

# Portfolio Part 4\_Lucenti

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**Submission date:** 16-May-2022 07:02PM (UTC+0100)

**Submission ID:** 180290106

**File name:** 34820\_Maria\_Lucenti\_Portfolio\_Part\_4\_Lucenti\_419649\_692900873.docx (26.03K)

**Word count:** 1457

**Character count:** 7926

## The impact of 'Arab Spring' and its relationship with Islam and Muslim identities

Talking about the events that took place between the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 in some countries of North Africa and the Middle East requires, at first, a reflection regarding the different names attributed to the events themselves. How to define them? Revolutions? Revolts? Arab springs? (Or Arab winters?). Does the choice concern the intentions and aspirations of the people or the results actually achieved? Short or long term? The question is certainly complicated, not only because of the great differences between one country and another, but also because of the social, identity and political dynamics that have arisen within each single national state. Many authors have criticised the choice of defining such events as riots or Arab springs, because: "it is not surprising that in the attitude of Westerners to speak of "revolts", or worse still of "Arab spring" (or "Arab winter"), there is not even so latent an attempt to reduce the extent of the events in progress and the results of challenging the regimes in order to implicitly reduce their intensity and depth" (Paonessa, 2013, p.84). In all the media of the Arab world and in the words and memories of the people who made and lived the revolution, the word universally used was "thawra", that is revolution. The triggering event was the immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia on December 17, 2010. The protests began in Tunisia and quickly spread to many other countries: Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and then again Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Oman, Syria and even Saudi Arabia. What unites the "revolutions" is the popular initiative, from below, without a leader at the head, but a heterogeneous mass of people that rebels in order to bring down a despotic government. The protests arise and spread from popular discontent. The plight of young people in particular is concerned and the unemployment rate is skyrocketing. "Al-Esh, al-hurriyya, al-adâla al-ijtimâ'iyya (bread, freedom, social justice) is one of the most representative slogans of Tahrir Square" (Paonessa, 2013, p.92). Nonetheless, corruption, regional economic disparities, between north and south and between cities and rural areas are other factors that explain the precarious social situation of the populations involved. Young people (population between 15 and 30 years old) make up 30% of a total population of 12 million people in Tunisia. "Youth in the 15–30 years old age bracket form one-third of the labour force and three-quarters of the total unemployed. In other words, the rate of unemployment may reach 30 per cent" (Gabsi, 2019, p.70). Beyond demographic and economic factors, the revolutions have highlighted the relevance of identity issues related to one or more religious, sectarian, ethnic, or tribal dimensions. Identity conflicts also have their political, economic, and social dimensions, and are often influenced by external interference (Ali, 2020, p.2). The identity heterogeneity of the populations affected by the events of 2011 pre-existed but was exacerbated by the internal conflicts that arose following the riots. The failure to include such pluralism in national identity has caused quite a few conflicts. On the contrary, the different regimes in power have often distributed wealth and power by favouring certain ethnic or tribal groups, to the detriment of

others, thus creating even more social divide. Examples of this are the civil wars in Sudan (with the separation of the south) and in Somalia (Ali, 2020). With the riots these identity conflicts have increased. The collapse of political power has left a void, which many groups have tried to fill. Groups that fought together for the fall of the regime then found themselves in extreme disagreement about the direction to take in order to restart. Often they have sanctioned agreements and alliances that in hindsight have dampened the revolutionary value and aspirations of those who dreamed of a (secular) democracy (Achcar, 2021). “After the Arab spring, many Arab countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, and others have witnessed a sharp polarisation between the forces of political Islam on one hand, and civil forces of nationalists, liberals, and leftists on the other. This polarisation reflects the big gap between the advocates of the “religious state” and the advocates of the “civic state.” This polarisation is also related to “politicisation of religion,” which means using it to achieve political goals” (Ali, 2020, p.9). If the revolutions have brought a new wind of democracy in the countries concerned – just think of the explosion of associations, previously prohibited or restricted to a minimum by the government, the freedom of Tunisian women to veil themselves in public places, also previously prohibited, etc. – it has also created enormous social problems and conflicts, as well as a generalised perception of insecurity in young people (Gabsi, 2019). Young people who played a leading role in revolutionary processes, but whose expectations were betrayed. Leila El Houssi talks of transculturality betrayed (2013). Web activists were known for their fundamental role in coordinating and planning the mobilisation and in letting the whole world know what was happening in those days/months both from inside – for instance Lina Ben Mhenni – and from abroad (Müller-Funk, 2020). The lack of “order” and “security” has led to events that have embittered the population, such as the rape of a young girl in the northern suburb of Tunis by some policemen on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2012. A film was also born from the story, precisely to denounce the lack of justice that followed the events of 2011 (*Beauty and the Dogs*, 2017). Some have defined this as a period of anarchy. During an interview, a young woman said: “The woman's condition worsened after the arrival of the Salafists. During the Ben Ali regime, the police protected the woman. For example, a woman alone behind the wheel after 9pm could not be stopped by the police (sic). Two years ago, more or less, there was the case of a girl in the north suburb who was with her boyfriend and was raped by the police, I don't know if you've heard of that. If the cops rape what can be expected of citizens? Everything got worse after that revolution, the damn revolution, it wasn't a revolution, but anarchy” (Lucenti, 2018, p.171). But the presence of the Salafis and Wahhabism in Tunisia contrasts with the modern tradition of the country of which the native school of thought personified by the prestigious Koranic University of Zitouna<sup>1</sup> has always been the advocate, has responsibilities that reside in previous governments and in the will to marginalise this university, leaving room for other more intransigent currents of thought to permeate the Tunisian context. As the human rights activist Maya Ben Khaled<sup>2</sup> tells us: “young people no longer have a religious culture, therefore, having no references they turn to Saudi Arabia, for example, and look for other references, which are not part of our history, of our moderate Islam” (Lucenti, 2019, p.84).

These examples show the internal conflicts in the societies involved in the 2011 “revolutions” or “uprisings”, the nature of which is the result of the coexistence of several identity dimensions, including the religious one. Islam plays a fundamental role, but this role is fully understandable only starting from the intersection with ethnic, cultural, political, economic,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.uz.rnu.tn/>

<sup>2</sup> IADH – Arab Institute of Human rights

social and gender elements. Absolutizing the religious aspect and presenting it as a leitmotiv or landfall of revolutions means once again privileging the orientalist perspective.

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