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Religious Conflicts, Political Fights:
Turmoil in the Middle East, Pragmatism in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The actual turmoil in the Arab world is the consequence of acute political crises (which have sometimes deteriorated into dramatic and inextricable situations of war). Among all the reasons of these crises (in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, etc.), the religious factor looks important. Contrarily, in Southeast Asia, political disagreements have been generally solved through negotiations and agreements (even if authoritarianism prevails in many cases), *i.e.* through pragmatism and away from sectarian divisions (with some exceptions like the Rohingas tragedy in Burma). Although the picture is not clear-cut, the comparison between these two cultural zones (with a focus on the Arab world) is interesting in trying to assess the role of religion (here: Islam) in politics. This paper will deal with the whole Arab world, compared to Southeast Asia when deemed relevant. The analysis will endeavour to connect religious-cultural dynamics to social-political phenomena from an original theoretical angle: the perusal of the eventual link between (Arab) Islam and violence. Such issues as traditions, sectarianism, social homogeneity, external factors, etc., need to be analysed since they may push towards smooth political transitions or, on the contrary, violence and chaos, depending on circumstances. And when societal attitudes *vis-à-vis* the global system are characterized by fear (because of religious-moral-cultural apprehensions), popular contestation may lean more easily towards intolerant inward-looking attitudes, with the result that socio-political claims degenerate swiftly into religion-driven strife.

Keywords: Arab world, Southeast Asia, religion, sectarianism, politics, transitions, authoritarianism

Introduction

The turmoil in (especially) Syria and Iraq is the consequence of acute political crises which have deteriorated into dramatic and inextricable situations of war. If the reasons behind the worsening of these two crises are multiple, the importance of the religious factor remains striking. In Yemen too, religious cleavages have been preponderant in fuelling the war (in addition to socio-political and tribal reasons). The political crises in Tunisia and Egypt have also been stimulated by diverging interpretations of Islam (plus other causes). Examples of religious factors are numerous

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in the Arab world (AW), although many other reasons do play a role. Contrarily, in Southeast Asia (SA), globally speaking, political disagreements have been generally solved through negotiations and agreements (if Cambodia and even Vietnam are excluded), *i.e.* with more pragmatism than in the AW and away from unleashed sectarian divisions (with the exclusion of the Burma Rohingas tragedy). Although the picture is definitely not clear-cut, the comparison between these two cultural zones (with a focus on the Arab and Islamic world), where homogeneity is an illusion, could certainly be interesting in assessing the role of religion in politics.

This paper will not dwell on any specific case study but rather on the whole AW, which will be compared to SA when deemed relevant. The focus on Syria and Iraq comes from their complex religious diversity and strong tradition of secular Pan-Arabism (a thorny mixture that renders the dialectic confrontation between religion and politics more acute than in any other place of the studied zone). Egypt is another interesting case because of the contradictions between traditional Sunnism and Nasser's nationalism (both an emancipatory and liberticidal experience). The analysis will endeavour to describe the link between religious/cultural dynamics and social/political phenomena from an original theoretical angle: to peruse the eventual link between Islam and authoritarianism.

2. Religious Explanations for Arab and Asian Political Transitions

Whereas the causes which have led to the destabilization of Syria and Iraq (plus Yemen and Libya) can be related to socio-economic problems, violence exerted by State security agencies against the people, the monopolization of power, the absence of free and fair elections, institutional rigidity, high levels of corruption, the lack of sound development projects, etc., the weight of religion as a politically determining factor cannot be disregarded. Religion should be understood as both doctrinal expressions (religious creeds) and social organization (communities structured around historical legacies). Except when ethnic criteria have remained essential in power struggles, religious factors have doubtlessly acquired a paramount importance in mobilizing people.

Religion, as a driving force, has not disappeared from the Arab-Islamic zone, although it has been contained (and manipulated) in Syria and Iraq by the Baath Party for decades. Yet, after the collapse of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the political spectrum has taken on a clear sectarian orientation with the seizure of power by previously marginalized (Arab) Shiite parties. This new monopoly of power, at the expense of the (Arab and Kurd) *Sunni* part of the population, led to political paralysis and security collapse. The support enjoyed by the Islamic State (IS) terrorist organization – the most extremist[1] – among some *Sunni* tribes stands as a clear example of this sectarian polarization. In Syria, after the March 2011 protests, although many grievances had a political tone and were expressed in socio-economic terms, the conflict rapidly took the

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[1]Charles R. Lister, *The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction* (Washignton DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2015).

form of a bloody clash between communities: the (Shiite) Alawite one, mainly supportive of the regime and constituting the core of the professional armed forces, *versus* the Sunni majority, on the whole opposed to president Asad's regime and engaged (for some of them) in armed rebellion. The presence of the IS on large swathes of both national territories (until the late 2017 demise) indicates that any transition based on purely political demands have few chances of success.

This paper will not deal with hypothetical doctrinal interactions between Islam and Southeast Asian religions. Yet, there are ideological and cultural influences from the Middle East (especially from Saudi Arabia and its Wahhabi strand of Islam, due to the kingdom's financial muscle) towards Muslim populations living in SA. Rather, this paper will dwell on the internal dynamics of Islam, *i.e.,* how Islam – as a dogma, a way of life, and a social organization – supposedly reacts when it is confronted to political challenges. To put it briefly: is Islam an impediment to political solutions? Answering positively would – too easily – clarify the global failure of the Arab upheavals, but explanations are more complex. Some comparisons will be carried out with SA recent transitional experiments to ponder over the eventual role of Islam in the – unsuccessful and even calamitous – political transitions recently witnessed. If it would be stimulating to know why the Arab-Islamic zone has not learnt from SA, any elucidation must in the end remain conjectural.

In front of a convulsed AW, should the analyst come up with materialistic (socio-economic) or cultural explanations? Why are the causes which have led to destructive sectarian mobilization stronger than claimed integrative processes of national construction? Could the utilization of religion for violent purposes have been oriented towards more peaceful and consensual goals? A comparison with SA may be useful to identify both common patterns and specific features (like the destructive potential of infighting within Islam). The German-born American scholar Manfred Harpen (1924-2001) already wrote ominously that "the area from Morocco to Pakistan is in the midst of a profound revolution."[2] The specificity – if any – of this area is that it has been affected for decades by deep and turbulent crises without abatement, and the Arab Spring[3] would just be the last episode of a continuous string of political and social convulsions. All successful or aborted transitional processes, in the AW as in SA, have focused on the ending of repressive systems, *i.e.* the withdrawal of the military from power. Even if the general picture is far from perfect in Asia, civil governments have successfully taken over, although corruption and inequalities have not been eliminated. On the contrary, the AW is still suffering from both evils: military predominance and social disparities, as if these two cultural zones have been experiencing different rhythms of historical and

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[2]Manfred Harpen, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa* (Scranton; PA: The Haddon Craftsmen, 1963), viii.

[3]Hafez Ghanem, *The Arab Spring Five Years Later* (2 vols.) (Washington; DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015).

political development. A subtle distinction must be made here between assuming power and controlling the economy: for efficiency's sake, the military may decide to go back to their barracks while continuing to have a say in public affairs (like in Egypt), whereas managing both (political order and economic activities) looks a less acceptable way of dealing with popular demands. So why has the AW been experiencing brutal ways of refusing concessions?[4]

Theoretical analysis has to be global. Panayiotis Jerasimof Vatikiotis (1928-1997), a political scientist and historian of the Middle East, insightfully explained perpetual conflicts through the supposed mechanical link between economic activity/technology and revolutionary experience:

> The major source of political conflict and potential revolution in many countries of the Middle East, as well as Africa and Asia today, is the inability of so-called radical nationalist regimes and movements to manage, let alone resolve, the social, economic, and political problems of independence…Until the states in the Middle East can control their economic activity and create or produce their own technology, their access to revolutionary experience will remain limited. The very political categories essential to a revolution will be lacking.[5]

Marxist theories have predominated in the production paradigm analysis, or the reference framework dealing with societies as economic structures, and they have tried to identify, through production, the class structure carrying the determining historical evolution.[6] The fundamental premise is that a certain level of economic development generates almost mechanically given socio-economic relations with, as corollaries, a specific political process and a particular ideological legitimation.[7] The relations of production would therefore need to be studied in order to evaluate the link between legitimation and contestation. In accordance with Vatikiotis's assumption, genuine revolutions have not yet happened in Arab countries, certainly because of the fact that class mobilization has remained weaker than that founded on basic solidarities.

Whatever upheaval occurs in the AW may be more or less determined by the right – and even the imperious duty – for Muslims to resist a bad and corrupt authority (so long as the positive consequences of the rebellion outweigh the negative results created by violence). So, whenever a king or president behaves in a way deemed contrary to Islam, the people have the religious and legal obligation, after having provided good advice, to rise to re-establish a fair order corresponding to God's commandments. As economic

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[4]Comparatively, the Turkish military have (more or less) accepted the rules of the democratic game, some 15 years ago, before being progressively controlled by the authoritarian AKP government.

[5]Panayiotis Jerasimof Vatikiotis, (ed.), *Revolution in the Middle East and Other Case Studies* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), 12-3; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 314.

[6]Similar theories have become more interested in the study of stratifications and political alliances.

[7]Jean Leca, "Pour une Analyse Comparative des Systèmes Politiques Méditerranéens." [Comparative Analysis of Mediterranean Political Systems] in *Revue Française de Science Politique* 4-5/27 (1977): 575-7.

graft, moral depravity, and social injustice are chronic, it is no surprise that there has been frequent contestation. But trying to change a leader – be he legitimized by religion, electoral process, or force – and topple a regime does not necessarily mean that a radical modification of the power structure is at work. The injunction to exercise the right of rebellion signifies that violence has to be relied upon to achieve an aim which, in the end, falls far beyond man's plans and actions, since the motive for revolting is to impose an order in compliance with Islamic law (which is supposed to reflect God's orders).

But numerous Qur'ānic verses and (mostly apocryphal) Prophetic (*SAW*) traditions indicate another direction: religious and political power has to be respected, and punishment will come after death. The only absolute right to revolt is against whomsoever is inspired by the devil (*i.e.,* the infidels), a recommendation that does not fall within the realm of politics. The Iraqi legal scholar al-Māwardi (972-1058), the author of the famous *al-Ahkām al-Sultāniyya*, was reluctant to advocate force against dishonest authorities, and preferred to establish a list of the necessary conditions to be completed by the caliph instead of stating overtly that he could be deposed if he did not fulfil the mentioned conditions.[8] This convoluted way of defining virtuous power proves Islamic legal thought's unease in confronting the issue of rebellion. A counter-example is found in the medieval *Khawārij* experience since this movement clearly stated that the caliph could – or even should – be deposed, if not killed, whenever he dared move away from God's path.[9] It can thus be stated that Islam (probably like any religion) seems on the whole in favour of political conservatism, even if violent rebellion is possible, or even compulsory when sacred values are trampled on. This religious dynamic – ordering right and fighting evil – has probably played a role in the Arab upheavals, to the detriment of politically articulated discourses (that can lead to agreed-on solutions).

Without indulging ourselves in a biased Orientalist vision of the other, as decried in a masterly way by Edward W. Said, some past judgments may yet be recalled. If they were uttered once in specific historical circumstances, with the aim of serving imperialist interests, they bear nonetheless some amount of deep observation and analysis. These condescending statements should not be taken for granted but must illuminate our understanding of the painful transitions going on in the AW. If present parameters differ totally from those of the past, one can nevertheless wonder if there is not some continuity which could be learnt from previous explorers, scientists, officers, and the like. The following lines will just try to suggest useful insights for understanding and comparison. Said's seminal book has to be revisited in an iconoclast way, *i.e.* by first selecting judgments criticized by Said for their biased views on Islam and the Arabs, and then endeavouring to reinterpret them in the light of current events: radicalization of political

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[8]W. Montgomery Watt, *La Pensée Politique de l'Islam. Les Concepts* [Political Thought of Islam] (Fondamentaux. Paris: PUF Watt, 1995), 120-1.

[9]Henri Laoust, Les Schismes dans l'Islam. Introduction à une Étude de la Religion Musulmane [Schisms in Islam. Introduction to a Study of the Muslim Religion] (Paris: Payot, 1983), 36-48.

Islam,[10] chaotic transitions of the Arab Spring, authoritarian responses, and antagonisms based on religion. If all these elements were present when Said wrote his book, he underestimated them, probably for personal reasons: the sense of identity spoliation due to Zionist colonization assuredly constituted a paramount element of his academic thinking, and he converted his frustration into an intellectual weapon to oppose western depreciative opinions upon his native culture and hoped-for future.[11]

One feature of Orientalism is that those who excelled in this field – like the Frenchman Ernest Renan (1823-1892), the Hungarian Ignác Goldziher (1850-1921), the American Duncan Macdonald (1863-1943), the Scot H.A.R. Gibb (1895-1971), the Austrian Gustav von Grunebaum (1909-1972), the American Israeli Bernard Lewis (1916-2018), and so many others – had (or still have) a marked tendency to view Islam as a cluster of obscure inseparable elements: a "cultural synthesis" according to the English historian Peter M. Holt (1918-2006).[12] Yet, the old Orientalists, notwithstanding their prejudices, possessed an immense knowledge that current political scientists generally do not. That is why re-examining their works cannot but be highly beneficial to comprehend the present.[13]

Edward William Lane (1801-1876), the great British Orientalist, translator (of *One Thousand and One Nights*), and lexicographer (his famous *Arabic-English Lexicon*), wrote in *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* the following words which describe social behaviours that can hardly be understood by today's western minds:

> When the *seyyid* 'Omar, the *Nakeeb al-Ashraf* (or chief of the descendants of the Prophet *SAW*) […] married a daughter, about forty-five years since, there walked before the procession a young man who had made an incision in his abdomen, and drawn out a large portion of his intestines, which he carried before him on a silver tray. After the procession, he restored them to their proper place, and remained in bed many days before he recovered from the effects of this foolish and disgusting act.[14]

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[10]Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam. Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007).

[11]Among the many comments on Said's works, B. Musallam has rightly pointed out, as Said himself when he admitted "personal loss and national disintegration" [Edward Said, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient,* 338], that the epistemological posture concerning Orientalism depended a lot on a heart-breaking sense of dispossession [Basim Musallam, "Power and Knowledge," *Middle East Research and Information Project MERIP* 9/6 (1979): 22]: "Edward Said has no generally accepted identity, his very *people* are in dispute."

[12]Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient,* 105.

[13]Considering political matters in parallel with religious and cultural factors must not be perceived as biased and deprived of any scientific character. For example, the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies organized in July 2016 a panel on *Societal Factors Shaping Middle East Foreign Policies*, with the aim of "highlighting societal influences on short-term policy decisions as well as broader strategic reorientations."

[14]Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 111.

Are self-sacrificing acts of this kind, performed out of bravado and so as to cling to cultural codes, still prevalent in the Arab zone as structuring modes of community identification? Suicide attacks in Palestine (stabbing settlers and soldiers), Syria and Iraq (martyrdom operations carried out by militants from extremist Islamist groups), Lebanon (some cases of immolation to protest against the repression affecting the "You Stink" anti-corruption civic movement), make one point. Traditional mortifying practices (self-flagellating rite among Shiites during the 'Ashura' celebration) are another, which proves that old codes of honour remain in force, yet with different techniques and dissimilar aims (related to new geopolitical situations). So, one may speculate on the creed about eternal life in non-secular societies: does it constitute a driver of violence? Community esteem and Heaven's rewards may, in some cases, interfere with political demands and military actions, to the point that religiously motivated violence overshadows rational solutions. These culture-based assumptions seem to carry some credibility in a significant number of occurrences. The link between Asian religious creeds and violence would need to be investigated, for comparison's sake, although the determining parameters are frequently political, economic, legal, and demographic, *i.e.* related to material issues.

The French writer Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) shared shrewd (and exaggerated?) remarks with his readers after travelling in the East (1849). The way he depicts some specific behaviours assuredly goes beyond the anecdotic aspect of the narration and provides a useful – yet partial – analysis of society, power, and religion. He wrote in his *Correspondance*:

> To amuse the crowd, Mohammed Ali's jester took a woman in a Cairo bazaar one day, set her on the counter of a shop, and coupled with her publicly while the shopkeeper calmly smoked his pipe. […] A marabout died a while ago – an idiot – who had long passed as a saint marked by God; all the Moslem women came to see him and masturbated him – in the end he died of exhaustion – from morning to night it was a perpetual jacking-off […]. *Quid dicis* of the following fact: some time ago a *santon* (ascetic priest) used to walk through the streets of Cairo completely naked except for a cap on his head and another on his prick. To piss he would doff the prick-cap, and sterile women who wanted children would run up, put themselves under the parabola of his urine and rub themselves with it.[15]

Whereas there is an obvious emphasis on sexuality – one of Flaubert's obsessions – and on eccentric conduct, the observations linked with political power (the viceroy's inner circle) and religious creed (the marabout and the *santon*) shed light on the social and political functioning: the awe inspired by the military, people's credulity, the influence of irrational religious beliefs. To what extent are these phenomena specific and still pertinent is a matter of conjecture. Yet, the pervasiveness of irrational forms of religion seems to be the main structural element which could – in certain limits – explain some crises of the "Arab Spring," when impulsive actions and reactions have prevailed over more pondered and consensual stances. Or when physical violence has eclipsed negotiation, *i.e.* when religion (as an exclusive and intolerant doctrine) has reinforced

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[15]Ibid., 102-3.

primary social links more than it has created a fertile ground for understanding others, away from preconceived biases. Thus, when religion is not irrigated by rationality, the chances are high that the slightest crisis will degenerate into a bloody conflict along sectarian lines. Though, political stances cannot be the absolute shield against the eruption of violence, as the appalling Red Khmers experience showed, when Maoist ideology mutated into a genocidal enterprise despite local traditions of wisdom and respect. When it came to reconciliation, Cambodia was able to forget some of its ghosts through pardon, or amnesia (like after the 1975-1990 Lebanon war). But in the Middle East, sectarian hatred has piled up through centuries, with few signs that old detestations will abate. On the contrary, new socio-economic problems have come up on top of old predicaments, further complicating the search for reasonable solutions. In this sense, the religious/community paradigm seems to remain of paramount importance in the AW, especially in Syria and Iraq where Sunnis are fighting Shiites with renewed abhorrence (even if there are genuine political problems).

3. To What Extent Are Cultural/Religious Analyses Pertinent?

Ernst Renan (1823-1892), the French philologist, was renowned for his rather disdainful judgments on Semitic races, cultures, and religions, a condescension which he expressed in his *Œuvres Complètes* in the following manner:

> One sees that in all things the Semitic race appears to us to be an incomplete race, by virtue of its simplicity. […] Like those individuals who possess so little fecundity that, after a gracious childhood, they attain only the most mediocre virility, the Semitic nations experienced their fullest flowering in their first age and have never been able to achieve true maturity.[16]

Translated into political terms, this would mean that Semites – and Arabs in the first place – have never been able to attain a great degree of rational social organization, not to mention the fact that they have never developed a scientific vision of their environment nor believed in a humanist religion, sticking instead to narrow-minded scriptural literalism. If one dares apply this thesis to the turbulences of the Arab Spring, Renan's ideas could be summed up in the fact that intrinsic obscure forces have impeded the implementation of balanced and consensual solutions. As in many of Renan's statements, the amplification of his exalted soul is candidly at work, yet not totally off the point.

William Robertson Smith (1846-1894), the Scottish Orientalist who had an argument with Renan about the history of Israel and who is famous for his contribution to the comparative study of religion, wrote the following: "It is characteristic of Mohammedanism that all national feeling assumes a religious aspect, inasmuch as the whole polity and social forms of a Moslem country are clothed in a religious dress. […]

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[16]Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 149.

But it would be a mistake to suppose that genuine religious feeling is at the bottom of everything that justifies itself by taking a religious shape."[17]

Although this assessment is not up to date and espouses a preposterous generalization, can it be rejected all together as far as the contemporary AW is concerned? Even Baathist Syria and Iraq relied heavily on religious symbols to legitimize so-called secular political systems.[18] Moreover, the AW is not the most secular zone of the globe, since public atheism is quasi non-existent.[19]

It is interesting to cite an opposite opinion concerning the supposed preeminent role of religion in Islamic and Arab societies. The American Orientalist Duncan Macdonald (1863-1943) wrote, after a deep study of Muslim theology in part through the popular piety contained and reflected in *One Thousand and One Nights*: "The Arabs show themselves not as especially easy of belief, but as hard-headed, materialistic, questioning, doubting, scoffing at their own superstitions and usages, fond of tests of the supernatural – tempting God, in a word – and all this in a curiously light-minded, almost childish fashion."[20] Whatever the truth, and there is none, the lesson to be learnt from his analysis is that sweeping generalizations lead nowhere.

Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) provided another biased culturalist analysis combined with a strong knowledge of the Middle East. The English explorer and political officer made these remarks about the so-called traditional state of war Arabs used to live in: "How many thousand years this state of things has lasted, those who shall read the earliest records of the inner desert will tell us, for it goes back to the first of them, but in all the centuries the Arab has bought no wisdom from experience."[21] This statement goes obviously beyond the limits of reasonableness since there is no distinction between desert and *oecumene* (towns and villages where the majority of Arabs live). Yet, the state of war (non-belligerency in the best of cases), fostered by rival regimes since the independences, does continue. Similarly, in the turbulences of the Arab Spring since 2010, the language of confrontation has prevailed upon the logic of pragmatism, on the basis of old allegiances, traditional fears, and imagined adversaries. In Tunisia, which is almost

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[17]Ibid., 236; William Robertson Smith, *Lectures and Essays of William Robertson Smith* (Whitefish (MT): Kessinger Publishing Smith, 2010), 492-3.

[18]Line Khatib, Raphaël Lefèvre, and Jawad Qureshi, *State and Islam in Baathist Syria: Confrontation or Co-optation?* (Boulder (CO): Lynne Rienner Publishing, 2012).

[19]With the probable exception of small communist parties here and there which, in any case, insist more on socialism than on materialism. Among Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, the situation has been different since the communist movement has a long-established history (like the Syrian Communist Party of the deceased Khalid Baktash, or the Turkish PKK), but Kurds are not really part of the Arab cultural area in spite of interactions.

[20]Duncan Black Macdonald, *The Religious Attitude and Life in Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press Macdonald, 1909), §4; Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient,* 247.

[21]Gertrude Bell, *The Desert and the Sown* (London: William Heinemann Bell, 1919), 244; Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 229.

totally Sunni, religion has constituted a sharp dividing line between secularists and Islamists. Stressing the importance of a supposed old "state of war" in determining whether transitions can or cannot be smooth remains nevertheless unclear, especially concerning Asia.

While defending the idea that British are superior to Egyptians, the conservative politician Arthur James Balfour (1848-1930) did not hesitate to say:

> You may look through the whole history of the Orientals in what is called, broadly speaking, the East, and you never find traces of self-government. All their great centuries – and they have been very great – have been passed under despotisms, under absolute government. All their great contributions to civilization – and they have been great – have been made under that form of government. […] Never in all the revolutions of fate and fortune have you seen one of those nations of its own motion establish what we, from a Western point of view, call self-government.[22]

Can the fact that Arab countries have been ruled by kings, autocrats, dictators, militaries, and the like be discarded straight away as a sheer coincidence or fatality?

The reasons behind the absence of political systems based on large popular acquiescence and participation are surely economic, historical, climatic,[23] geopolitical, etc. Yet, why have Arab countries not managed to implement structural changes or societal revolutions? And why have the recent upheavals been far from delivering promising transitions? If the religious/community explanation is too easy to be satisfying, it deserves nevertheless some attention. Could it be sustained that pragmatism is more rooted in SA than in the AW, insofar as common sense states that stability means prosperity? Have huge oil and gas incomes allowed Arab regimes to distribute wealth to sympathizers without bothering about instilling any sense of working responsibility? Are rentier economy and clientelism the explanation? Despite the plague of graft and authoritarianism, the economic boom in Asia cannot be compared to the stalemate and corruption observed in many Arab countries (even if some reforms are implemented, like in Egypt or Saudi Arabia). The amazing fact is that groups opposing each other, in the AW, usually view conflicts in religious terms rather than in political ones, whereas it is assumed that reason and debate can be used to generate mutually beneficial solutions (as Aristotle pointed out through his conception of *philia*, when amity expresses itself via verbal exchanges – the *logos* – within the political framework of the city).

When Gibb delivered in 1945 the famous *Haskell Lectures* in comparative religion at the University of Chicago, he went on to say (*Modern Trends in Islam*):

> The student of Arabic civilization is constantly brought up against the striking contrast between the imaginative power displayed, for example, in certain branches of Arabic literature and the

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[22]Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 32-33; Paul A. Erickson, and Liam Donat Murphy (eds.), *Readings for a History of Anthropological Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 325.

[23]As Montesquieu suggested when he said, while talking about polygamy, that "it is the climate that must decide of these things." *The Spirit of Laws*, XVI.

literalism, the pedantry displayed in reasoning and exposition. […] The rejection of rationalist modes of thought and of the utilitarian ethic which is inseparable from them has its roots […] not in the so-called 'obscurantism' of the Muslim theologians but in the atomism and discreetness of the Arab imagination.[24]

Gibb represents the old generation of Orientalists, who took part in imperialist adventures and/or considered Islam from a haughty (Christian or materialist) western perspective. When one ponders on the success of political Islam ("Islam is the solution to all political problems") or on the mobilization power of sectarian rivalry (identifying – imaginary – foes so as to ignore self-criticism), Gibb's judgment deserves nonetheless some reflection.

Edward Said felt compelled to cast a serious doubt upon the soundness of Gibb's analysis, in a clear disapproving reaction which can be explained by the writing period of his book: the 1970s, *i.e.* when pundits hoped that Arab Muslim countries would finally embark on the path of socio-economic development and subsequently reform their obsolete political systems. That was the "glorious" (though already on the wane) epoch of Pan-Arabism, with the attractive secular ideology of the Baath party (in Syria and Iraq), the imposing legacy of Nasser's Third Worldism, the falsely promising Islamic socialism of the Algerian National Liberation Front, and the like. Said, as a Palestinian scholar whose country had been stolen by Zionism, could not but redress the biases of Orientalism in order to give intellectual substance to a global emancipation movement he believed in, but which turned out to be a chimera because of mistakes and the weight of Islamism (a narrow-minded ideology). So, when he wrote that "Gibb's inaugural biases remain a formidable obstacle for anyone hoping to understand modern Islam,"[25] one wonders what is "modern Islam," and if it may help to understand social dynamics in the face of domineering Islamist (and even *jihadi*) organizations.[26] The modernist trends of Islam have obviously had great difficulties in being heard by the masses, articulating coherent programs, and wielding influence. What about Gibb's postulation that "reform is a betrayal of Islam" (according to Said's words)? This issue deserves thorough theological and philosophical reflection, and neither answer (Islam is/is not organically loath to reform) is satisfying.

Concentrating on Asia, Karl Marx (1818-1883) wrote in 1853 two short but significant articles: "The British Rule in India" and "The Future Results of British Rule in India." In the first, he wrote this polemical statement:

> England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of

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[24]Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 105-6; David Lodge, and Nigel Wood (eds.), *Modern Criticism and Theory. A Reader* (London / New York: Routledge, 2013), 377.

[25]Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 106.

[26]Rudolph F. Peters, *Jihad. A History in Documents* (Princeton (NJ): Markus Wiener Publications, 2016).

Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England, she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.[27]

Therefore, could it be sustained that British and French rules were neither lasting nor modernising enough for the AW to gain access to a much-needed industrial phase of development? Such an access could have induced the social transformations which usually guarantee that most conflicts remain essentially political – via negotiations – and do not linger for centuries in the inextricable field of sectarian strife. Compared to mobilization based on community, industrial and class action in the AW has seldom gathered enough momentum to initiate profound socio-economic changes. This has been the case before and during the recent uprisings (with few exceptions, like Tunisia where trade unions have traditionally been influential).

Transitions in SA, on the contrary, seem to have been rather successful. This is due to external factors, like foreign pressure, globally missing in the Arab zone, and the complacency of western powers about autocratic rule. Could we speak as well about some kind of Asian individualism, nurtured by religion and culture, which would render people more prone to cater for their own needs than embarking on collective revenge against unidentifiable foes? There are exceptions to this hypothesis. In any case, all presumed external factors must be assessed in connection to development, authoritarianism, and security, in the search for causality. The fact that the USA is now engaged in a fierce economic (and incidentally military) rivalry against China could explain that pressure has been exerted on some Asian regimes in order to push them onto the path of democratization and hoped-for economic prosperity, perceived as serving western interests. In contrast, the AW has not been subjected to the same pressure from the USA and its allies, which has hindered change.[28]. The West has also globally shunned linking economic cooperation to human rights,[29] a shortcoming which has obviously inhibited political overtures.[30] The present fight against Islamist terrorism will certainly not encourage the West to destabilize Arab regimes, however oppressive they may be. Moreover, western disengagement from Arab internal problems has given more latitude to regional regimes which are not genuinely in favour of democracy, like Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

Speaking about an Asian culture of consensus is exaggerated. Religion has played a tremendous role in many cases of violent antagonism, like between Muslim Pakistan

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[27]Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India," in *Surveys from Exile* (Harmondsworth; London: Penguin/New Left Review, 1973), 306-7.

[28]Lee Smith, *The Consequences of Syria* (Washington; DC: Hoover Institution Press, 2014); Russell A. Berman, *America's Withdrawal from the Middle East* (Washington; DC: Hoover Institution Press, 2014).

[29]Bosmat Yefet, *The Politics of Human Rights in Egypt and Jordan* (Boulder (CO): Lynne Rienner, 2015).

[30]The European Union decided to spend only some 350 million euros to encourage Arab transitions.

and mostly Hindu India. In Burma, the contemptible treatment of Muslim Rohingya by the Buddhist majority casts serious doubts on the possibility of inter-faith cohabitation, not to mention hostility between minority ethnic groups and the central junta. In Malaysia, the situation looks more pacified since Malays and Chinese usually oppose each other in the political arena, in spite of rising tensions due to the increasing weight of radical Islamism. Even if Thailand has witnessed a military coup in May 2014, the ruling junta will not apparently – because of external pressure? – cling to power since elections are scheduled before February 2019 (though after the enactment of a military-friendly constitution). Nevertheless, one has the impression that mutually understood economic interests, combined with foreign interference, have more or less been successful in obliging authoritarian Asian regimes to make concessions, for the sake of regional stability (with the neutralization of Chinese influence) and capitalist expansion. On the other hand, the West has generally preferred to deal cynically with Arab autocrats, selling goods (including weapons) in exchange for oil and gas, in a decades-long morally indulgent mercantile relation which has not prepared the ground for smooth transitions. There may also be a peculiar sense of honour among Arabs (in patently patriarchal societies) and a specific awareness of Islam's superiority, as shown by political Islam, which is contemptuous of Christianity and western values. Further stressing his point, Marx went on to say: "England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating – the annihilation of the Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia."[31] If one considers the imperialist mission as having been successful, that might explain (to a certain extent) the rather soft transitions that have taken place there (*i.e.* transitions based on negotiations), although determining external factors have also been at work.

Gustav Edmund von Grunebaum (1909-1972)'s assumption that Islam, considered globally and a-historically, remains impervious to intellectual reasoning is questionable, for many past and present Muslim scholars have indulged, even to a limited extent, in self-criticism. Yet the postulation that Islam *per se* cannot be held for a real humanist system sounds a bit more convincing, in the sense that clinging to the scriptural tenets indisputably implies the submission of the individual will to God's. But the same could be said of any religion not sufficiently based on rational thinking.

> [Muslim civilization] is not vitally interested in the structured study of other cultures […]. If this observation were to be valid merely for contemporary Islam, one might be inclined to connect it with the profoundly disturbed state of Islam, which does not permit it to look beyond itself unless forced to do so. But as it is valid for the past as well, one may perhaps seek to connect it with the basic anti-humanism of this civilization, that is, the determined refusal to accept man to any extent whatever as the arbiter or the measure of things […]. [And:] [Arab or Islamic nationalism] lacks […] the concept of the divine right of a nation; […] it also lacks, it would seem, the later nineteenth century belief in mechanistic progress. […] The resentment of political slights [felt by

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[31]Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India," in *Surveys from Exile*, 320.

Islam] engenders impatience and impedes long-range analysis and planning in the intellectual sphere.[32]

Grunebaum's opinion may have been partially true when he wrote his book, *i.e.* when Arab countries had just achieved independence and needed time to construct state institutions and engage on the path of development with the required amount of self-criticism and openness. But supposing that positivism – the primacy of man's actions in achieving happiness through progress – is not rooted among Arabs and Muslims calls for intellectual caution because of its axiological partiality. Education, migration, industrialization, westernization have modified societies, though probably not enough to consider that man's sole role in attaining collective progress must stand for the supreme criterion, above religious literalism and sectarian loyalties. The difference between the Arab and Asian zones could therefore be that the sense of God's omnipotence may be less strong in Asia, due to its tradition of pantheism and philosophy, which would allow for more adaptability. On the contrary, it seems that accumulated frustration – because of imperialist aggressiveness, Zionist territorial extortion, widespread corruption, unconstructive authoritarianism – has prevented Arab peoples from adopting reasonable stances, as pointed out by Grunebaum.

4. Different Paradigms to Grasp Authoritarianism

The Orientalist interpretation of social dynamics and violence falls short of being satisfying, although it highlights essential features of the way Arab societies are functioning. Yet, to what extent Islamic societies in SA share common cultural/religious characteristics and sociological, economic, and political specificities which would push them to react similarly in comparable situations of turmoil. The fact that transitions have more or less succeeded here and failed there cannot be ignored. Wide geopolitical considerations do play a (sometimes) decisive role, like the interference of a superpower inclined to encourage a peaceful solution to a thorny crisis, or the very absence of such meddling which can have the damaging effect of letting a situation rot or explode.

Aristotle's assumption that man is by essence a political animal – a creature which can only accomplish its destiny through living collectively (in a city) – can be questioned when one looks at the fierce internecine fights affecting the AW. Asia contrarily seems to have been relatively more immune to bloody conflagrations, excepting the brutal elimination of the Communists in Indonesia (1965), the bloodbath on the road to Bengali independence (1971), the Red Khmers genocide (1975-1979), the Tian An Men Square repression in China (June 1989), the recurrent massacres in the Philippines (particularly in the Mindanao island, home to a sizeable Muslim population). Since Minerva's owl only flies at twilight, Asian societies' dusk – the current circumstances – could be described as having attained a certain degree of wisdom. The

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[32]Gustav E(dmund) (von) Grunebaum, *Modern Islam: The Search for Cultural Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 55, 261; Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 297.

AW, however, resembles more a gloomy inferno consuming its creatures. Aristotle stated in his *Politics* that some societies make a fundamental confusion about the nature of virtue – and therefore of happiness – since they assume that the ultimate goal of human life – and therefore of the political organization – lies in the pleasure of domination. That was a mistake committed by Sparta.[33] What about the AW where dialogue is too often understood as the imposition of one's views on others and mass education oriented towards indoctrination?

Aristotle insists on the necessity of having a sound constitution to monitor the city's organization in all circumstances, a legal requirement far from being met in places where upheavals and wars have occurred (Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen). If Arab constitutions emphasize (theoretically) the citizens' rights, they disregard the essential distinction conceived by Aristotle: the independence of the deliberating body (the *Boule*), the public offices (the *archon*), and the tribunals (the *dicast*). Dwelling on socio-economic matters, Aristotle had pointed out the dangers of uncontrolled demography, when *laisser-faire* leads to the increase of people, and subsequently to the impoverishment of the city, which engenders criminality and sedition.[34] Demographic boosts have occurred in many places of the world, with unemployment and social marginalization having had a clear impact on the triggering of Arab uprisings. Despite demographic pressure, Asia appears to have been more immune to connected devastating phenomena.

Aristotle upheld the opinion that a perfect citizen is one able both to obey correctly and command rightly, according to the varying circumstances.[35] The comparison between this elevated moral assessment and the reality of Arab countries offers a poor picture of their socio-political systems, where governed citizens care little about the common good and ruling ones indulge in plundering. Concerning the armed forces and the security apparatuses, apart from few exceptions (the Tunisian army which refused to shoot at the demonstrators and the Egyptian one which remained – dubiously – aloof), the military have been active tools of brutal repression: ethical considerations have not over-embarrassed Arab officers and soldiers in the repression of opponents. Yet, in Syria, desertions have taken place among officers and rank-and-file, from all communities even if deserters hail overwhelmingly from the Sunni majority whereas the core of the armed forces, made up of Alawites, has remained faithful to the regime.[36] In

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[33]Aristotle, *Les Politiques* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), 501.

[34]Ibid., 161.

[35]Aristotle, *Les Politiques*, 218.

[36]Although *Sunni* contempt and oppression date back to the founding period of the Alawite sect (in the late eighth century), the first landmark condemnation came through a *fatwa* (juridical opinion) promulgated in 1305 by a *Sunni* theologian of the Hanbali rite, Ibn Taymiyya (d. in 1328). In order to revile what he considered as outrageous doctrinal deviancies deserving capital punishment, he anathematized the Alawite community (pejoratively called Nusayri) and called for its extermination on the ground of conspiracy with the Crusaders and apostasy [Yaron Friedman, *The Nusayri-Alawis: An Introduction to the*

Iraq, pro-governmental Shiite militias have committed atrocities against Sunnis, collectively accused of siding with the EI terrorists. If many exceptions save humanity from the shame of barbarity, one must admit that a culture of institutional violence prevails, and that individuals are just cogs of a monstrous machine deprived of moral objectives.

In *Politics*, Aristotle, while discoursing upon the different types of monarchy, and particularly those assimilated to a formally legal and hereditary tyranny, says that Barbarians are more servile than Greeks, and Asian people than Europeans.[37] If the idea of comparative servility is not developed, it gives nevertheless substance to the thesis that Asian societies were then accustomed to authoritarianism. Could it be judicious to suggest that the Middle East, because of long centuries of Persian imperial influence, assimilated irrevocably authoritarian habits which Islam did not root out but adapted to?

Is the tradition of authoritarianism in the Middle East deeply entrenched? After the Islamic conquest from the Arabian Peninsula, the region fell under the domination of theocratic caliphates (Umayyad, 'Abbasid, and Fatimid Dynasties), then of semi-independent emirates, until the establishment of the centralized Ottoman Empire (beginning of the XIVth century until 1918). None of these political constructions were democratic in the Aristotelian sense. After the Ottoman collapse, British and French imperialisms divided the area into spheres of influence, and democratic experiences were not encouraged by the two tutelary powers. After the evacuation of French troops on 31.8.1946, Lebanon constituted a formally genuine democracy, with parties and elections. Yet, the system has remained rotten by institutionalized confessional allegiances and the (non-written) constitutional division of power between communities, to the detriment of individuals.

Lebanon may be nonetheless the only Arab country where political life is open and competitive, except when external problems (Palestinian refugees, Israeli attacks, international terrorism, the Syrian war) disrupt the flimsy status quo. If the religious factor has regulated the political structure, mutual neutralization between communities has been at work since the inception of the state to the point of (usually) stabilizing Lebanese socio-political life. Many conflicts which have torn apart Lebanon are connected to political issues (the status of Palestinian refugees, the acceptable level of Syrian influence) or socio-economic considerations (unemployment, corruption). The "You Stink" civic multi-confessional movement represents a manifest proof that mobilization can occur on a shared political platform. Consequently, transitions remain

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Religion, History, and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 188-197]. Another *fatwa* cast in the same mould was issued in 1638 by Nuh Afandi al-Hanafi al-Hamidi, the Ottoman state's *shaykh al-Islam* [Stéphane Valter, "La Réplique à Ibn Baz (1912-1999) de ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Khayyir (1904-1986)..." Bulletin d'Études Orientales LV: 299-383 (2003): 380-1.

[37]Aristotle, *Les Politiques*, 257-8.

possible even if they are hampered by the petrified system of the eighteen religious communities recognized by the state. Finally, does the Lebanese example invalidate the thesis of cultural and religious hinderances towards smooth transitions?

After the evacuation of French troops on 30.4.1946, the spirited Syrian political life seldom occurred within a democratic context, and the rare electoral processes witnessed the monopoly of parties favouring the sole interests of traditional notabilities and landowners. After three military coups (1949), the creation of the United Arab Republic (1.2.1958 – 28.9.1961) implied that Syria be absorbed by Egypt, under the leadership of the authoritarian National Union mass organization. The first years of independence did therefore not create a fertile ground for a placated political system. After secession from the UAR, the authoritarian Baath Party staged a coup (3.3.1963) and imposed a state of emergency, before a more radical and leftist Baathist coup happened (23.2.1966) with the subsequent suppression of public liberties and an outburst of military adventurism. Another internal coup was carried out (16.11.1970) by General Hafiz al-Asad, who became President until his death on 10.6.2000. His son Bashar succeeded him and is still clinging to power. With such a legacy of violence, the March 2011 popular discontent could hardly be expressed in reasonable political slogans, in addition to the regime's brutal repression. The crisis turned into a very nasty civil war due to a lack of any political culture of consensus plus ancestral religious hatred between *Sunnis* and Islamic minorities.

Iraq has trodden a similar path. Separated from the dying Ottoman Empire only to fall under the yoke of foreign colonial rule, Iraq became independent in 14.7.1958 when the pro-British monarchy was wiped out in a bloody military coup. Fierce rivalries ensued between nationalists, communists, and Kurds,[38] with military domination of the political life. After Saddam Husayn came to power (second-in-command on 17.7.1968 and president on 16.7.1979), an iron hold subjugated the country, with traumatic experiences: the war against Iran (1980-1988), foreign intervention (1990-1991), the ruinous embargo (1991-2003), the second Gulf war followed by the American-led occupation (2003-2011). Since then, Iraq has witnessed communal infighting between marginalized *Sunnis* and domineering Shiites, plus a virulent Kurdish irredentism, in a context of corruption, nepotism, unruliness, violence, and Islamist terrorism (al-Qaʻida and IS). No wonder that the political culture has not reached maturity and furthered instead primary allegiances. The Iraqi case tends to prove anyway that political circumstances play a role on cultural / community / religious relationships, even if the latter retain their own dynamics.

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[38]Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State Within a State* (Boulder (CO): Lynne Rienner, 2012); David L. Phillips, *The Kurdish Spring. A New Map of the Middle East* (Piscataway (NJ): Transaction Publishers, 2015).

Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq have thus never known a normal political life, with sectarianism as a structuring element of society in a context where Islam remains a dominating religious system. As developed by political science, the segmentary paradigm refers to kinship, ethnicity, and religious community, sometimes under the language of patronage and clientelism.[39] In this sense, relations existing within basic communities usually move to the national level, political stakes thus being expressed through (primary) group alliances.[40] This paradigm is useful to understand Arab and Middle East societies, as well as Asian ones.

The production paradigm, another theoretical model, analyses societies through the lenses of production relations and class structures, sometimes of social stratifications and political alliances. This theory's fundamental premise is that a certain level of economic development generates a given type of socio-economic relations, with a specific political process and ideological legitimation.[41] From this point of view, class mobilization in the AW (and particularly in the sectarianism-plagued Middle East) seems weaker than mobilization based on basic solidarities, whatever the level of economic development: in emerging countries (Syria, Iraq, Jordan, etc.) and in more advanced ones (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, etc.). Trans-confessional industrial actions do exist, like in Iraq where protesters took to the streets (Summer 2015) to ask for jobs, public services, education, and the like; or in Lebanon (same period) where various sectors of the population denounced the corruption of the political elite. Yet, these protests have not radically neutralized the momentum of sectarianism. In Tunisia and Morocco, where Sunnism is hegemonic, socio-political claims have been articulated more clearly, except when internal dogmatic differences (between Muslim secularists and Islamist militants) have put the religious agenda back to the forefront.[42] It remains a questionable matter whether class-like mobilization – which can lead to transitions after consensus has been achieved on the distribution of wealth – has been stronger in SA than in the AW, as modern production relations and new contestation modes of ideology. In any case, SA (except Singapore) does not seem to enjoy a greater level of economic development than Arab countries. And if the intensity of socio-political mobilization in SA remains debatable, purely religious slogans have had apparently, in most cases, little effect on protest mass movements.

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[39]Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, *Traditional Patrimonialism and Modern Neo-Patrimonialism* (Beverley Hills: Sage Publications, 1973).

[40]A link exists between patronage and the dysfunctions of an unachieved "capitalist system" (a virtuous norm): an incompletely centralized state, a market unyielding to competition, a useless and corrupted bureaucracy, specific communal dynamics [Ernest Gellner, and John Waterbury (eds.), *Patrons and Clients in Mediterranean Societies* (London: Duckworth, 1977)].

[41]Jean Leca, "Pour une Analyse Comparative des Systèmes Politiques Méditerranéens," [Comparative Analysis of Mediterranean Political Systems] in *Revue Française de Science Politique* 4-5/27 (1977): 575-7.

[42]Lise Storm, *Party Politics and the Prospects for Democracy in North Africa* (Boulder (CO): Lynne Rienner, 2014.

Another analytical model is the periphery/centre paradigm. From this perspective, bureaucratic domination is more widespread in the AW than agreed-upon power devolution. Concerning SA, Malaysia is a federation in its own right which has managed to deal with local and ethnic tensions within a constitutional framework, whereas Burma remains a dubious case. The administrative division of the territory – seven purely Burmese regions (some 70 percent of the population) and seven ethnic states – does not reflect the authoritarian nature of regime, despite the transition process going on since March 2011. The dramatic 2017 Rohinga crisis shows that the army remains domineering and that Buddhism can be very xenophobic. If SA globally consists of centralized states with a certain amount of democracy, the AW constitutes an anachronistic ocean of petrified political centralization. Although Iraq has become a federal entity since the adoption of a new constitution (2005), with Arabic and Kurdish as official languages, tensions between the central government and the Kurdish Region remain acute because of the disputed ownership of oil (around Kirkuk), while *Sunni* provinces feel discriminated against. For its part, the UAE can be viewed as a federal fiction: while there is accepted political devolution, the monopoly of power remains absolute within each emirate, ruled by a local monarch without popular consultation (even if there may be some degree of acquiescence).

If decentralization could be a facilitating transitional factor, the AW scores badly, even in Lebanon where the state is weak (and bankrupt). Yet, southeast countries are not particularly decentralized either. Crystallization of cultural identity, political institutionalization, the formulation of shared goals, relational regulation between basic groups, and the legitimate use of force are elements which facilitate democratic processes and transitions (according to Eisenstadt). Moreover, the political community, when it exists, can be understood (according to M. Weber) as a "moral order of authority" with the state – the centre – having, or pretending to have, the legitimate monopoly of authority. In spite of formal similarities with SA with regard to political institutions, contestations in the AW have often been expressed in religious terms more than as administrative / political claims. Separation between the social structure and the performance of political duties is a connected issue. When the public service is perceived as functioning through kinship and clientelism (plus physical coercion), and not according to competence, systems are heading for trouble,[43] a devastating mishap for Arab countries. State construction in the AW remains uncomplete: authoritarian prevalence of the political field, hegemony of the patrimonial centre, monopoly of power, vertical and iniquitous social hierarchy. The question is whether these socio-political elements play a bigger role than religion and community.

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[43]Reinhard Bendix, "Social Stratification and the Political Community," In R. Bendix, and Seymour Martin Lipset (eds.), *Class, Status, and Power: Social Stratification in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 73-86.

The present reflection has tried to evaluate the role of culture / religion in political transitions in the AW and SA. The (specific?) cultural aspects of Arabity and religious features of Islam have been explored to see if they can explain the chaotic and bloody Arab uprisings. Seemingly, the burden of both tradition and religion appears tremendous, with a touchy (community) sense of pride. Therefore, how far have a proselytizing religion and a frustrated nationalism averted rational solutions?

Are Arab states (beyond authoritarianism) structurally strong or weak? Subject to external pressure? And which degree of instability is favourable to the West, since the benefits of unrest are many: selling arms, advantageously purchasing oil and gas, reinforcing Israel.[44] Meanwhile, in SA, America's strategy has been directed at neutralizing China's influence (the Belt and Road Initiative). And both countries have understood that appeasement remains the best way for promoting mutual interests. Social stability has therefore been looked after more for economic prosperity's sake than for democracy's. For America, the stakes are different: dividing the AW and disengaging from it *versus* containing China in a strategic area (through friendly regimes and with reduced costs).

The technicalities of the voting process may play some role in determining the level of popular acquiescence towards the political system. And some dose of proportional electoral nomination will probably create a more favourable climate than the majority electoral process, which marginalizes small groups. In this respect, the AW's performances are poor. The polarizing and dividing nature of presidential elections should also be taken into account: Arab political systems are strongly personified, possibly more than in SA. Concerning Egypt, General-turned-president Sisi's 2014 election was intended to restore order and ban a controversial organization more than to stimulate national consensus, and the 2018 re-election has reinforced his stature without mobilizing large segments of the people. Military meddling and personality cult seem at an end in most of Asia (except China and North Korea): "free" parliamentary elections were held in Burma (2015) for the first time in 25 years. Inclusiveness has thus become the norm.

5. Concluding Remarks

The emphasis of this paper on culture and religion from a political perspective constitutes a point which needed to be made, although many other considerations deserve to be put into the equation. Among these, there is the degree of homogeneity to be found in state and society: to what extent is homogeneity (a rather vague concept) a fertile ground for smooth or, on the contrary, violent transitions? Egypt bears witness to the fact that religious homogeneity, notwithstanding the Coptic minority, does not generate immunity against violence and repression. In Tunisia, transition has been tainted with

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[44]Itamar Rabinovich, *Israel and the Arab Turmoil* (Washington; DC: Hoover Institution Press, 2014).

Islamist intolerance and terrorism. The homogeneity of the Morrocan population has certainly played a lesser role than the shrewdness of the monarchy which has granted few superficial reforms in order not to reform fundamentally. Is Libya homogeneous? Criminal dynamics and gang affiliations must be added to the tribal diversity. Apart from the Shiite minority, Saudi Arabia is religiously homogenous. Yet, fierce tensions are at work because of the contradiction between the puritan Wahhabi credo and the pro-western foreign policy, plus the authoritarian push for socio-economic reforms. In Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, religious heterogeneity has led to hatred and destruction. Lebanon remains a counter-example: financial assistance has guaranteed longevity. Conversely, Indonesia's religious diversity, ethnic variety, and geographical dimensions have led to a civil government. Whereas the AW is united by language and religion, Asia is ethnically and religiously much divided, which means that the stability of transitions does not lie only in homogeneity.

Finally, is it mainly a lack of confidence in the global system[45] that has pushed towards violent popular contestation, cultural self-enclosing, and religious intolerance. Whether this hypothesis is right or wrong, Arab grievances and claims have often been formulated in socio-political terms before degenerating swiftly into internecine religion-driven strife, whereas Asian civil movements have been more restrained and in the end rather successful.

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[45]Birgit Schaebler, *Globalization and the Muslim World. Culture, Religion, and Modernity* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2004)

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