions ...) that only the future historical processes will decide on, we can recognise that the Middle East and North African region has been undergoing a major socio-political mutation since the end of 2010.

At this stage the emancipation from a political authoritarianism which has, for a long time, pervaded the modern nation-state and its ideological expressions (nationalists, Arabists, socialists or Islamists) seems to be struggling to get established, and often violently as in Syria. Any attempt for prospecting would be rather a gamble or a challenge. It is even more so as history has proved to us that behind the great moments of turmoil and historical drives, lays the much needed advent of other moments of overthrows, falls or ruptures.

We shall hereby attempt to interpret the current situation in the area, to search for a few elements that are likely to make the on-going socio-political developments understandable and to try, as much as possible, to identify the new stakes that such upheavals are imposing on the cause of human rights and their defenders in the region.

There are at least two ways to perceive and interpret the political developments happening in the area since the popular uprising in Tunisia which ended the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali (January 14, 2011):

– One which perceives the Event *par excellence*; one of these different and unusual ruptures, whose sudden, unplanned and difficult to anticipate irruption disrupts the usual course of history to invent a new temporality regime. As interpreted by the philosopher J. Derrida, the event is such as can be seen, yet without ever being able to be predicted. It hits us, without us being able to see it coming. And before its occurrence, the event seems plain “impossible”<sup>1</sup>. All the elements constituting the widespread interpretation of “revolution” are included in J. Derrida’s perception of the event. The same one that was widely used in the first months that followed the Arab upheavals. It indeed refers to a radical process of breaking away from the old order and the emergence of a new world; the window to a new historical sequence supporting a social order and an unprecedented human hope. This avid and almost mystical interpretation of the early days of the so-called “Arab Spring” was very soon overcome by doubt, especially after the electoral shifts that followed the falls of the regimes (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya) or the constitutional reforms (as in the case of Morocco). It was even moved aside, actually forgotten under the impact of the “post-revolutionary” socio-political tensions and misbehaviours.

– There is another interpretation of the political developments that the countries of the South-Mediterranean coast have experienced; an interpretation which, in my view, deserves all our attention. It is derived from the elaborate approach of Alexis de Tocqueville in “**The old regime and the Revolution**”<sup>2</sup>, a publication in which Tocqueville analyses the notion of rupture-revolution and depicts the French Revolution of 1789 in an unprecedented way. According to him, this was less of a denial of the past than a translation into actions of the social and cultural transformations that were piling up for a long time and slowly under the Old Regime. The event’s actors as well as its annalists have certainly experienced it and understand it as the birth of a new world which neither owes nor shares anything with the old one but in reality, as Tocqueville says, being far from a dynamics of making a clean sweep, the revolution was for the most part one long and difficult adjustment of the political system to a society which had already deeply changed under the old regime.

### ***“Arab revolutions” and the three transitions***

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Une certaine possibilité impossible de dire l’événement” (A certain impossible possibility to tell the event) in **Dire l’événement, est-ce possible ? Séminaire de Montréal pour Jacques Derrida (Telling the event, is that possible? Seminar of Montreal for Jacques Derrida)**, L’Harmattan, 2001, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> It’s a late publication from the work of Tocqueville, published in 1856, which is approximately 20 years after his famous book “**La démocratie en Amérique**” (**Democracy in America**). See Folio/Gallimard edition, 1967.

I express the assumption that this interpretation framework according to Tocqueville is in a position to produce a few intelligibility effects when it comes to the current political process in the Arab countries. What is it about?

In 2011, the upheavals that occurred in the region first showed the entire world how the Arab youth was taking charge of their own fate and how they took to the streets to end this long phase of political immobilism. But beyond this massive and immediate social fact, these upheavals revealed how large the transformations which changed the Arab societies in the past fifty years were. The new determining actor henceforth (the youth) of what turned out to be what is called the “Arab Spring” is the result of three forms of transitions which took several decades building up: *a demographic transition*, an urban transition and an educational transition.

Indeed, on the southern coast, the irruption of youth on the political scene is firstly the work of a demographic transition which inaugurated a socio-historical moment in the entire region, characterised by the fall of birth rates (*within four decades the average birth rate went from 7.5 children per woman to 2.3*) and the inexorable rise of youth groups (*The majority of the population , i.e 70% was less than thirty years old on the eve of the upheavals*), before the ageing process of the population starts by 2030<sup>3</sup>. There is more to just the decrease in birth rate. The effects of the demographic transition also lead to an intense socio-cultural transformation mainly marked by the step-back of the patriarchy (and the crisis of his beliefs), the transformation of the relationships between generations and genders, the emergence of the individual and the questioning of the power balance whether it was in a marriage or in the political field. Moreover, the demographic transition was supported, everywhere in the South of the Mediterranean, by two other transitions just as important: the educational one related to a rapid generalisation of mass teaching (*more than 90% of youth between the ages of 15 and 19 can read and write, and in some Arab countries more than 50% of youth (18-24 years old) have access to higher education*) doubled by an accelerated urbanisation (*in Morocco, for example, a country which has always been deeply rural, the urbanisation rate exceeds 56% and will reach 70% by 2030*). The convergence of these three social mutations brings about a new and inevitable socio-political actor that the educated, urban and sustainably anchored youth are portraying in the era of digital culture.

Over the timespan of one generation, the strong aspirations that this transitional context will lead to, fell apart under the effects of materialistic and symbolic frustrations that the young generation is suffering from in the first place (not enough training, unemployment, uneasiness, instability and other difficulties in accessing the socio-economic self-sufficiency...). At the turn of the century, everywhere in the Southern Mediterranean, the situation had brought on deep tensions among the generations and allowed for the blooming of a civil society resistant to the old forms of leadership.

These unsolvable anthropological elements when considered in their dynamic dimension make us think that what we commonly refer to as the “Arab Spring” or the “Arab revolutions” is nothing of a time period or a temporary political tremor. We are faced with a long-lasting historical phenomenon; an evolutionary fact, and whose interpretation would spread beyond the current cartography of the competing political strengths and expressions. Nevertheless, if the above-mentioned anthropological elements contribute to the intelligibility of the social and cultural mutations in the Arab region, they don’t take away anything from the new ongoing political disruptions, or from the uncertainty that they establish and do not anticipate what such complex processes would lead to in the future.

### *The current socio-political context*

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The socio-political sequence initiated by the protests of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia at the end of 2010 was temporally structured on two actions. The first one is the popular uprising which put an end to dictatorship. In Tunisia and Egypt, it happened in the clearest form, in Yemen it had been laborious and complicated, the intervention of foreign troops was required in Libya, and it is taking dramatic dimensions in Syria today. The

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<sup>3</sup> The demographers’ estimations show that a demographic rapprochement among the Arab countries and developed occidental nations (Europe, North America and Australia) may get involved around 2050. The young Arabs between the ages of 15 and 24 will only represent 12.8% of the population, whereas the rate of those between the ages of 25 and 64 will reach 23.4%. In most Arab countries, the demographic explosion and the increase in youth rates (15-24 years old) have become a thing of the past. And some Arab-Muslim countries such as Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco, Turkey and Iran, have already reached the low birth criteria in vigour in Europe.

symbolism of this first moment was puzzling for the actors as well as for the observers. The people normally divided knew, through locations, mobilisation and contestation, slogans or images, how to stand together and build a collective destiny. And this is where, undoubtedly, resides the fascinating magic of this first moment of a process inevitably predestined to be long and complicated. By joining forces against the authoritarian government, the various components of society emphasised the fight for freedom and dignity. The people thus stand as a civil society in which the reasoning of the government and the ideological flaws are momentarily neutralised.

The second act designates the time which will likely be long and tortuous, going from fighting for freedom to institutionalising a democracy. There is nothing mechanical about this transition in the sense that it's about a complex process of foundation having multiple dimensions (political, social and cultural) of institutions and of a framework for a democratic life, and what it entails as far as rules, ethics and culture.

After the enthusiasm, the magic of the popular uprisings and the fall of authoritarian regimes, the actors of the new era soon realised that they did not speak the same language and did not refer to the same conceptions of mankind, time, history, identity, individuals or borders between the public and the private. These divergences in terms of political culture or rather just culture, turned up at the threshold of this second phase; that of building the institutions of the new era (elections, drafting the constitutions, creating new laws, setting up the principles of a transitional justice, re-configuration of the relationship between the Government and the citizens, etc.). Therefore it proved to be that the construction process of a cohabitation model was more complicated, and only had a few things to do with the time of popular uprising, that of collective production of the "Common", the fleeting and magical time" resulting from the popular uprisings of the first action of the "Arab Spring".

In countries where dictatorship has been abolished, the new context requires the challenge to peacefully strive for expanded spaces for a cohabitation pattern which will be shared by a very large majority of citizens. However, in order for it to be as inclusive as possible, such a pattern must protect all rights and fundamental freedoms.

By choosing freedom after a long period of apprehension (the traditional fear from any chaos = *fitna*), the peoples in the region would have to be deprived of the language and the mechanisms of its implementation in the subjective quality of life of individuals such as within public spaces and in institutions. The fall of the authoritarian regimes revealed a broken-up political field, contested by the projects of antagonistic societies and political or contradicting identity accounts conveying very different conceptions of Goodness, Beauty and Truth.

After spending decades under an authoritarian restlessness with numerous expressions (nationalist, Arabist, socialist, Islamist, etc.), the majority of actors (from the old Marxists to Islamists) seem to agree on the concept of a necessary adoption of mechanisms for a modern democratic cohabitation. These mechanisms can be summed up in four terms:

- **Elections:** sovereignty by the people; peaceful political change in power and accepting that the power seat be empty and not eternally filled by a figure of a sanctified leader, one single party or one spiritual master.
- **Deliberation:** as a way of managing conflicts, implying an autonomous and dynamic society, a public space and forums (parliament, free press, independent medias, etc.)
- **Decision:** power is exercised by the legitimate political authorities that were elected by the voters.
- **Rendering accounts:** by those who were mandated to govern and manage the public matter.

Of course, the level of response to such mechanisms varies depending on the political actors and according to their experience and their political culture however, with the pressure from the civil societies, it should be noted that the integration and internalisation of these principles are fully understood. Moreover, the important factions of the Islamist movement have progressed in the last twenty years toward the theorization of such democratic procedures (*ta'ssil*). It is through institutional practice that such theories should yet get content and be significant. Therefore some cultural revolution would be necessary so that the various actors are able to go beyond the consensus on the subject of the abovementioned procedural aspects and integrate the bases of democratic cohabitation constituted by Human Rights.

Currently where significant divergences are still marking the various visions of ultimate aims and values (Goodness, Beauty and Truth), Human Rights as a universal and indivisible standard can constitute a common ground, the guarantee of human dignity considered as an end per se, and not the only means at the service of a wish or another. By defining the human being as an absolute value, a separate wish subjected only to its own laws, the modern idea of Human Rights perceives the latter as freedom above all. But to access this philosophical core, founder of a democratic cohabitation model and essential to integrate the Arab societies in the universalism of modern humanity, the cultural revolution cited previously is required. It will take time and will be carried out on various levels: a cultural level for building the new language of freedom (mankind, the individual, the citizen, the public and the private, the identity, time and history, etc.), a political level to operate the democratic invention potential (constitutions, institutions, new laws and rules, etc.) and a socio-economical level in order to guarantee the vital conditions of human dignity.

### *As a conclusion*

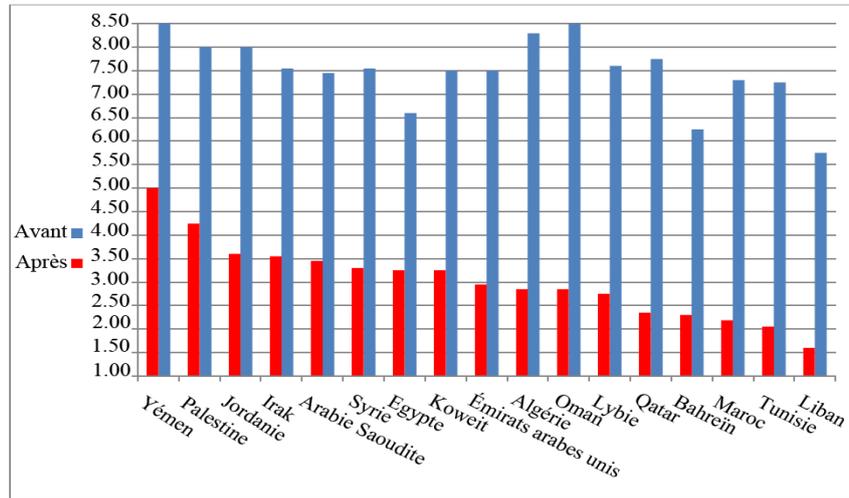
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If the social and cultural transformations mentioned in the beginning of this note have certainly changed the societies of the South Mediterranean region and have abolished authoritarianism, they still have a long way before they can shield them from possible setbacks, or from the tensions and the chaos. The authoritarianism during the past fifty years regardless of its ideology had fully functioned through a major deployment of identity power. In others words, if the modern nation-state was able to steer away from its historical development toward democracy, this was only possible, ideologically, through a massive abuse of process of identity resources. This means that, in addition to the political consequences of the authoritarianism, the identity restlessness of the past had complicated in the Arab World and more than elsewhere the process of ejecting from the political theology.

It is needless to point out the decisive nature of the current phase with regards to as to the future of democracy in the region. These pioneer countries (Tunisia, Egypt) are at a crucial turning point of their modern history; a turning point whose impact may decide on the fate of the entire region. Today's political, social and cultural stakes revolve around Human Rights. In the course of negotiations, peaceful fights or violent tensions, protecting them as well as encouraging them or anchoring them will constitute the major indicator to assess the progress in the implementation of a democratic and civic cohabitation pattern.

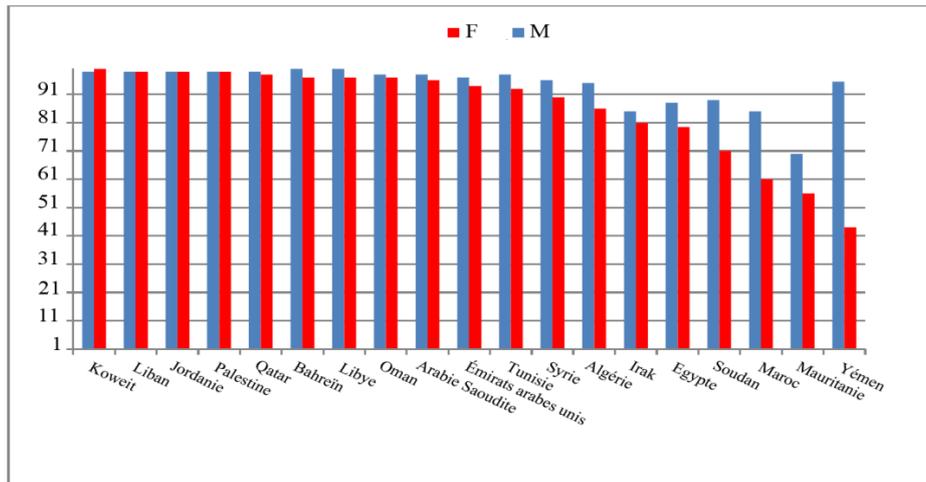
**The demographic transition**

**Graphic 2:** General averages of birth rate in the Arab countries before the demographic transition phase and in 2010

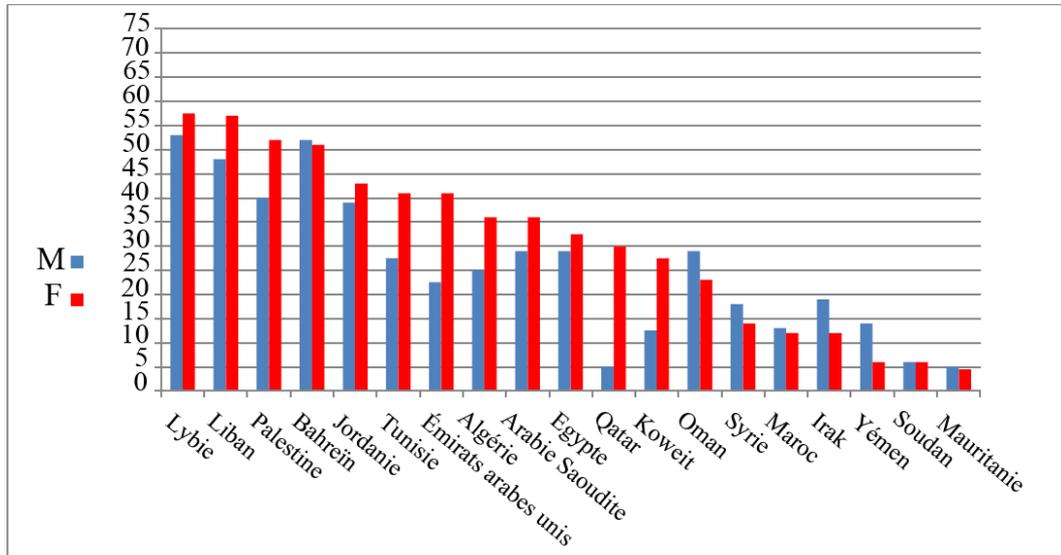


**The educational transition**

**Graphic 1:** Rate of young Arabs according to age (15-19 years old) who can perfectly write and read by country, 2010



**Graphic 4:** Access rate to University of young adults (18-24 years old) by gender and country (around 2010)



**The urban transition (the situation in Morocco)**

