

Understanding Revolutions

Opening Acts in Tunisia⁽¹⁾

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Introduction: A New Branch of Knowledge

The first decade since the onset "Arab Spring" has occasioned tens of thousands of articles, books and studies; thousands of academic seminars and conferences; and countless hours of political meetings at regional and international levels, all dedicated to describing the events, analysing their repercussions and deliberating their ramifications. In effect, the Arab Spring has become a new field of research. Think tanks have been recruited for this very purpose. It has become required reading on university curricula and a focus for academic theses. It has engaged a constantly expanding international scholastic community whose roots date back to the waves of democratic transformation that began in Eastern Europe in the middle of the last century and Latin America before that.

Azmi Bishara's *Understanding Revolutions* fits squarely in this complex political and intellectual context. It is essential reading for any academic student of the Arab condition and, as such, can only be read within the context of that extensive critical tradition in which discussions and debates are informed by the entire legacy of literature on political revolution and reform throughout the world.

Bishara organised the main body of this study into five chapters in which he presents (I base the order here on the work he published on the subject in Arabic in 2012⁽³⁾) a "diary" of the revolution chronicling the events prior to and during the uprising, detailed discussions of the events as they unfolded phase by phase, a breakdown of the Arab versus specifically Tunisian aspects of the events, and an analysis of the social, cultural and political makeup of the forces that variously led and supported, or opposed and fought the revolution, and the regional and international contexts in which they operated. Perhaps most importantly, the author crowned the English edition with a theoretical prologue on revolution, which draws on, and elaborates on, his previous writings on the subject. In addition to the concluding remarks and epilogue on the transitional period, he added an open-ended postscript giving his views on the events unfolding in Tunisia at the time of writing.

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³ Azmi Bishara, *Al-Thawra al-Tūnisiyya al-Majīda: Binyat Thawra wa-Ṣayrūratuhā min khilāl Yawmiyyātihā* (Doha and Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2012).

Navigating Three Shoals

When beginning a study on the Arab Spring, Arab scholars will encounter three epistemological challenges:

- The fragmentary and uncertain nature of the empirical evidence,
- The problem of theory and the risks of generalisation, and
- The vulnerability of the cognizant self to subjective influences vis-a-vis the subject matter.

In the most productive parts of his book, Bishara strives to navigate the narrow straits between these three shoals. Every contribution he makes is the product of his success in managing to stay this course for as long as possible.

Empiricism

The author was reasonably lucky in terms of the availability of information on the Tunisian revolution. It did not precipitate an early counterrevolution that would silence voices or cover up information or deviate from its peaceful course into bloody civil war, a development which in other countries has made writing about revolution a kind of luxury. Nor did the Tunisian revolution erupt in an intellectually and institutionally flat environment, despite the despotism that loomed over Tunisians' lives. The political elites, though generally aging and organisationally weak, were not intellectually or normatively steeped in the structures of a conservative society of the sort that drags its members into inter-communal battles. Tunisian society, in its modern history, has not experienced sectarian or ethnic conflicts that threatened its unity. It is a social environment that has permitted a relative abundance of available information, academic writings, field studies, memoirs and viewpoints, all of which are useful to scientific inquiry precisely because of their diversity and spirit of intellectual freedom which emanates from the authors' diverse ideological convictions or independent positions. Bishara benefited from this, to which testifies the abundance of detailed information which he culled from a huge quantity of sources,

ensuring that his analytical work rested on a strong empirical foundation.

Of course, empirical information, however abundant and diverse, is not all that empiricism is about. For one, the gaps between the known "facts" and the unknown are, more often than not, too broad for the available information to bridge. This, in itself, is a problem in its own right. But we find that Bishara is conscious of this challenge and preserves a healthy scepticism toward all generalisation.

Theory

Since empirical information, which Max Weber reminds us is selective, partial and artificial (in the sense of manufactured), does not generate, on its own, a comprehensible whole, theoretical speculation is the solution. But it is a problematic one because of the nature of generalisation. To illustrate this dilemma empirically, so to speak, let us consider a folk story that I have used as a pedagogical aid when discussing this subject with students.

"One day, Juha was sitting beneath a tree on the side of the road when some men stopped and asked, 'Hey Juha, did a black camel pass this way today? We're looking for it.'"

"'Yes, I did see a camel,' Juha answered. 'The side facing me was black, but I can't vouch for the other side.'"⁽⁴⁾

The men found themselves in a predicament. If they accepted the whole of Juha's answer, they could not be sure they were on the right track, rendering his answer useless to a decision as to whether to continue searching in the same direction. But if they took only the first part, it would only be of use if they added a speculative generalisation. Herein resides the dilemma of a posteriori theorising. It is forever tentative; the further away theory moves from the empirical particular to the conjectured whole, the more vulnerable it becomes to challenge. One senses this underlying concern in Bishara's methodology for walking this epistemological tightrope.

4 My mother used this anecdote as a way to teach us, as children, the ills of lying.

The problem with theory extends beyond the hazards of generalisation to the heavy mantle it projects onto "reality", generating "cognitive convictions" that lurk in the recesses of the concepts, hypotheses and epistemic-sociological contexts that produce it (i.e. the theory). It is at this point that theory could develop into what some term "narrative". But bear in mind that theory does not become narrative, in the sense understood by the "interpretive narrative" school, if we may use that term, until it departs from its logical conjectural nature and lends itself to a instrumental purpose as, for example, an instrument of power and action and/or as a production and "humanisation" tool for researchers keen to ingratiate themselves with groups that serve their interests and to enlist in the defence of these groups.

The layers of symbolism that theory imposes on "reality" presents another challenge at the critical intellectual level. It demands from scholars an ability to shed that mental symbolic cloak in order to re-establish their special connection with "empirical reality", enabling them to contemplate it afresh in light of new questions and concerns related to the particular epistemological-social contexts in which they are conducting their thought processes. Only in light of this can we understand why Bishara dedicated lengthy passages in the introduction and prologue to a discussion of virtually the entire corpus of literature on revolution from the standpoint of its usefulness to understanding the Tunisian revolution, in particular, and the Arab Spring, in general. This is the second fine line that he pursues with painstaking care.

Commitment

Can one think about matters in general and on revolution in particular free of some form of moral or political commitment? This ancient dilemma was posed again in the modern era with René Descartes' assertion that the existence of everything can be questioned except for the cognisant self which has an inherent independent existence. The social sciences lent impetus to the positivist approach with the notion that it was possible to separate the subject from the object and, indeed, that it was necessary to do so in order to produce "correct" knowledge. At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, the fathers of the social sciences (Auguste Comte,

Herbert Spencer, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber and others) advanced this project and the work continues. Neuropsychology is just one of the sciences that maintain its message today. However, it was Weber who took this dilemma by its horns when addressing a subject of direct pertinence to Bishara's book: science versus politics as a vocation. Weber posited that as long as the scientist was driven by the goal of attaining truth and the politician was driven to change the world and the values and interests that shaped it, the two were bound to move always in different directions and could never meet.

Is Weber's thesis still valid? Bishara attempted to tackle this question in his book, even if he did not state this explicitly. Philosophers from Karl Marx and the Frankfurt School to Michel Foucault and even Bruno Latour today have revealed a deeply rooted relationship between knowledge, power and ideological thought systems which compel researchers to take moral stances, often without them realising it. In like manner, the interpretive school, as represented by Clifford Geertz among others, maintains that theories are nothing but semi-subjective narratives and that we can produce dozens of them in various forms without having to be scientific in the positivist sense of the term.

This said, defenders of objectivity in the social sciences still exist, despite the ambiguity of the concept. Pierre Bourdieu attempted to solve the problem, partially at least, with his proposed reflexive, self-monitoring approach to the acquisition, production and accumulation of knowledge. Based on the theoretical background and methodology of *Understanding Revolutions*, it is safe to assume that Bishara still belongs to this school. This is why he dedicated a special section at the end of this book to expressing his personal view on the path the Tunisian revolution has recently taken, drawing on the conclusions of his analyses in the main body of the work. As such he assumes a conscientious position not unlike that summarised by Raymond Aron in *Le Spectateur engagé*.

The Problems of the "Narratives" of Revolution

The Literature: What is Revolution?

Scholars encountered two basic problems related to the literature on revolution the moment they began studying the Tunisian revolution:⁽⁵⁾

The first has to do with revolutions as ideological narratives. These are inevitably the product of long-lasting political, communicational and literary-philosophical labour performed by social forces that succeed in imposing their historical reading of events on a vast scale and that use diverse means to reproduce this narrative, the most important of which are the state's ideological apparatuses, especially the school. When the narrative becomes fixed in minds and things, it solidifies as an ideological representation of history and functions in the manner of the *habitus* as Bourdieu conceived it, steering the collective self in terms of how it portrays itself and the other. When these forces succeed in asserting their hegemony universally, their narrative permeates the minds of the hegemonised for whom the narrative becomes the authoritative frame-of-reference for understanding and assessing their reality, sometimes to the extent that they become unable to conceive their world differently from the image the authoritative version creates in their minds.

The second problem concerns revolution as an object of critical academic thought. Here scholars find themselves wrestling with epistemological theories, the declared aim of which is the pursuit of the "truth". They are thus obliged to be aware of the historical, social and cognitive contexts at work in the process of constructing that "truth".

In *Understanding Revolutions*, Bishara addressed this two-pronged dilemma head-on. In the global imagination of what constitutes a major revolution there are very few models that can be considered as such: the French and Bolshevik revolutions, and, at a stretch, virtual spokespersons for this imagination might add the Iranian revolution, but tentatively and

with many reservations. But does the information we get from the narratives of the revolutions tell us what actually happened, or is it all an ideological construct produced *ex post facto*? Bishara posed this question and then turned to specialist historians to show that much of the evidence from these revolutions does not mesh with the narratives that were subsequently created. In their initial phases the revolutions were not much different than the beginnings of the Arab Spring uprisings and the Tunisian revolution, in particular. The author deserves credit for his meticulous attention to this matter and especially for identifying the similarity between how the French revolution inspired a pan-European movement for the revolutionary overthrow of despotic regimes and how the Tunisian revolution sparked a desire to emulate it throughout the Arab world. But conscious of potential empirical snares, he cautioned that the outward resemblance may not necessarily extend to similarity in substance. For example, whereas the Napoleonic wars were a medium for the spread of the French revolution throughout Europe, the Tunisian revolution spread like wildfire throughout many Arab countries because of what Bishara termed in his prologue "susceptibility" to revolution. Although this quality may have existed in a similar context in 18th and 19th century Europe, in the Arab context the imagined affiliation to a single overarching culture and the belief in the possibility of building a shared future under a unified banner was even greater than the demand for freedom. The author concludes that to approach the Arab Spring from the standpoint of the Western imagined narrative of revolution could inhibit our ability to understand the Tunisian revolution.

Is there a theory on what constitutes revolution? Once again, we return to the empiricist dilemma. Bishara examined dozens of works that treat revolution as a concept and attempted to formulate a theoretical paradigm based on variables derived from certain features common to concrete historical revolutionary

⁵ In 2011-2012, we encountered this problem in full force while carrying out a field study on the Tunisian revolution in the areas where it started. We found that the events at the outset resembled the French revolution and that the "official" narrative of the latter was idealistic and inconsistent with reality. We cited Eric Hobsbawm in this regard. See: Mouldi Lahmar et al., *Al-Qādhī al-Mahallī taht Mijhar al-'Ulūm al-Insāniyya* (Doha and Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2014), p. 23.

experiences, the purpose being to enable researchers to categorise a case under study as a revolution or not depending on whether it fits the paradigm. The result was disappointing for at least two reasons. Firstly, an empirical description of a specific case cannot produce a theory with major explanatory power. A prime example is to be found in Crane Brinton's attempt to identify the articulatory facets of the French revolution.⁽⁶⁾ True, we find many elements mentioned by Brinton that re-occurred in Tunisia and elsewhere in the Arab region, such as the general bankruptcy of the state and the splintering of the ruling elites. However, the differing contexts prevented such factors from converging in an identical way in every case and from assuming the same significance in the minds of those concerned. Moreover, in some instances they were not necessarily present, yet the revolution happened anyway. In the Tunisian case, the state was not in such a critical financial situation that it could not perform its essential functions. In fact, we could also contend that the ruling elite had not splintered but rather remained neutral and perhaps unable to rally the state agencies to its side.

Secondly, the theoretical works failed to anchor the concept of revolution on a fundamental principle for them all, wherever or whenever they occur, namely their reformist nature. This applies regardless of how they are carried out, whether spearheaded from above and led by a vanguard set on changing structures and values or ignited from below by the underprivileged demanding justice, and whether they are peaceful, restrained and patient, or quick, explosive and a reflection of closed horizons for negotiation and consensus. In this connection, Bishara invokes Alexis de Tocqueville,⁽⁷⁾ who argues, as a conservative, that the violent revolution of 1789 was unnecessary when measured against what it subsequently accomplished because most of the transformations it attributed to itself had already been in the process of realisation through the reforms that were implemented before the revolution. Bishara takes issue with many well-known writers on the concept of revolution: Skocpol, Tilly, Burke, Barrington Moore, Goldstone and many others (pp. 7-14). He goes further to question the usefulness

of Hannah Arendt's proposal that limits the defining condition of genuine revolution to "freedom". While he agrees with it in principle, he points out that Arendt wrote that America had achieved a great revolution because its pursuit for freedom in all senses, yet she overlooked the fact that this came at the expense of the freedom of the indigenous inhabitants who were the victims of American settlers' expansionist theology with its genocidal outcomes (p. 13).

So, what is revolution? The author ventures a definition. It is one that is more practical than theoretical as, in his opinion, it helps us differentiate revolution from protest movements that are limited in demands and duration, from top-down political reform movements that do not seek to change the regime, and from military coups (with some cautious allowance made for such successful experiments as the Portuguese coup in 1976). The definition he espouses for this purpose is that revolution is "a popular uprising with massive participation which is consistently directed at regime change. Revolutions aim for liberation and justice, which, according to the revolutionaries, can only be achieved via a change of regime". He adds that "we must beware of rejecting the notion that a given uprising only deserves to be described as a revolution if it succeeds in bringing about a just political system or a free society" (p. xiv-xv). But he also notes that, like Timothy Ash, he believes that there is an integral relationship between revolution and reform. Genuine reform is a cumulative process. Real revolutions can only fulfil themselves through reform.

On the Tunisian Case

Once we start examining a specific case, empirical problems rear their heads again. The dynamics of how events develop and shift course, the difficulties involved in building something new, and the consequent setbacks and even reversals against the revolutionary consciousness and its goals confound the ways we work with concepts. Can we call what happened in Tunisia a revolution? Bishara, perhaps inspired by the Tunisian poet Aboul-Qacem Echebbi,

6 Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1965).

7 Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancient Regime and the Revolution*, Jon Elster (ed.), Arthur Goldhammer (trans.) (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

observes that revolution occurs when people "conquer the illusion of inevitability" and no longer accept that the oppression and injustice in their situation is the "normal order of things" (p. 2). Indeed, "If the people one day want life, fate must respond", as Echebbi's final lines of the Tunisian national anthem conclude. Of course, it takes more than this spirit alone to carry the revolutionary torch to its goal of overthrowing a regime. Certain structural conditions have to be met as well. The most important is the coalescence of two completely antithetical camps with respect to the desired change combined with the non-existence of an institutionalized mediator to bridge their differences. This can lead to the point of no return when a radical political revolution is the alternative. In this context, the author reserved stinging criticism for Arab intellectuals who, in the thrall of theories they read in the literature, were unable to see what was happening right under their noses. As a result, many of them did not regard the events in the Arab Spring countries to which they belong as a revolution and did not take part (p. 4).

Does the Tunisian revolution resemble the great revolutions of history? The fact is that this is not a prerequisite for classing it as a revolution. Regardless of some similarities between the Tunisian case and the historical cases, one cannot ignore significant differences with respect to component elements, trajectories and dynamics as informed by historical, national, regional, global contexts, and contemporaneous times. In this context, however, the author takes aim at those who have argued, based on the experience of Tahrir Square in Egypt, that

modern revolutions emerge and develop without the need for a political leadership and that the people had freed themselves from the hegemonic organisations and apparatuses that steered them (p. 18). This leads to an in-depth examination of the Tunisian revolution which includes a useful comparison with the Egyptian revolution in terms of such considerations as the two countries' history of sociocultural modernisation, the nature of their respective civil societies and intellectual and political elites, the evolution of the Tunisian/Egyptian modern state and its relationship to the army, and the countries' respective strategic position and weight from the perspective of how world powers relate to this region.

As Bishara points out, we cannot study and attempt to understand the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions independently of the question of democratisation and the essential presumption that the ultimate aim of such revolutions is to build democracy. However, democracy must be more than ideological discourse. It should be an alternative to tyranny, not a means of renovating its foundations. Bishara could not help but observe how ambiguous the concept of democracy as a political system was to both the secularist and religious forces that dominated the Arab Spring. To the secularists a civil state meant one opposed to Islamist forces while to the latter the civil state meant the opposite of the military state. In fact, building democracy means creating a system open to all and in which citizens determine their positions with respect to each other based on the democratic principle which, inherently, must be inclusive since it positions itself in antithesis to tyranny and exclusion.

On Non-neutral Knowledge

Our aim here is not to cover all the diverse and intricate terrain of the author's fertile contemplations, but to inspire people to read this work and discuss it with the same degree of seriousness with which the author treated his subject and the relevant literature in this global discipline. Building on his publications on the Tunisian revolution and other Arab issues, Bishara has furnished us with a plethora of detail on this revolution, differentiating between the specifically local and more universal qualities and apprising us of

the methodological difficulties of dealing with these two levels of observation in this type of study. The value of this effort is indisputable.

At the same time, it is a work that, in my opinion, concludes on a depressing and pessimistic note, warning us of the dangers inherent in the populist trend that has recently gained ascendancy in Tunisia and jeopardises the revolution's democratic course. Bear in mind, moreover, that he completed this study before President Kais Saied - purportedly in

the name of the will of the people - promulgated the decrees on 25 July 2021 suspending parliament and dismissing the government thereby assuming all executive and legislative powers.⁽⁸⁾ Bishara's analysis of this trend leads him to a grim prognosis for Tunisia's future. He sees a return to the sharp ideological polarisation between the modernists and the Islamists which cannot be offset by poorly performing political parties and a generally weak – if genuinely democratic in inclination – political class. In his view, democratisation cannot take hold in people's minds and institutionally as long as there is a chance that the results of the ballot box will not be respected, which is to say as long as there is not an unequivocal commitment to what he describes as the practical exercise of the new "law of the game" that the polity has agreed to by means of a constitution. This, combined with his familiarity with historical precedents, is why he fears that if the revolution succumbs to the anti-democratic populist current this will court the return to the type of dictatorship the revolution was waged to overthrow. After all, to overturn the results of the polls is to overturn the entire process of democratic transition.

In terms of the formal logic underpinning the conditions for democratic practice we fully agree with Bishara on this score. Nevertheless, the cultural substance of the Tunisian revolution, its shifts in course, the information available, and the relationships of rival political forces to its outputs add layers of complexity that should compel us to exercise caution when it comes to making predictions on its development. Indeed, if there is one criticism that can be levelled against this book it would concern the relative lack of weight given to the cultural factor. In the Tunisian case, it is important to take stock of a sociological trait that arose as a result of the modernisation processes before, during and after the colonial era. The Tunisian political elites who governed the country from independence until 2011

and other large segments of society belong to the era of "demystification". This applies not just to their embrace of modernist thought but to the ways they envision the world and how it works. For example, during the past seven decades in Tunisia, the faith-based opinions of Islamic jurists have lost their legitimacy on questions related to the conduct of public and civil life. The Zitouna Mosque is no longer an authority on such matters (except insofar as they concern human beings as divine creatures, such as organ transplants and abortion), unlike al-Azhar in Egypt, for example, or the Shia *marja's* in Iraq. In fact, the traditional theological educational system as an independent institution has ceased to exist. Its waqfs (religious endowments) have been dissolved or banned and it has become an ordinary national academy in which students study jurisprudence, philosophy, history, sociology and psychology. In other words, Tunisia no longer produces *ulama'* in the classical sense of the term and Tunisians no longer turn to them for advice on matters concerning public affairs.⁽⁹⁾ This is not to imply that Tunisians have stopped practising their faith and performing its rites, or that they no longer visit Sufi shrines or solicit the help of spiritual charlatans for personal matters, or that they would not consult a mufti, in a private capacity, on a particular religious matter. Rather, a broad swathe of the public no longer believes that the theological sciences have any use in the conduct of public affairs or that they should constitute an authority for that purpose.

What does this trait have to do with democratisation? This is the crux of the problem, which is not specific to Tunisia. Now that the Tunisian left has relinquished the model of the "socialist society" (in the classical sense of a prelude to a communist society) and the revolution has dismantled the equation the dictatorship had constructed between the faithful's exercise of their creed and the threat to the regime, the Islamist tendency has enjoyed a resurgence,

8 As a note in the book tells us, shortly before it went to print, the author asked the publisher to add a few pages at the end devoted to this matter.

9 When, in 1956, Habib Bourguiba solicited the opinion of the "enlightened" jurists of the Zaytuna Mosque on the proposed Personal Status Code, their capacity was purely advisory and they did not represent an autonomous institution with the power to impose an authoritative religious opinion. After the revolution, professors from the Faculty of Islamic Law attempted to establish themselves as a jurisprudential authority that could pronounce fatwas on general political issues. For example, they issued a fatwa to prohibit people from voting for any candidate who supported gender equality in inheritance. At the time, they had no institutional foundation on which to base their legitimacy and their attempts were met with ridicule among many circles of modernist activists in civil society. See: "'Al-Taṣwīt lahum ḥarām'- Mashāyikh bi-Tūnis yuṣā'idūn ḍidd dā'imī al-musāwāt bi-l-mīrāth," *Aljazeera Net*, 19/12/2018, accessed on 5/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3LD8CQ0>, min. 30.

and it is advancing its project to "re-Islamise" the state and society which they maintain is needed to revive Tunisia's civilisational identity and free it from foreign cultural hegemony. Obviously, this is a far cry from Habermas's idea on which they had rested their argument in favour of the presence of religion in civil life. Radical Islamist currents are not alone in the attempt to promote this project; it also applies to the Ennahda Party, which was unable to rid itself of this complex at its tenth party conference in 2016.⁽¹⁰⁾

What are the ramifications of this for the progress of democratisation? For a great many Tunisians, the Islamists' victory in legislative elections threatened a reversion to the mystified world. This meant the return of the leaders of that world, with their "theocratic sciences" (the validity of which secularists question) and institutions, to public life with the purpose of converting society into a mirror of themselves. To the secularists, this is a route back to dictatorship, but this time in the name of religion rather than secularism. They were particularly alarmed when some Islamist leaders and their allies in extremist parties called for the application of Islamic law on matters such as fasting during Ramadan or to ban artistic events or displays that Islamists claim are religiously unacceptable. Ennahda, specifically, has called for the reestablishment of the waqf foundations. Many civil society activists in unions, NGOs and political parties are also worried by the two-faced discourse of

Islamist leaders of all inclinations, who promise their bases that taking political power is the prelude to a restoration of religious identity in state and society – encouraging them to believe that democratisation is simply a means to an end, even if popular pressure has frequently prevented their leaders from making use of majorities won at the ballot box.

The current Tunisian constitution does not reflect progress in the Islamists' thinking on the thorny question of democratisation, wherein resides the crux of the relationship between revolution and freedom, as Hannah Arendt tells us. Instead, it reflects the balance of political forces at a critical moment in the fluctuating and faltering progress of the Tunisian revolution. In my opinion, democracy will not be able to take firm root in Tunisia until Tunisians themselves resolve the question of the separation between religion and politics (as opposed to exclusion of religion from public life). In addition, I believe that the internal rift that Ennahda is experiencing today stems from the absence of democracy within the party itself (a property it shares with the other established parties) and from its instrumentalisation of religion. This accounts for its inability to differentiate between the community of citizens and the community of the faithful and it helps explain the contradictions in its political behaviour and its even more frequent failures in alliances that it deems morally unsuited to its religious frames-of-reference.

Conclusion: A Book That Does Not Want to End

When writing this book, Bishara did not set out to answer all the questions the Tunisian revolution posed or has yet to pose. He is clearly aware that revolution is a long process of conflict, reform and transformation. The reader gets the impression that the author is almost unable to end the book due to the sheer momentum of the issues it raises and his desire to establish the theoretical and methodological contours for a field of knowledge that truly merits such an effort. In addition to the introduction and prologue, the author appended an epilogue to the

concluding remarks and then a postscript in an attempt to keep pace with the latest developments. Yet, many issues continued to trouble him and he felt they needed "further inspection and investigation", in the words of Ibn Khaldun. Towards this end, Bishara's book offers crucial keys to critical thinking about the Arab Spring phenomenon. To me this constitutes a very important building block in the formation of an Arab academic community that interacts vertically and horizontally as it grapples with what is happening in Arab societies and in this community itself.

¹⁰ See: Mouldi Lahmar, "Islamists and Politics in Tunisia Today: Is the Foundation of a Democratic Islamic Party Possible?" in: Eid Mohamed & Dalia Fahmy (eds.), *Arab Spring: Modernity, Identity and Change* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 39 - 53.

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