

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23810/AEOXXIII202118>
10.23810/AEOXXIV202111

When citing this article please include its DOI with a resolving link

Analysing Revolution-like Processes in North Africa: A Historical Perspective of the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s

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Abstract

The recent Arab Spring (which started in 2010 and is still going on) has been considered the beginning of a transition process for some Arab countries and in particular North African countries. In the last years a bulimic production of books and articles have investigated the Arab Spring by mainly focusing on events from the 2011 onwards and/or proposing a single narrow-minded perspective. A broader historical comparative approach is needed for investigating and underlining both similarities and differences among the different target countries and their revolutionary and/or revolutionary-like events/processes, by also contributing (and this is the aim of this article) to shed light on "under-studied history of contention" in the MENA region.

Keywords: North Africa, history of contention, revolution, revolt, Arab uprisings

Introduction

The narration of the Egyptian people, and the Arab people more broadly, as alternatively somnolent subjects awaiting wakefulness or despicable objects in need of containment, punishment, and reform was ubiquitous before the wave of Arab uprisings. (Seikaly 2017: 135)

[...] le cliché selon lequel la Tunisie serait le 'pays du juste milieu', de la 'stabilité', son peuple d'un tempérament pacifique s'accommodant aisément de toutes sortes de régime (dictatorial, autoritaire, démocratique, etc.), continue à structurer notre vision de cette société. (Allal and Geisser 2011: 62)

In understanding what is happening in North Africa and the Middle East, we are running out of metaphors. We need new metaphors. Even the word 'revolution' - understood anywhere from Karl Marx to Hannah Arendt - needs rethinking. Such a new language of the revolution will cast the impact of 'the Arab Spring' on national and international politics for generations to come.¹

The 2010 revolts in North Africa and Middle East have been welcomed by journalists, experts, and scholars with a mixed feeling of surprise and dismay. These events have been compared, through a western perspective, to historical occurrences that happened in Europe in its recent history. Several works proposed a comparison with the 1848 European Springs, likewise the spirit of the Egyptian youth of Tahrir Square has been compared to that of the European youth in 1968. The overthrows of dictators such as Mubarak, Ben 'Ali and Gaddafi² have been considered a turning point, which some analysts equate with the fall of the Berlin wall. In line with Eastern Europe past events, scholars expected a European-style democratisation process for North Africa, something that is not only far away from today's reality, but that precisely (from a methodological point of view) slips into eurocentrism. Furthermore, the idea that the sleepy Arab masses could be capable of riots, revolts and uprisings asking for a positive progressive change against the ruling regimes, shocked and stunned many international observers. After almost twelve years from 2010³ it is probably time to admit that a profound change in the perspective through which Arab Springs have been analysed is necessary to further problematize the understanding of these events.

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The first aspect to be challenged is the narrative according to which Arab people are *somnolent subjects*. In this sense, it is necessary to historically analyse features (from a material and cultural point of view) of the previous revolts, riots, uprisings shedding light on the "under-studied history of contention" as defined by Chalcraft (2016: 24-25), taking into account both contained and transgressive contentions. The time for revolt may not always be the time for revolution and this is precisely why I agree with Tilly's proposal (Keddie 1995) of considering a single pipeline between revolution and revolution-like events (in Tilly's words "non revolutionary processes") for guaranteeing a comprehensive understanding. Revolts may lead to a more comprehensive revolutionary movement or can achieve their goal without evolving in a more complex revolutionary process. Leaderless movements (in terms both of leadership as well as in terms of political organisation) have proven (at this very moment) to be capable of revolts, "historical riots" in the words of Badiou (2012), but not revolutions.

During the history of North Africa and Middle East, terms such as *thawra* or *intifada* have been used to indicate different forms of upheavals, uprisings, and revolution-like events. The term *intifada* has been used by both scholars and social/political actors themselves to indicate mass demonstrations and riots that were popular, spontaneous, and acephalous in their nature. This is very clear in the case of 1987, but also with

the *intifada* of Bint Jbeil in 1936 and other Lebanese uprisings during the 1900s, with the so-called bread riots in Egypt (1977) and in Tunisia (1983). In line with the idea of political revolutions described by Larémont (2013), these *intifadas* did not lead to a change in regime because they did not lead to any change or radical upheaval of the *status quo*. If we stop considering the 2010 revolts as exceptional events (even if they have been exceptional in terms of their consequences), we could probably better frame them in the past context and even understand them better. We surely need new metaphors to interpret the events, as Dahbashi⁴ already noted and as Bayat (2017) also recognized and we should search for a new complex and multifaced theoretical framework (as Bayat proposed, we need a "long revolution theory") for analysing 2010 events. A new theoretical framework is crucial not only for understanding the substance of the uprising processes, but most importantly to understand its *failures and victories*, thus overcoming a binary analysis.⁵

The scope of this article is however more limited, as it mainly aims at shedding light on understudied revolution-like processes in North Africa with particular attention to the identification of their material and cultural drivers in selected countries and in a defined timeframe: North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt) during the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, a period that is less analysed by current literature, which usually focuses on the 1970s and 1980s. The aim of this article is to contextualize these events and better place them in the history of North African countries demonstrating that some of the Arab spring *exceptional traits* (e.g. youth participation or cross-fertilization dynamics) are well rooted in the history of this area and that the image of somnolent Arabs is wrong and groundless. The insurrectionary event generated by the revolt appears extremely interesting because, as revolutions are rare events not only in North Africa, but during the entire global history too, it is extremely important to recognize the impact of these revolts and their influence on the history of North African countries. The *immaculate conception* of the Arab spring *ex-nihilo* is a thesis that can no longer be accepted.

Students, Workers, and Nationalist Revolt Movements: Egyptian Dynamics between the 1940s and the 1950s

Egypt has been one of the most active countries during 1940s and the 1950s in terms of students' and youth's participation in protests, strikes and riots.⁶ This is extremely clear in events that have already been examined and studied (e.g. 1919 riots and 1935 *intifada* related to constitutional protests) but if we extend our analysis also to other events, we could find a seamless *fil rouge* of protests that never really stopped. For example, if we just consider 1946, we can easily identify a series of protests in February that shaped Egyptian national memory.⁷ Those events have also been recalled (among others) in the Egyptian literature, such as the famous book by Latifa al-Zayyat (2017), *Al-Bab al-Maftuh* (The Open Door). In particular, the 21 February 1946, commemorated as the Day

of Evacuation and now established as the country's National Students' Day, was marked by a general strike and demonstrations recalling the infamous Abbas Bridge incident, when around 6,000 students coming from different Egyptian universities and schools were injured and some probably killed (sources seem to not agree on this point) by security forces as a consequence of a protest in front of the Abdeen palace.⁸ The Abbas Bridge incident occurred on 9 February: "[t]he ninth of February 1946 proved to be a key day in the history of the student movement. Thousands of students from the secondary schools in Cairo flocked into the university campus, where a huge congregation of students was preparing for the march. Several speeches were delivered, and a group of students was chosen to maintain strict order during the march. The marchers headed towards the city along the usual route, aiming to cross the Nile by Abbas Bridge. When they reached the bridge, they found its two halves had been raised. A group of students succeeded in lowering them once more and the demonstrators began to cross. But the police managed to raise the spans once again while the students were still crossing the bridge, splitting the march into two and causing panic. A number of students fell into the river" (Abdalla 1985: 64).

The situation became even harsher and more tense in the following days until 21 February 1946 as the "the drama of the 'Abbas Bridge turned into a symbolic start for a bloody month. [...] 21 February 1946 turned into the bloodiest student eruption up to that time. In fact, the students through the workers' unions managed to set off an all-Cairoan [sic] conflagration. Tens of thousands of demonstrators marched from all sections of the town, first to the Opera Square, then to the Qasr al-Nil (today's *Al-Tahrir*) Square, where they clashed with the British. Armoured cars were encircled by the impassioned demonstrators and set on fire. The British retaliated with intensive shooting. The battle lasted until after midnight with demonstrators running in the side streets waving bloodstained cloths, further igniting the riot. No less than 20 deaths and 150 wounded were counted in the morning, not to mention victims in simultaneous though smaller demonstrations in other urban centres" (Erich 2005: 152, 154).

The situation did not change in the following months, marked by strikes, protests, and riots: 5 and 31 October but also – and most importantly – 13, 24, 26 and 27 November (Middle East Journal 1947: 75-76). Students were among the main drivers of the protests. According to the reports of the Middle East Journal, students' actions were so significant that the Prime Minister had to periodically close and re-open schools and universities (especially in Cairo and Alexandria) because "students remained away from classes in order to participate in political, nationalist demonstrations of protest against line taken by Egyptian Government in treaty negotiations" (Middle East Journal 1947: 75). Students joined nationalists' and workers' protests, by focusing their attention on driving a change in the Egyptian foreign policy against "British imperialism".

Both quotations of Abdalla (1985) and Erlich (2005) as well as a closer reading of October and November 1946 events, evoke the 2011 Egyptian events: youth masses

confronting police forces, symbolic events inspiring protesters actions, bottom-up organizations trying to take the lead of the protests but ending up fighting each other because of political influences and inferences (e.g. the Muslim Brothers and the Wafd), hundreds of deaths and injured within the Egyptian people ranks, Tahrir Square (at that time Ismailiyya Square) as the epicentre of the protests (along with Alexandria). The main difference we can highlight is that, despite the huge criticism against the monarchy, the main enemy of the protesters was clearly an external player: the already mentioned British colonial power. These commonalities are not reported here to state that history is slavishly repeating itself, but to underline the non-exceptionality of such social and political dynamics and contribute to curb the sense of "striking novelty" (Badiou 2012: 33) when analysing and evaluating the 2011 events. If similar dynamics tend to repeat and/or are already present in the history of a specific country, it could be useful to re-analyse the past events to find more instruments for interpreting current events.

Going back to the analysis of cultural and material causes of Egyptian past protests, before the Free officers 1952 coup, the attention on foreign policy can be identified as a distinct characteristic among protesters in the country. Students routinely joined Wafd nationalist demonstrations (and vice versa) demonstrating clear commonalities in their demands, objectives, and strategies. Another example in this regard can be the one of 14 September 1947 and the related clashes between the students and the police in Alexandria following UN Security Council decision against Egypt within the framework of the Sudanese dispute (Middle East Journal 1948c: 63). But even before and after that date (e.g. in 1945 or in 1950), it is easy to find the same scheme repeating itself: nationalists and students (especially university students) taking the streets in "opposition to Zionism and as a protest against the Egyptian Government's alleged negligence in not pressing for the evacuation of British troops from Egypt".⁹ Taking as an example the month of November 1950, it is possible to note that students repeatedly protested against Great Britain with a specific reference to its presence in the Suez Canal. It is interesting to mention the case of 16 November when, because of the traditional "speech from the throne" by the Prime Minister Mustafa Nahhas, thousands of anti-British students flooded Cairo streets and 41 of them were injured as a result of severe clashes with local policemen (Middle East Journal 1951d: 75). The scheme was perfectly reproduced on 21 November: several thousands of students demonstrated against the British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin's statement regarding the Suez Canal when he made clear that "British troops would not leave the Suez Canal zone" (Middle East Journal 1951d: 75) in line with the 1936 treaty. Bevin underlined that no changes occurred in the British policy towards the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan status rejecting Nahhas threats and consequently expounding the British position towards Egypt (Middle East Journal 1951d: 75). Eight days after, a minor anti-British demonstration of 300 students in the Cairo suburb of Zamalek, forced Egyptian police to

shoot in the air to disperse demonstrators (Middle East Journal 1951d: 76). These events showed the same, recurrent, set of drivers in student's protests: a strenuous opposition to the presence of Great Britain troops and influence in the country, associated with complaints for the poor economic situation of the country and the numerous reports of government negligence and errors. At the same time (echoing in a certain sense the 2011 dynamics), it is hard to find a constructive narrative in terms of alternatives, especially in these bottom-up students' demonstrations. The (probably too harsh in some respects) judgment of the British diplomat Craig published on the Middle East Journal in 1953, seems to identify clear flaws in the creation of a coherent alternative project to the status quo: "[i]n their political ideas they are, like students everywhere, vague and immature. A large proportion say that they are communist but very few of these know even the first thing about that creed. It is very difficult to find out from the students what the policies of their various parties are. All of them will reply, when you ask, that there is an enormous gap in Egypt between rich and poor and that this gap must be narrowed. But there they stick; and how this aim is to be achieved and what are to be the other points in their programs they are usually at a loss to explain" (Craig 1953: 293-294). Craig (1953: 294) also identified the same flaws in the Islamic alternative proposal: "[t]he members of the Muslim Brotherhood were particularly bad in this respect. They would not come down to brass tacks at all, but talked vaguely and without details of economic reform and a return to the principles of Islam".

As reconstructed by Abdalla (1985: 47), it was not only the Wafd that was interested in engaging the student component but also the new-born Muslim Brotherhood had that same aim. Indeed, since its foundation the Muslim Brotherhood tried to gain the trust of youth in both Wafd and Al-Azhar ranks. They were so effective that in 1946, as noted by a British Embassy senior, "they have recently become stronger than the Wafd as an element of disorder" (Abdalla 1985: 47). Their presence in both schools and universities further increased after the Second World War. They were capable of mobilization, but most importantly they were capable of overshadowing Wafd presence in Student Union councils. This is particularly true if we look at the statistics of Student Union elections at Cairo University in November 1951, when they won the following proportions of the contested seats: "11/11 in the Student Union of the Faculty of Agriculture; 11/11 in the Student Union of the Faculty of Science; 7/10 in the Student Union of the Faculty of Engineering; 11/16 in the Student Union of the Faculty of Arts; 9/10 in the Student Union of the Faculty of Law; 9/13 in the Student Union of the Faculty of Commerce" (Abdalla 1985: 48).

As recognized by Beinín and Lockman (1988), while confronting nationalists in the educational sector, Muslim Brotherhood tried also to penetrate worker movements, and it is not by chance that we consider that one of the most active groups of the Egyptian society in protesting along with the students and against the monarchy were the workers.¹⁰ On 3 September 1947, textile workers demonstrations in Mahalla al-

Kubra led to the murder of three of them and 17 of them were wounded due to police shootings (Middle East Journal 1948c: 62). On 5 April 1948, a strike was declared by the Egyptian police in Alexandria, Suez and Cairo asking for better salaries and other benefits (Middle East Journal 1948a: 321).¹¹ Two days later, nurses from Kasr El Aini hospital demanded better wages and better working conditions (Middle East Journal 1948a: 321). At the beginning of 1951, a series of strikes involved physicians, the engineering sector, and teachers. Doctors went on strike for fifteen days from 11 May until 26 May with thousands of them (in some cases more than 3,000) asking for an increase in their salaries (Middle East Journal 1951c: 340). Women organizations (in particular the so-called Daughters of the Nile) repeatedly demonstrated for women rights on 19 and 20 February 1952, when 1,000 women activists took the streets asking for equal political rights (Middle East Journal 1951c: 202). Even the press harshly criticized the monarchy until reaching the point of going on strike on 5 August 1951, against the imposed censorship (Middle East Journal 1951a: 485).

Strikes and workers demonstrations drastically changed both their intensity and nature after the July 1952 coup, suffering from an increased repression especially in the case of strikes, rallies and protests labelled as communist. By way of example, we can mention the Egyptian police harsh repression of a demonstration involving 6,000 textile workers on 13 August 1952, and the censorship on press dispatches reintroduced the day after (Middle East Journal 1952: 458). In 1953, the situation remained unchanged and the wave of arrests against the communists participating in demonstrations did not curb the intensity of the protests, as demonstrated by the harsh repression against workers of a textile factory based in Cairo on 8 September 1953 (Middle East Journal 1954: 73). The Director of Military Intelligence stated that "professional politicians and communist elements" were conducting "an underground campaign to create unrest and to undermine the regime" (Middle East Journal 1954: 73).

After the 1952 coup, similarly to organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, trade unions in Egypt experienced the same fate: first used to overthrow (or at least put under pressure) the monarchy through a series of strikes, demonstrations, and clashes, they were later harshly repressed when their support was no longer necessary. Following the same pattern, army officers relied on the mobilising power of trade unions but later, after power was gained and the King was removed, the same officers repressed all the organizations that could have overshadow the Free Officers. While having played a crucial role in mobilising masses and fatally weakening the monarchy (Alexander 2010: 245), after the military coup of 1952 (which most of them favoured and welcomed), the situation drastically changed for both workers and Muslim Brotherhood.

However, it may not be correct to assume that demonstrations and protests were totally over during the 1952-4 period. The military regime (since 1952) used protests in the streets (and their protagonists) for two main purposes: legitimise its power (as in the case of the *Azmat Maris*¹² of 1954) and use masses and crowds for its foreign policies

purposes in a complex "form of hegemonic incorporation and co-optation, armoured by coercion" (Chalcraft 2016: 323).¹³ By way of example, we can surely mention the anti-Muslim Brotherhood demonstration held by pro-Nasser workers in October 1954, when the Egyptian *rais* explicitly said to be ready to "stamp out Muslim Brotherhood terrorism" (Middle East Journal 1955: 58) but we can also mention the events of 1952, when the Bayda Drivers company supported the 1952 coup and particularly Muhammad Najib with a strike on the 9 August (Beinin and Lockman 1988: 421). Regarding the exploitation of masses for foreign policy aims, this has been very clear during the Suez Canal crisis. The list of events of this type would be long but one significative example could be represented by a 24-hour government-sponsored strike held at national level against the London Conference on 16 August 1956 (Middle East Journal 1956: 409) and also in November 1956 when masses (approximately 20,000 people) of Egyptians welcomed the UN police force contingent mission and the Norwegian force contingent indirectly celebrating the political victory of their *rais* (Middle East Journal 1957b: 69). The same scheme was repeated in the following years (examples of this are numerous) demonstrating that "radical nationalist dimension was enormously bolstered by the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, the successful defiance of the Tripartite Aggression in 1956, and Nasserism's hugely important role on the regional stage, at least until 1967" (Chalcraft 2016: 323).

Cross-fertilisation Dynamics: North African Interactions during the 1950s

Going back to the analysis of Egyptian students' demonstrations, it is possible to note that these protests were not only addressed to Great Britain but also in some other cases to France and especially its policies in Morocco and Algeria. This trend demonstrates a cross-fertilisation dynamic with protests and riots happening in these three countries either at the same time or because of the same drivers. Within this framework, the first episode worth noting is related to Morocco and occurred on 3 March 1951, when more than two thousand students demonstrated in Cairo against the French attempts to remove the Sultan of Morocco. On the same day, secondary school students demonstrated against France outside the Egyptian Foreign Affairs Ministry headquarters (Middle East Journal 1951c: 348). As recalled by Burke (1972: 103-104), it is not surprising that the Moroccan nationalist battle had a significant influence in Cairo and Alexandria, namely because: there was a large (around 2,000 people) resident Moroccan community in Egypt, mainly involved in trade, and having close relations with their families back in Morocco; there were also several Moroccan students in Egypt, studying mostly at al-Azhar University; Egypt was a natural stop for Moroccan pilgrims on their way to and from the holy places of Islam; the relatively large number of subscriptions to Eastern Arabic (mainly Egyptian) newspapers among the *bourgeoisie* of Fez, Tangier, Rabat, Sale, and Tetouan, suggesting considerable intellectual exchanges between Egypt and Morocco.

On the other hand, in the so-called Maghreb area, Morocco shared with Tunisia cross-fertilisation dynamics and both countries experienced similar periods of political violence and turmoil related to the (post-)independence struggle and terrorism.¹⁴ One clear connection between these two countries is firstly based on the shared intimate connection between trade unions and the nationalist decolonisation struggle as demonstrated by the events of December 1952 in Casablanca. Following the death of the Tunisian UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail) trade union leader Farhat Hached, Istiqlal and trade unions planned an open rebellion against the French rule in Morocco, with more than 6,000 Moroccan people protesting in the city, organizing strikes, and protesting against arbitrary police detentions.¹⁵ The Casablanca events demonstrated two peculiarities of trade unions and the nationalist decolonisation struggle in the Maghreb region: cross-fertilisation and mutual influence. On 23 October 1956, anti-French disorders broke out in Tunisia and Morocco following the capture of five Algerian leaders flying from Rabat to Tunisia (Middle East Journal 1957b: 89). The timeline of these events as described by Largeaud (2016) also confirms the strong relationship and a shared common interest between the Moroccan Istiqlal party and the Union marocaine du travail within the framework of the anti-colonialist struggle. It is worth noting that on that occasion also the Tunisian Neo-Destour party issued an official statement condemning the French actions and joined the protests, confirming once again the nationalist-trade union collaboration.

The above-mentioned conflicts with France took place immediately after the Tunisian proclamation of independence. The Tunisian independence and decolonisation process was surely peaceful compared to the Algerian events, but it is worth noting that several struggles, riots and uprisings characterised the post-independence period and namely the first Bourguiba period. One of the most relevant (and at the same time understudied) events is represented by the clashes that occurred in Ain Drahem between French and Tunisian soldiers on 31 May 1957 (Middle East Journal 1957a: 307). Six people died and 17 were wounded as a result of the confrontation. Clashes continued also in the following days in the south of the country near the oasis of al-Hamma and Gabes (Middle East Journal 1957a: 307). The Tunisians' impatience and intolerance regarding the French military presence in the country was clearly demonstrated also by a set of strikes conducted by the UGTT, like the strike of 13 February 1958, when UGTT leaders ordered all employees in the French military establishments to go on strike at midnight (Middle East Journal 1958: 187). The so-called war of Bizerte in July 1961 was then the result of a well-rooted tension and the roots of that crisis must be searched in several events that characterized the 1950s, such as the Sakiet Sidi Youssef bombardment: "[...] French aircraft attacked Sakiet Sidi Youssef, a village on the Algerian border, causing scores of civilian deaths. Bourguiba responded with a revival of anticolonial rhetoric, mobilising public opinion behind a demand for the withdrawal of most of the several thousand French troops still garrisoned in Tunisia and the restriction of the

remainder to a few posts in the Sahara and the massive naval installation at Bizerte. The formation of a provisional Algerian government in Tunis later in the year provided an additional irritant to France [...]. To pressure France into acceding to his demand to evacuate the base, Bourguiba urged party militants to form a 'people's army' to join soldiers and policemen in blockading the French positions scattered throughout the vicinity of Bizerte" (Perkins 2014: 147).

In Bizerte, riots started on 6 July 1961, with 1,000 people urging the French troops to evacuate the naval base in the city. Masses were excited by a declaration made by Bourguiba. He raised doubts on the real intentions of the French government regarding the status of the base (Middle East Journal 1961b: 437). The Bizerte crisis was, from the very beginning, a political move initiated by Bourguiba: he *inspired* the people in the streets to follow his words and demonstrate against the French presence. It is difficult to consider these anti-French rallies as spontaneous events, even though, undeniably, popular resentment towards France was very high at that time. As recognized by El Machat (2000), Bourguiba decided to ignite the conflict for the evacuation of the Bizerte base for his own political interests in an anti-French, anti-Nasserist and anti-opposition (Salah Ben Youssef) move. When on 12 July, the youth took again the streets against French troops in Bizerte, Bourguiba decided that it was time to directly address the crowd with a speech on 14 July that gathered more than 50,000 people: "the struggle for evacuation of French troops would not stop until the last French soldier had left" (Middle East Journal 1961b: 438). Bourguiba explained his strategy also in front of the National Assembly on 15 July: if no proper response to his requests to De Gaulle would have been defined in 24 hours, Tunisian troops and civilians would have surrounded the base of Bizerte (Middle East Journal 1961b: 437-438). And this is exactly what happened on the 19 July and again one month later when Bourguiba openly called for three days of public demonstrations against France and on 25 July when he "called on brother nations and friendly powers to send arms and guerrilla fighters to aid Tunisia against the French army in the event of a new battle" (Middle East Journal 1961b: 438). From a historical point of view, the chronicles of Ain Draham and Bizerte clashes raise the following points: the pacification of Tunisia seems to be neither peaceful, nor immediate, nor costless for Tunisian civilians; the UGTT always had contradictory stances and was able to mobilise forces on the ground both in opposition to, but mainly in line with the regime as a "docile organization dispensing patronage" (Allal 2013: 187); Bourguiba was extremely interested in mobilising masses and crowds for *national* (personal) interests.

In addition to that, it is necessary to make one last point. We all remember the 2015 wave of terrorism in the country as well as the 2013 assassination of leftist leaders (Belaid and Brahmi) after the dismissal of Ben 'Ali. These kinds of events, less common during the Ben 'Ali period, were unfortunately part of the new-born Tunisia. Those unfortunate events could evoke past murders such as the one of Farhat Hached in 1952, as well as that of newspaper publishers like Chadli Kastalli (Middle East Journal

1953a: 357), and politicians.¹⁶ The latter have been often the targets of assassination attempts, as in the case of the Sfax Councillor Ahmad Belgrawi on 8 August 1953 (Middle East Journal 1953b: 518), Ayachi Ben Chedli (Assistant Mayor of Kef) on 22 August 1953 (Middle East Journal 1953b: 518), or also Hedi Chaker, a nationalist from Nabeul in September 1953 (Middle East Journal 1954: 90) and, last but not least, also police representatives such as Salah Toumi, who was killed on the 12 September 1953 (Middle East Journal 1954: 90). Not to mention the long series of terrorist attempts and bombs exploded in Tunis as well as in other part of the country during the same years. It would be interesting, in this regard, to integrate today's main narrative on the Bourguiba period by further investigating these potentially revolutionary events, which were able to destabilise the fragile new-acquired independence and that dramatically occurred again after 2010. Finally, historical examples on cross-fertilisations and mutual influences cannot exclude the Palestinian issue and the Algerian war, two events that stirred intense feelings and emotions in North African streets and squares.

There is a vast literature on the consequences of the so-called Nakba on the Arab world, as well as on how 1948 events dramatically changed the perception of the Jewish communities in North Africa. Tensions between the two different communities had dramatically risen before, during and after the 1948 events. The increasing hostility towards the local Jewish community seems not to be related to religious reasons, but rather to the Palestinian issue. As we have seen before for the students' mobilisation, there were often (if not always) foreign policy factors that gave masses and political parties the opportunity to demonstrate, riot, clash: in this case against local Jewish communities. By wrongly assimilating the *Jewish* and *Zionist* elements and considering these two words as synonymous, a set of "faith-based clashes"¹⁷ erupted in North Africa: more evidently around 1947 and surely more dramatically in 1948.

The first record of Egyptian "faith-based clashes" referred to 1947 (the 5 December) and is directly linked to the Palestinian issue. On that date 3,000 demonstrators gathered in Alexandria for expressing their rage against the UN decision to divide Palestine (Middle East Journal 1948b: 205). On the same day, around 20,000 people grouped in the Al-Azhar district of Cairo for the same reason (Middle East Journal 1948b: 205). As it always happens with the Palestinian issue in the Arab contemporary history, politicians immediately tried to exploit the feeling of the masses regarding this topic to pursue their own interests. On the 14 December 1947, Arab politicians from different countries physically occupied the square at Cairo Opera. Between 30,000 and 100,000 Egyptians joined Cairo's Opera area to hear the speeches of different heads of states (from Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria and so on) shouting against Palestine partition (Middle East Journal 1948b: 205). This *Arab solidarity*¹⁸ was also violently expressed in September 1948, with anti-Jewish demonstrations in Cairo degenerated with an explosion in the Jewish quarter of the Egyptian capital causing 19 casualties and 62 people injured (Middle East Journal 1949: 65).

Along with and in parallel to Egypt, also Morocco has been marked on several occasions

by demonstrations against the Jewish presence. The historical presence of a wide and well rooted Jewish community was a matter of fact, but in May 1948 this presence became an unsolicited one. "The Arab nationalism which asserts itself must face both the feeling of frustration of the colonised, resentment towards the Allies, and finally omnipresent misery. All these elements are exploited by nationalist groups, in particular by Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, which is estimated to have gathered nearly a million members and sympathisers in 1945. Arab anti-Zionism takes root on this ground. The Palestinian issue will crystallise resentment and become the receptacle of accumulated tensions and frustrations" (Bensoussan 2012: 699).¹⁹

In the case of Morocco, the exploitation of this feeling by the nationalists was very clear on 3 May 1948, when nationalist forces "attacked Arabs carrying traditional offerings of friendship to Jews after the Passover holidays" (Middle East Journal 1948a: 329). Only the interposition of French police prevented demonstrators to enter Jewish areas (Middle East Journal 1948a: 329). This anti-Jewish sentiment was also exploited by the ruling power in the attempt of supporting nationalist efforts, promoting an anti-French campaign, and using the *far enemy* scheme for empowering the struggle for independence. This peculiar mix (resentment of local population; nationalists and the ruling power fuelling the tensions; apparent inertia of local French forces; the declaration of independence of Israel on 14 May 1948) led towards a rapid deterioration of the events. Riots and clashes in Oujda on 7 and 8 June were the natural consequence of that. The first day of clashes caused five casualties and no people were injured, but the day after the death toll reached around forty (Votichenko 1948: 457).

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The anti-Jewish sentiment and the Palestinian issue influence on North Africa had an impact also on the Libyan scenario. Almost unconcerned with students and party-based clashes or demonstrations, Tripoli was widely and deeply stimulated by events related to the Palestinian issue: "[...] in early November 1945 - the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration - they [the Libyans] suddenly started a fierce and bloody riot that ended after three days with 140 Jewish casualties and millions of dollars in damage to [Jewish] property" (Arbid 2003: 249).

On 12 June 1948, following the Moroccan events, clashes erupted also in Tripoli: Jewish houses and establishments were set on fire and several Libyans (both Jews and Muslims) were killed (Votichenko 1948: 457). Regarding the Libyan case, it is interesting to underline how riots and uprisings in the country were limited compared to other countries.²⁰ Libya appears to be more *stable* even if influenced by three main foreign policy topics: the Palestinian issue, Nasser's ideology (especially in the late 1950s) and finally the Algerian war with a growing anti-French sentiment expressed in two anti-French students' marches in April 1956 (Middle East Journal 1956: 417).

Finally, in Algeria the protests against the Jewish presence occurred in another, even more complex, scenario: the war for the independence. And certainly, such protests are widely influenced by the colonial power. Roots of communal clashes between Algerian

Jews and Algerian Muslims can be traced back to 1870 and to the so-called Crémieux Decree: "In the seventy years since the 1870 Crémieux Decree, Algerian Jews had become Frenchmen. This was not an easy path. Algerian Jews regularly faced attacks on their new and evolving identities via antisemitism [...]. In 1870, the Crémieux Decree transformed the Jews of Algeria from colonial subjects into French citizens" (Roberts 2017: 2). Once Algerian Jews became French citizens under the Crémieux Decree, they became the quintessential internal outsiders of the French colonial regime, at once French citizens but simultaneously shaped by their 'indigenous' customs and practices. Through attendance at French public schools and the 'willingness' to adopt French as their language, Algerian Jews assimilated to their French identities [...]" (Roberts 2017: 42).

In the period that we are examining, we can mention the regrettably well-known Constantine pogrom of 1934 and the riots of May 1945 concerning European and Jews. Most of the clashes against the Jewish communities have found their *legitimacy* in assimilating Jews destiny to the Europeans fate especially after the annulment (in 1942, by the Vichy regime) and the reinstalment (by De Gaulle) of the Crémieux Decree. One example of this *common fate* to which both parties have been subjected was a brutal mob against the Jews around Notre Dame d'Afrique by mistakenly considering some of its inhabitants as French soldiers. This is what happened on 18 January 1961: "[t]he police fired into the air to disperse a crowd of 300 Muslims who were reported to be threatening 2 Jews in Notre Dame d'Afrique. The latter had been accused of knocking on the doors of Muslim houses. There had been rumors that non-Muslims "disguised as soldiers" had knocked on doors and tried to enter Muslim homes" (Middle East Journal 1961a: 183). Similarly, clashes erupted at the end of 1961 (in Oran, on 29 December 1961), following a speech by Charles de Gaulle regarding the Algerian future that inflamed the masses that directed their rage towards the Jews (Middle East Journal 1962: 186). Obviously fights between the two parties may have had other reasons, which concurred to fuel antisemitism, as Cole (2010), interestingly, remarked, with specific regard to the Constantine events of 1934 or as noted by Roberts (2017) on a broader and deeper level.

In addition, it is worth noting the effect of the Algerian war not on Algeria itself, but as a tool for mobilisation in the other North African countries. When analysing the timeline of the Algerian independence war and the struggles related to it, it is extremely complicated to divide and categorise the events that affected the country from WWII until 1962. Terrorist attacks, troops clashes, unrests and riots sometimes are not clearly and individually recognisable and are merged instead in a single, complex, unique, event. But for the purpose of our article, it is not particularly interesting to reconstruct the timeline of Algerian events, but rather to analyse the impact of these events on North Africa.

In the case of Egypt, anti-French sentiment never reached the level of anti-British

sentiment. Nevertheless, in 1956, the situation changed because of the Suez crisis and of a specific international event that inflamed Arab squares all over North Africa. It was 22 October 1956, when five FLN (Front de libération nationale) leaders were kidnapped by French forces while flying on an airplane from Rabat to Tunis (Middle East Journal 1957b: 73). This heavy interference on the sovereignty of both Morocco and Tunisia, led towards widespread protests in the whole region. From the 22 to 25 October 1956, Rabat and Tunis, as well as peripheral areas such as Meknes, were marked by widespread riots against France. On the first day of unrest, the French consulate in Tunis was under attack and on the following days several Tunisian and Moroccans lost their lives during fights with French forces. On top of that, also Egypt was marked by protests, and this is particularly interesting because this happened in the very middle of the Suez Canal crisis. On 28 October, a 24-hour general strike was called to complain against the arrest of the five FLN leaders: all activities were halted, and no casualties were reported (Middle East Journal 1957a: 76). Morocco was also marked by another round of tensions in 1958 and one of the most spectacular pro-Algerian demonstrations was held in Tunis on 1 November 1960, when 30,000 Tunisians took the streets in a pro-Algerian demonstration marking the 6th anniversary of the Algerian war (Middle East Journal 1961b: 62). A similar action was undertaken by 5,000 Libyans in Tripoli in the month of December of the same year.²¹

Conclusions: A Comparative Perspective

The list of events reported in this article is certainly not exhaustive, but it tries to demonstrate the occurrence of riots, revolts, uprisings, demonstrations, and protests in the history of North Africa. Even if none of these events has actually evolved into a revolutionary, bottom-up process, it is in any case interesting to note that the history of North Africa in those years (the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s) was marked by events whose material and cultural causes could be of contribute to better frame the so-called Arab Spring in a wider historical context.

When revolutionary processes have been developed (e.g. the Egyptian Free Officer *blessed revolution* in 1952), this has happened in a top-down fashion, not involving the masses but *using* the masses to serve the interests of the leaders. The Najib-Nasser clashes and Bourguiba's exploitation of *people's army* were two practical demonstrations of it. Under Nasser, Egyptians continued to be mobilised on the basis of foreign policy events (e.g. the Algerian war or the Suez Canal crisis). This does not mean that Nasser never experienced forms of opposition or threats to his power, but these threats did not come from the square or the streets, rather from plots organised by others (e.g., foreign powers but also internal opposition such as former monarchists and nationalists), especially between 1954 and 1956.

Also, Bourguiba seized the square and eliminated any political and social alternative. The most famous Tunisian worker union, the so-called UGTT, acted more as a

transmission belt of Bourguiba policies rather than as an opposition party: "its role has been as much to control the workers as to defend their interests" (Disney 1978: 13). This UGTT-Bourguiba connection was particularly evident after the Sfax congress of 1955. Moreover, the analysis of the Tunisian timeline before and most importantly right after the independence allows to raise doubts on the peaceful transition guaranteed by Bourguiba with respect to French colonial power and challenge his "elegant decolonization" (Brown 2001: 55). Obviously, we do not find in Tunisia the same magnitude of violence of a neighbouring country like Algeria, but at the same time it seems to be unrealistic to describe the post-independence history of Tunisia as a peaceful, even elegant, series of events. Additionally, some events of the Tunisian history seem to be understudied despite their relevance (e.g. Ain Draham). If properly investigated, Bourguiba's period (especially the 1950s) could also teach us more about *organising the spontaneity* of Tunisian squares and streets.

Libyans took the streets to protest against Israel and in favour of Palestinian, against the French colonial rule in Algeria as well as to support Nasser and its pan-Arabist project against communism in 1959. Only between 1951 and 1954 we can record small tensions and demonstrations against the so-called federal government of Tripoli or after the 1952 elections when the National Congress Party declared frauds in the voting system. Again, even if in this case the protest was ignited by a party, the event seems to be randomly conducted and the reaction of the ruling regime was absolutely in line with other authoritarian systems: Bashir Bey Sadawi, the leader of the National Congress Party was arrested and then deported. No major effect of these two events (riots and detention of the leader) affected the stability of the country.

Last but not least, the Moroccan case seems to be of interests for the post-independence tensions between the ruling leadership (the royal family and the King) and the leftist parties. As for the other countries, in Morocco workers and leftist opposition joined forces against the ruling power after the independence. In December 1959, for example, tensions were recorded between the King Muhammad V, trade unions and the nationalist. Also, Istiqlal party accused the King to support leftist parties by taking a partisan attitude in the political arena. The protests took the form of an open opposition to the monarchy (in this case *the internal enemy*) in 1960, precisely on 2 April, when the Moroccan Federation of Labor called for a general strike denouncing violence against workers in the mine of Kachkate and the police was accused of illegal detentions and tortures (Middle East Journal 1960: 308). The peak of tensions was reached on 27 May when the ousted Premier Abdallah Ibrahim, published a press release where he exposed the new regime, the new cabinet (nominated in the same month) and said that: "battle is even harder now than the battle we fought for independence" (Middle East Journal 1960: 310). He was echoed the day after by the union leader Mahdi ibn Barqa who said that the Moroccan system was moving towards a theocratic and feudal system maintaining and reinforcing medieval social structures (Middle East Journal 1960: 310).

In 1961, the social tensions did not diminish, but on the contrary increased, especially among workers. In July 1961, the Morocco Labor Federation called for a strike of mine workers in support of phosphate workers that had already been on strike for 15 days (Middle East Journal 1961a: 429) and in the month of December of the same year, grocers, tobacconist, barmen and bus drivers (shortly) stopped their activities to protest against the government decisions (Middle East Journal 1962: 201). Despite that and despite this active attitude in opposing the *regime* policies, Moroccan leftist forces were not able to create an alternative proposal to the ruling power, as they were in the following years and decades assimilated in the compromise policy promoted by the monarchy.

Between the 1940s and the beginning of the 1960s, the streets and squares in North African countries were the setting of different tensions and were marked by a high number of events, mainly driven by international issues (e.g. the Palestine and Algerian independence wars) but also by economic reasons (e.g. the salaries increase) with the presence of cross-fertilisation dynamics. Nevertheless, none of these processes seems to have produced a more complex bottom-up revolutionary movement. Just after the revolt events, squares became voiceless, weightless. Opposition leaders were jailed or exiled and the State was sacked by patriarchal figures such as Nasser or Bourguiba with no room for setting up a solid bottom-up alternative.

It can be concluded that if we convincingly demonstrated that the demonstrators in the squares and streets were absolutely not silently observing the events, we should also note that the creation of a concrete, real, structured, alternative was far from being reached: at least from a bottom-up perspective. This article sought to challenge the stereotyped image of somnolent Arabs and it clearly poses the problem of integrating the above-mentioned events in the history of these countries integrating this understudied history of contentions (in some cases quite well-known, but in other cases absolutely ignored or obliterated and in any case underestimated in its impact and effects) to better evaluate their influence (in terms of their impact and not only of their failures and successes) and decipher the political and social dynamics (Badiou 2012: 38) triggered by the Arab riots.

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Notes:

- 1 - Dahbashi H., *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, "Al Jazeera", 8 May 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2012/5/8/the-arab-spring-the-end-of-postcolonialism/> (last accessed on 9 September 2022).
- 2 - Please note that in order to abide by editorial rules, the author was not able to provide a scientific transcription of Arabic names. Consequently, these are reported in their more common form.
- 3 - This article was written between the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022.
- 4 - Dahbashi H., *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, "Al Jazeera", 8 May 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2012/5/8/the-arab-spring-the-end-of-postcolonialism/> (last accessed on 9 September 2022).
- 5 - See in this sense the extremely interesting analysis contained in Rivetti and Cavatorta (2021).
- 6 - We consider here both secondary school students and university students.
- 7 - The centrality of the 1946 protests has been recently analysed by the Egyptian researcher Hisham Abd al-Raouf (2021) in his recently published book *Intifāḍat 1946 fī Miṣr*, but these events remain still on the side-line of other studies.
- 8 - For more information on the general strike proclamation by the National Committee of Workers and Students (NCWS), please refer to Abdalla (1985: 66).
- 9 - The event had also an international echo being reported on the New York times columns: Clifton D., *Cairo's Students Protest Zionism*, The New York Times, 2 November 1945, <https://www.nytimes.com/1945/11/02/archives/cairos-students-protest-zionism-demonstrators-also-threaten.html> (last accessed 4 September 2022).
- 10 - For a detailed analysis of Muslim Brotherhood (conflicting) relationship with worker movements during this period, please see Beinin and Lockman (1988: 366-394).
- 11 - It is worth noting that also in this case, students joined demonstrations in Alexandria.
- 12 - March crisis between Jamal 'Abd al-Nasser (Nasser) and Muhammad Najib for the control of Free Officers and lastly of the whole of Egypt after 1952 military revolution.
- 13 - For a detailed presentation and assessment of strikes, protests and demonstrations during the March crisis, please refer to Beinin and Lockman (1988: 437-447).
- 14 - In this article I am not going to investigate neither the political violence struggles in detail nor the terrorist activities of that period, but to note that similar and parallel and or consecutive periods of unrest and protests happened likewise in Casablanca and Tunis during the period concerned.
- 15 - For a detailed timeline of those days see Esprit (1953).
- 16 - Riots took place in Tunis on the day of Chadli Kastalli's assassination on 2 May 1953.
- 17 - As they are defined in the timeline of the Middle East Journal.
- 18 - This article is not the right place to discuss the controversial issue of the so-called Arab solidarity towards Palestinians, but we can surely raise doubts on its historical effectiveness as well as on its truthfulness.
- 19 - Translated from French by the author.
- 20 - When the research was conducted for this article and without claiming to make a final judgement, it appears that in the Libyan case party-based mobilization and trade union activities were absolutely limited if compared with other North African countries.
- 21 - A more interesting aspect in terms of cross-fertilization dynamics is the fact that the Algerian crisis interested not only North African societies but highly affected the French political scenario and increased social tensions in Europe.

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