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INTRODUCTION

MENA political science research a decade after the Arab uprisings: Facing the facts on tremulous grounds

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ABSTRACT

This introductory article to the Special Issue *MENA Political Science Research a Decade after the Arab Uprisings: Facing the Facts on Tremulous Grounds* takes stock of MENA political science research a decade after the Arab uprisings. Engaging with key contributions from social movement and protest studies, comparative politics, and International Relations, we discuss three overarching questions that we consider as particularly important today: First, does '2011' represent a critical juncture for the respective MENA research fields? Second, what promises does a revisiting of the Area Studies Controversy hold in light of the Arab uprisings? Third, which changes has the past decade yielded for the ways political science research in/on MENA is done? Against this background, we present the six contributions to the special issue.

Facing the facts on tremulous grounds

The Arab uprisings of late 2010 and 2011 initially seemed to mark an important turning point in the modern history of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).[1] While the countries south and east of the Mediterranean had not been strangers to social mobilization and street politics in earlier periods, be it during the heydays of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s, the 'bread riots' of the 1970s and 1980s or the Islamist, leftist and liberal demonstrations of the 1990s and 2000s, '2011' still seemed to signify a much more substantial transformation: In less than a year, region-wide mass protests combined with the (non-)intervention of powerful security agencies forced the heads of state of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen out of office. With the exception of the Iranian revolution 1979, this was the only time in five decades that mass protests successfully undermined ruling authoritarian regimes in the MENA, raising

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hopes among many people in the region and beyond for increased social justice, inclusion and even democratization.

A decade after the Arab uprisings, the initial optimistic view that many held in 2011 has largely been replaced by a rather pessimistic outlook: With the exception of the fragile democratic transition in Tunisia, authoritarianism has remained the modal regime form in almost all of the Arab countries of the region. In Egypt, the military coup of 2013 has contributed to a harsher form of dictatorship than before 2011, as has the rise of Muhammad bin Salman in Saudi Arabia since 2015. In the more liberalized authoritarian monarchies of Jordan, Morocco and, less so, Kuwait and Oman, on-and-off protests have continued over the last decade, but they have taken place in a context of more extensive and intensive repression by state security organs. In 2011/12, Libya, Syria and Yemen quickly transformed into internationalized civil wars. The emergence of new anti-regime protests in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq in 2019 raised hopes among some that an 'Arab Spring 2.0' (Muasher, 2019) might be on the horizon. Despite the continued protests, many people in the MENA still view the current political dynamics as well as the future prospects negatively.

At first sight, the scholarly debate among different subfields of political science on the Arab uprisings and their aftermath mirrors the publicly held narrative of a 'rapid rise' of hope in 2011 and then a 'long fall' or 'gradual decline' post-2011. In the short, optimistic 'rise' phase, many MENA political scientists argued that the spread of mass protests in 2011 and in particular the quick ousting of Ben Ali, Mubarak, Qadhdhafi and Saleh (the latter two also due to NATO as well as GCC interventions, respectively) meant the long-held 'Arab exceptionalism' had finally come to an end (e.g., Teti & Gervasio, 2011). In an early Special Issue of Mediterranean Politics devoted to the Arab uprisings, Michelle Pace and Francesco Cavatorta declared that 'it is clear that the end product of the MENA peoples' demands will be a more accountable political system' (Pace & Cavatorta, 2012, p. 135). This view was strongly contested by other MENA scholars who held that across the region, regimes' repressive capacities and willingness were still clearly present (Bellin, 2012). Steven Heydemann even suggested that Arab authoritarianism will be 'darker, more repressive, more sectarian and even more deeply resistant to democratization than in the past' (Heydemann, 2013, p. 72). While the 2011/12 scholarly debate was a lot about 'soul-searching' and 'who was right?', ensuing political science research began to examine a number of new topics, or it revisited older themes in light of the Arab uprisings. The phase after 2013 has seen a massive expansion and, at the same time, a specification of political science research themes, empirical findings and theorizations (Bank, 2018; Kao & Lust, 2017; Schwedler, 2015; Valbjørn, 2015).

This Special Issue (SI) builds on the aforementioned insights, but its main objective is broader and more ambitious: to take stock of political science

research on the MENA a decade after the Arab uprisings. Given the scope of MENA-related political science publications since 2011, we have decided to concentrate on three fields of study which we consider as having been particularly relevant in capturing the politics of the Arab uprisings and their aftermath: social movement and protest research, comparative politics (CP) studies on state and regime agencies and International Relations (IR) scholarship on regional order, including the increasing overlaps between crucial aspects of the three fields. Social movement and protest research systematically studies the societal and mobilizational side of politics. As the Arab uprisings emerged from broad-based social mobilizations and mass protests which quickly spread from Tunisia and Egypt to most other Arab countries, this is the first field we incorporate here. During 2011 and afterwards, it was MENA states and regimes which have reacted in various ways and with various means to the political challenges posed by the Arab uprisings protests. These phenomena are the mainstay of CP, in particular research on state agencies and their interplay with societal actors. This is the second field we focus on in the SI. The 'Arab' in the Arab uprisings denotes a cross-border, regional and transnational dimension of MENA politics. Questions around geopolitical shifts or the role of influential MENA and extra-regional actors are the field of IR, especially scholarship on regional order – the third focus we take in this SI. Importantly, rather than examining in great empirical detail, for instance, individual protest movements in Egypt, authoritarian regime strategies in Morocco or the former regional or international embedment, this SI's primary interest is to elaborate on and discuss the different ways how research has been done in the specific fields over the past decade. This entails analysing how dominant research strands have evolved and changed over time and what their promises and pitfalls have been. More precisely, such a perspective addresses the temporal questions of 'where we came from?' (recent past), 'where are we currently?' (present) and 'where might we be going?' (near future) (Bank, 2018; Valbjørn, 2015).

To ensure coherence among the SI's contributions and to allow for drawing broader lessons, we have structured our stocktaking exercise around three cross-cutting key issues, formulated here as guiding questions:

(1) 2011 as a critical juncture: To what extent do the Arab uprisings of 2011 represent a critical juncture for the respective MENA research field under examination?
(2) Revisiting the Area Studies Controversy: How does the relationship between generalizing political science and context-sensitive Middle East knowledge play out regarding the research theme under study?
(3) Implications of changing field access: What are the ethical and methodological implications for doing research not only *on*, but *in* the countries east and south of the Mediterranean?

Earlier publications assessing the state of the art have also examined the first question on the extent to which the Arab uprisings have constituted a critical juncture when it comes to the MENA-related CP regime studies (Hinnebusch, 2018; Valbjørn, 2015) or the application of IR theories to the region post-2011 (Lynch & Ryan, 2017; POMEPS, 2015). In contrast, this SI examines three cross-cutting issues from the longer perspective of a decade and without being limited to one specific sub-discipline. Importantly, the SI revisits the classical Area Studies Controversy (Jung, 2014; Tessler et al., 1999; Teti, 2007; Valbjørn, 2004) in light of the Arab uprisings, examining the relationship of political science discipline-oriented vs. more context-specific area knowledge production. Regarding the third question, the SI's contributions also discuss access to the field in the MENA as well as the ethical and methodological challenges that have emerged since the Arab uprisings (Clark & Cavatorta, 2018; Glasius et al., 2018; Grimm et al., 2020). Each contribution to the SI addresses at least two of these cross-cutting issues, thereby allowing the individual articles to speak to each other.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a spotlight on extant MENA research from the three fields that are most important for this SI: social movement and protest research, CP and IR. Section 3 then further elaborates on the three guiding questions addressed in the SI: critical juncture, Area Studies Controversy and field access. Against this background, section 4 introduces the SI's six contributions and concludes.

A spotlight on MENA research after the Arab uprisings

Given the sheer breadth and depth of the political scientific output on the Arab uprisings, we have been selective in our choice of thematic foci for this SI. Our selection is based on two criteria: First, we concentrate on those political science studies that aim to engage with and contribute to broader disciplinary debates, that is which aim to theorize their empirical findings, in part also beyond the MENA. More often than not, such studies describe themselves explicitly as comparative, that is they engage in cross-case, synchronic or within-case, diachronic comparisons. The second criterion is topical: Rather than focusing on all or most possible research themes around the Arab uprisings, we focus on insights from the three aforementioned fields which are particularly relevant for the post-2011 debate. This means that this SI cannot cover other prominent topics in MENA political science research post-2011, among them Islamism and Islamist politics, the situation of (forced) migrants and refugees or the role of natural resources and, more broadly, dynamics of political economy.

Without the intention to reify dichotomies between inside/outside or domestic/foreign which are constantly transcended in political practice, we

still have decided to adhere to a distinction between primarily inward-looking sub-disciplines, such as social movement and protest research or CP on the one hand and variants of IR which assume rather an external, macro-perspective on regional dynamics on the other. Accordingly, we are clearly aware of multiple attempts to overcome the artificial compartmentalization between the different (sub-)fields, and we consider them as 'open and inter-connected containers', thereby acknowledging the mutual entanglements between each. Such overlaps are often neglected as academic thinking is conditioned by a focus on sub-disciplinary containers.

While we will point to various instances of important cross-fertilization, we have still opted to adhere to a sub-disciplinary structure below. This is the case because, first, we would like to make sure that the individual contributions of the SI can properly resonate within their respective sub-fields. Second, we contend that such a partition also reflects the empirical developments on the ground. In this sense, we argue that research and empirical reality are mutually constitutive. Broadly speaking, MENA research on the Arab uprisings responded to political developments. To be more precise, at first, in the aftermath of the events of 2010/11 we could witness a surge in social movement and protest research as an immediate reaction to wide-spread regional protests. Subsequently, given the diverse regime reactions in protest policing, societal repression, co-optation etc. and especially in response to the 2013 military coup in Egypt, topics in relation to CP gained more (at)traction. Later, in particular foreign involvements in the civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, but also responding to transnational phenomena such as the rise of the radical-Islamist Islamic State (IS), triggered an increasing engagement of IR with MENA politics. Concomitantly, it is also in this light that we have chosen both the respective (sub-)fields and topics of this SI.

Social movement and protest research post-Arab uprisings: The multiplicity of mobilization

Given the scale, speed and diversity of social mobilization during the Arab uprisings, the study of social movements and activism, in particular youth movements, has grown considerably (cf. Irene Weipert-Fenner's SI contribution on popular protests; Beinin & Vairel, 2013). Often drawing on concepts and methods from social movement studies, many researchers have analysed the protest repertoires in different settings, resulting in blurred disciplinary boundaries of political science, sociology, anthropology, and Middle East studies (MES). Relatedly, the relationship between secularists and Islamists (Grimm & Harders, 2017) as well as the differentiation between types of activists, ranging from labour organizations and unions (Bishara, 2018) to political parties and the plethora of previously overlooked 'non-movements' (Bayat, 2013), have become mainstays of research after 2011. In addition, the

role of new social media in mobilization, such as Facebook and Twitter, has massively gained in influence (Clarke & Kocak, 2020; Lynch, 2014). Connected to both activism and social media research are studies that draw on political geography and that focus on the spatiality of protests as well as the role of implicit knowledge and changed identities (Schwedler & King, 2014).

Accounting for the cross-border, transnational dimension of social movements and protest behaviour, comparative research has also studied diffusion processes in regional waves of contention (Patel et al., 2014; Weyland, 2012). The popular uprisings that quickly spread across many Arab countries in 2011 suggest that oppositional protest repertoires quickly diffused across national boundaries. Not only were slogans such as 'the people want to fall of the regime' ('ash-sha'b yurid isqat an-nizam') actively taken up by activists across the region, but core protest practices such as mass sit-ins in central squares could be observed from Cairo to Manama, and from Dar'a and Homs to Sana'a. In a similar vein, prominent scholars studying protest movements and their diffusion elsewhere began to include the cases of the Arab uprisings in their comparative designs. For example, Weyland (2012) contrasted the 'wave-like' nature of the spread of anti-regime protests in the Middle East in 2011 with examples from Europe during the revolutions of 1848. Despite the obvious structural differences, he finds interesting similarities in the cognitive shortcuts that oppositional activists and 'ordinary people' took to make sense of the surprising 'forerunner' – France in 1848, Tunisia in 2011. One of Weyland's core contentions is that opposition forces made a common cognitive mistake in both 1848 and 2011, overestimating their chances for success in high-risk anti-regime protests. This explains both the wave of protest initiation and the subsequent foundering of protest movements in many places (cf. also Volpi, 2013).

In sum, MENA-related social movement and protest research has massively expanded and diversified since the beginning of the Arab uprisings. While important pre-2011 protest actors, such as labour, parties or non-movements continued to receive scholarly attention, new focus areas revolve around youth, the role of social media, issues of spatiality, transnational diffusion and learning. In particular the last, transnationally oriented topics from recent social movement and protest research provide important cross-fertilization with more outward-looking trends in both CP and IR scholarship.

Comparative politics post-Arab uprisings: The importance of repression, transnational diffusion and learning

Given that the heads of state in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen were ousted, the question of regime survival and breakdown has remained a core concern since 2011 (Bellin, 2012; Brownlee et al., 2015). The answers to this earlier hegemonic research focus have multiplied and diversified, allowing for

a broadening of the CP research agenda on the MENA. One such new research focus studies repression (cf. Josua and Edel's SI contribution; Bellin, 2012; Blaydes, 2018). In this regard, Josua and Edel (2015) distinguish between 'constraining' forms of repression, which provide checks on certain kinds of regime activities but permit others, and 'incapacitating' forms, which are deployed in political crises to arrest all types of engagement.

It is hardly surprising that the Arab uprisings brought new attention to the largest and seemingly most powerful organization within the regimes: the armed forces. Civil-military relations had once been a major element in MES, especially in the 1950s and 1960s when the region was one of the most coup-prone in global comparison. The Arab uprisings 2011 served as a reminder just how important the coercive apparatus of the Arab state really was. Numerous studies have tried to explain the different tacks that militaries took with regard to protesters. A key question is why some armies partici-pated, actively or tacitly, in the ouster of authoritarian presidents, as in Tunisia and Egypt, while some participated in violent repression of their own citizens, as in Bahrain and Syria. With the ascent of General Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt, a further question focuses on how the experience of political instability can provide opportunities for armies to forward their corporate interests (Grawert & Abul-Magd, 2016). Many of these studies circled back from the general trends in CP, showing how Arab militaries operated similarly to their counterparts in other weak and fragile regimes (Albrecht et al., 2016). Even so, recognition is growing of the need to look beyond the armies themselves. As with many other autocracies around the globe, Arab regimes sported multi-ple overlapping arms of secret services, police, gendarmerie, party-based paramilitaries, and state-sponsored militias, all of which played a role in defining trajectories of regime change (Hanau Santini & Moro, 2019).

Standing out in the discussion of regime survival strategies is the striking durability of all eight authoritarian monarchies during the Arab uprisings (Bank et al., 2015; Yom, 2014). Rather than suffering political ossification, these regimes proved more than capable of responding to internal challen-gers through co-optation or coercion, oftentimes by relying on outside powers to ensure geopolitical protection (Yom, 2016). Studies derived from the Arab uprisings continue in this vein, showing how different arrays of family rule, external support, rent distribution, and formulas of legitimation have inculcated these regimes from unrest, with the partial exception of Bahrain (Josua & Edel, 2015).

CP research since the beginning of the Arab uprisings also became more 'outward-looking' in that it has systematically examined the trans- and inter-national dimensions of authoritarian regime politics, both within the MENA region and beyond. One prominent concept in this regard is authoritarian diffusion, denoting the chronologically proximate emergence of similar non- or anti-democratic policies in different countries. Important examples of such

uncoordinated diffusion processes are the cross-border spread of state restrictions on NGOs, online activism or journalism. Another is the region-wide spread of anti-terrorism legislation and the more specific, intra-MENA diffusion of designating the moderate Islamist Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization (Darwich, 2017; Josua, 2020). The concept of authoritarian learning is often closely related to diffusion, which has also played an important role in IR debates (cf. e.g., Solingen, 2015); it exists when regime elites observe, adapt and implement the political strategies of others, typically with the aim of preventing similar mistakes. For example, the Syrian regime learned from the failed Libyan counterinsurgency in 2011 that it should only gradually increase the levels of repression so as to avoid a potential international backlash akin to NATO's military intervention following UNSC resolution 1973 (Heydemann & Leenders, 2014).

Taken together, CP research on the Arab uprisings has clearly diversified in the last decade. Older topics such as the relevance of monarchical rule or the role of the military have been rediscovered in light of the post-2011 MENA developments. Other research themes have newly emerged, such as the disaggregating of non-army state repressive organs or the importance of cross-border diffusion and learning of authoritarian regimes. It is especially the latter aspect which links the CP agenda with the emerging, transnationally oriented research trends in social movement and protest research and more established IR perspectives.

IR research post-Arab uprisings: The missing link?

Despite the international and transnational nature of the Arab uprisings and their manifold impacts on the regional order in the MENA, IR scholarship has displayed a striking restraint in making sense of these dynamics (cf. Kuru, 2019). As Lynch and Ryan (2017, p. 643) rightly observe: 'Whereas the comparative-politics literature on the Arab uprisings and their aftermath demonstrates theoretical progress with sophisticated empirical analysis, there has been significantly less theoretical engagement by international relations (IR) theorists.' Rather, drivers of conceptual and theoretical advancement could be found elsewhere, which is why innovative IR scholarship can mainly be seen as the result of cross-fertilization with the neighbouring fields of social movement and protest research and CP (Marc Lynch's conclusion to this SI sheds further light on this matter). Taking this neglect as point of departure, several contributions have explicitly discussed the need to address the gap between IR and MES in relation to the Arab uprisings from different angles (POMEPS, 2015; Lynch & Ryan, 2017).

At the same time, the past decade witnessed increasing attempts to problematize and overcome a Western hegemony of IR scholarship under the label of 'Global IR' (Acharya & Buzan, 2019; Tickner & Waever, 2008) which

also affects IR research on the MENA; this, however, to a lesser degree than in other regions of the Global South (Hazbun & Valbjørn, 2018: 5; Fawcett, 2020). Still, there is a growing debate about the need for MENA-related IR research which originates from within the region. Instead of IR theories of Western origin being bluntly applied to the research *object* of the MENA, the region itself can become the incubator for novel theoretical lenses, not only on regional phenomena but for overarching disciplinary debates on IR theorizing (Hazbun & Valbjørn, 2018). In this regard, in line with a general interest in auto-ethnography within IR, there is also growing awareness of the 'geopolitics of knowledge', as Hazbun (2013) has described the importance to take into account the positionality and identity of the researcher observing the region (Valbjørn, 2017).

The self-described Beirut School of Critical Security Studies (Abboud et al., 2018) is a specific example of such knowledge production from within the region. While highlighting its distinct, emancipatory character compared to existing (critical) security studies, the scholars adhere to the sub-disciplinary convention of defining a 'school', similar to the ones associated with Copenhagen, Aberystwyth or Paris. Situating itself in the tradition of postcolonial critical security research, the Beirut School emphasizes the need to focus on the implications of insecurity for people affected by it. Closely connected, as Bilgin (2017) points out, a multi-dimensional approach to security can lead to greater sensitivity when it comes to the grievances of the Arab populations that have challenged their rulers since 2011 as opposed to perspectives that privilege regime or regional security.

IR scholarship after 2011 also addressed changes of the MENA regional order from multiple perspectives (Del Sarto et al., 2019). This was especially the case in relation to the struggle for regional hegemony (Hinnebusch, 2019) and the related political exploitation of sectarianism (Hanau Santini, 2017; Salloukh, 2013), the waning US influence and interest in the region, a greater role of non-state actors in regional geopolitics (Kausch, 2017), the rise of new regional powers, such as Qatar, the UAE, and Turkey, as well as the (continued) decline of old ones, such as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq (Hinnebusch, 2019; Phillips, 2016).

Moreover, despite the importance of non-state transboundary dynamics in the context of the Arab uprisings as well as the growing importance of international political sociology, IR scholarship in the wake of the Arab uprisings is still characterized by a persistent pre-occupation with statecentric perspectives. It is therefore not a surprise that, when the fourth edition of Louise Fawcett's seminal volume *The International Relations of the Middle East* got extended by a chapter titled 'The Arab Spring: The "People" in International Relations,' the author was Larbi Sadiki who is not an IR scholar by training but specialized in CP of the region (Sadiki, 2016). Several authors have, however, countered the dominant state-centrism in

the context of regional geopolitics after the Arab uprisings. Especially due to the temporary ascent of the IS as well as the key role of both Kurdish and Shi'a militias in Syria and Iraq respectively, the importance of non-state actors in armed conflict has received greater attention (cf. May Darwish's contribution to this SI, Hanau Santini & Moro, 2019; Kausch, 2017).

It was especially the IS' temporary territorial control over considerable parts of Syria and Iraq that contributed to a reassessment of the role of inter-state borders in relation to regional order. Strikingly, in this regard, while the interaction of critical geopolitics with IR on the one hand but also CP on the other, has yielded considerable conceptual innovations in the understanding of territoriality, borders and geopolitics in general, these insights have thus far hardly affected research on MENA geopolitics. Hence, in a rather implicit reflection of the literature on critical geopolitics, related research highlighted the interplay of borders and orders in the MENA. Accordingly, several contributions revisited the claim of the artificial nature of borders in the region as well as an alleged end of a regional order which had been dictated by Western imperial powers (Busse, 2021; Del Sarto, 2017; Kamel, 2017; Schofield, 2018). So, instead of reifying an obsession with the Sykes-Picot-Agreement, Fawcett (2017, p. 789), for instance, pointed out that despite the various challenges to regional order and a constant claim of the artificiality of borders in the region, inter-state borders have remained strikingly persistent. This has been so in spite of various secession attempts post-2011, ranging from Iraq and Syria to Libya and Yemen (Ahram, 2019).

To summarize, while IR scholarship on the Arab uprisings shows less diversity and theoretical sophistication compared to both social movement and protest research as well as CP, advancements are clearly identifiable in relation to a variety of topics. A main difference, though, lies in the absence of a critical self-reflection in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings.

Cross-cutting key issues for MENA political science research on the Arab uprisings

Based on the selective review of scholarship from the fields of social movement and protest research, CP and IR, this section offers a detailed account of three cross-cutting key issues around which the SI is structured. First, the question of whether '2011' has been a critical juncture for MENA political science research; second, the Arab uprisings' links with and lessons from the Area Studies Controversy; and third, the challenges and opportunities that research ethics, methodology and field access have presented since 2011.

The Arab uprisings as a critical juncture in MENA scholarship?

Initially, the Arab uprisings, their dynamism as well as the ensuing diverging trajectories have turned fundamental scholarly assumptions about MENA politics into question. Early on, the overall relevance of MENA-specific political science scholarship was questioned due to its alleged inability to predict the Arab uprisings, their timing and dynamic transformations (cf. Jung, 2014; Pace & Cavatorta, 2012). In 2011 and 2012, the uprisings thus shattered established beliefs, resulting in significant reconfigurations of research agendas following critical self-reflections among scholars doing research related to the region (Teti & Gervasio, 2011; Valbjørn, 2015). As a result, topics such as protest dynamics, the durability of authoritarian regimes, or regional alliances and competition for regional hegemony underwent substantial reassessments. While some scholarship after 2011 initially attempted to address broader disciplinary debates, especially in social movement and protest research or CP, neither did this trend persist nor did it lead to a comprehensive re-configuration of the academic debate in these fields (Bank, 2018).

The reasons for this alleged lack of rupture and thus the possible non-existence of a critical juncture in the years after 2011/12 are manifold. First of all, they might revolve around the very themes and topics to be examined: With Tunisia remaining the only Arab uprisings country to continue undergo a fragile transition to democracy post-2013, researchers examining the ways authoritarian regimes survive crises, from Egypt to Syria, Bahrain to Jordan, might actually look back and get inspiration from conceptualizations and methodologies prior to 2011, the era in which MENA authoritarianism was most prominent as a CP research topic (cf. Heydemann, 2013). Second and relatedly, political science scholarship might have identified new research topics during and after the Arab uprisings but analysing these novel phenomena does not necessarily signify a break with the earlier mainstream in the respective field. Rather, researching e.g., social media or new urban protest spaces might just be a thematic extension of the previous state of the art in the respective field or, in some cases, reify earlier theories, concepts and methodologies. Third, the view of what counts as 'legitimate' political science knowledge might be preoccupied with conventional North American or European scholarly debates, overlooking new ways of studying MENA politics. This calls for a necessary spatial differentiation on theme-specific knowledge production especially between North America, Europe and the MENA itself (Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2016; Shami & Miller-Idriss, 2016).

What this suggests is that to examine whether the Arab uprisings constituted a critical juncture, i.e. a situation of uncertainty that then locks in a new mainstream, it is necessary to not only look at massive transformational changes in the research foci under study. Rather, scholars should be sensitive

to more fine-grained shifts in the research themes that they examine in different fields. They should also trace similarities and differences over time: Where do we stand now in the respective MENA research field? How have we gotten here, i.e. what have been the main research findings in the respective sub-field in the recent past? And finally, against this background, what are the important research avenues for the coming years related to the context addressed in the respective thematic focus?

Revisiting the Area Studies Controversy in the face of the Arab uprisings

While most scholarly engagements with the Arab uprisings have refrained from an explicit or implicit connection to the Area Studies Controversy (ASC), we contend that there is much to gain from a revisiting of this debate. Originally, the controversy addressed the alleged incompatibility of disciplinary-focussed social sciences and area studies (Tessler et al., 1999). In this sense, it was argued that social science theorizing is often based on a universalism that risks not properly considering existing cultural variations of specific regions. Area studies, such as MES, in turn, tend to be preoccupied with a particularistic perspective that claims that the region under investigation is unique and thus not comparable to other regions in the world.

Originally CP was crucial for the emergence of the ASC, while IR did not play a key role as, broadly speaking, it was more interested in overarching questions of international order than in regional peculiarities. By the turn of the millennium this changed, though, with IR becoming more interested in CP-related topics which prepared the ground for a substantial IR contribution to the ASC. As a result, the subsequent advancements of the ASC were primarily rooted in area-sensitive IR scholarship. In the context of this SI, while we by no means deny the importance of CP for the ASC and vice versa, we have opted to primarily focus on a revisiting of the ASC from an IR perspective since this has been the predominant perspective in the context of the ASC in the decade before the Arab uprisings of 2011. Accordingly, for instance, whereas Halliday (1996) suggested the combination of analytical universalism and historic particularism in order to overcome the gap between (in his case) IR and MES, both camps have considerably evolved ever since the Area Studies Controversy (Teti, 2007; Valbjørn, 2004). As a result, there is a great deal of – especially postcolonial – IR scholarship accounting for regional particularities, while at the same time, area studies have increasingly incorporated sophisticated theoretical perspectives, without however explicitly relating to the Area Studies Controversy (see also Stephan Stetter SI's contribution on a rejuvenated Area Studies debate).

We consider it, therefore, a missed opportunity that while the Arab uprisings led to the questioning of fundamental scholarly assumptions, this did

not occur with reference to the Area Studies Controversy. Even though prominent CP scholars strongly challenged core pre-2011 understandings about the (alleged) durability of authoritarianism in the MENA, they did not frame their critique in terms of the Area Studies Controversy. One analytical lens that has been used instead to capture post-2011 MENA political dynamics has been the CP-specific 'Comparative Area Studies' (CAS). Akin to Halliday (1996), CAS scholars advocate for a 'middle ground' (Köllner, 2018, p. 15) between disciplinary theorization and area-related specification. They further differentiate between three ideal types of comparisons: intra-regional, cross-regional and inter-regional, with cross-regional comparisons, i.e. comparing cases from two world regions aiming at contextualized, bounded generalization, being considered as the gold standard of CAS research (idem.). However, as Ahram (2018) and Bank (2018) highlight, it has been intra-regional, i.e. intra-MENA comparisons which have absolutely dominated CP post-Arab uprisings research – with cross- and inter-regional comparisons remaining very exceptional. Despite its analytical promises, this renders the CAS perspective of only limited practical use for our SI since we aim to systematically discuss the intra-regionally oriented post-Arab uprisings, covering and bridging social movement and protest research, CP and IR. Concerning IR, Valbjørn (2017, p. 647) highlights the particular problem that neither did it question fundamental theoretical assumptions, nor was it at the forefront of generating tangible theory-driven insights in response to the Arab uprisings. As a result, he stresses the need to revive the mutual dialogue which characterized the relationship before the Arab uprisings.

We thus contend that MENA scholarship could clearly benefit from a revisiting of the ASC in a way that emphasizes the cross-fertilizing potentials which result from a mutual dialogue between disciplinary political science and area studies (Fawcett, 2020; Valbjørn, 2017). For this purpose, it is necessary to disaggregate the ASC. In this context, we, first, argue that there has never been a single ASC. Rather, the ASC is multi-dimensional, materializing differently in various social science disciplines. What matters therefore is not the question about how to 'solve' the ASC but rather reflecting on how the ASC plays out within different fields of research. For instance, the ASC may mean different things for researchers with a primary scholarly identity in IR or CP. Second and relatedly, the ASC might also translate into regional divisions. For instance, while there appears to be a considerable gap between US and European IR scholarship towards the MENA, this is arguably much less the case when it comes to CP where more similarities between US and European research approaches seem to exist towards the region (on this point, see also Marc Lynch's concluding article). Third, a controversy is (ideally) always about dialogue. In this regard, we see the SI also as an attempt to trigger a renewed debate in relation to the ASC, as also attempted by Stephan Stetter's SI contribution. Fourth, a revived ASC possesses emancipatory

potential which has so far been neglected. In other words, thus far the ASC treated MENA mainly as an object of study, while scholarly perspectives and contributions from the region have mostly been neglected. Finally, if we acknowledge that the 'Middle East is not an exception from the global condition, but an inseparable part of its developments' (Jung, 2009, p. 10), a renewed engagement with the ASC can also help putting MENA properly into a global context insofar as it can be asked which trends are specific to the region and which are rather global (Busse, 2018).

Ethical and practical implications for doing research in/on the region

Epistemologically, while the first two key issues – 2011 as a critical juncture and the Area Studies Controversy – are rather situated on a meta-level, the third one on research ethics and field access in the MENA post-Arab uprisings is more tangible. Still, we consider it equally important to focus on implications for doing research in and on the region as a crucial cross-cutting issue for our SI. This is the case as especially the positioning towards the different camps of the ASC potentially yields methodological implications, for instance, when it comes to a research design which is more prone to universality and generalization or particularity and context specificity or the combination of both. Moreover, the specific local circumstances determine which research methods are ethically appropriate and practically applicable. In this regard, the past decade has produced innovative methodological approaches as diverse as social media analysis, remote sensing studies, surveys or focus group discussions. Compared to existing research on the topic, our SI differs insofar as it links questions of research ethics with more conceptual and meta-theoretical considerations. Hence, while some studies exclusively focus on research ethics, field access, and methods while neglecting broader (meta-)theoretical questions, or vice versa, our SI tries to address both dimensions. Therefore, taken together we consider the third cross-cutting key issue of the same importance concerning the analysis of political dynamics in the MENA as the first two.

The political developments emanating from the Arab uprisings also confine researchers conducting fieldwork in the region. Repression and comprehensive surveillance have significantly limited the scope and topics as well as the interlocutors researchers can turn to. As a result, shrinking spaces of individual freedoms and political liberties fundamentally affect the way academic research is undertaken in the region, potentially putting both local and foreign researchers' personal safety at risk. While MENA-based researchers have been exposed to various forms of repression in authoritarian contexts, researchers from outside the region assumed to possess greater freedoms, at least if they held Western passports. With the atrocious torture and murder of the Italian, Cambridge-based PhD scholar Giulio Regeni in 2016 in Cairo this

turned out to be a misconception. Another case was the arrest and imprisonment of Matthew Hedges, a British PhD scholar from Durham, in the UAE in 2018. Moreover, in 2018 British-Australian scholar Kylie Moore-Gilbert was arrested in Iran after attending a conference and subsequently sentenced to ten years in prison for espionage; she was released in a 'prisoner swap' on 26 November 2020. Therefore, questions of safety of both researchers and their interlocutors which previously have been neglected in both academic discussions as well as trainings of PhD candidates need to be considered in a more serious and systematic manner. Some recent publications make long overdue and invaluable contributions on that matter (Clark & Cavatorta, 2018; Glasius et al., 2018; Grimm et al., 2020). A key difference between these volumes and the approach of our SI, though, is that we explicitly combine an engagement with research ethics and field access with discussions about implications for conceptual analysis and empirical findings. While all three of these volumes offer a nuanced account of either different instances of field work (Grimm et al., 2020), the distinctiveness of doing research in authoritarian contexts (Glasius et al., 2018) or a focus on different kinds of methodological and ethical challenges for field work (Clark & Cavatorta, 2018), our SI does not offer an alternative approach but rather a complementary perspective which additionally takes into account the interplay of such methodological and ethical questions on the one hand and analytical implications on the other. In addition, the SI tries to reflect upon to what extent the past decade has emanated changes for research ethics and field access.

Beyond individual instances of repression, these developments can have a fundamental impact on academic knowledge production regarding the MENA as a whole. While scholars with Western passports can simply be prevented from doing field research by withholding visa, researchers from the MENA may be deterred from researching potentially controversial topics in order not to endanger themselves or their families. At the same time, it cannot be excluded that security apparatuses of authoritarian regimes from the region attempt to intimidate MENA scholars who work at Western universities. Furthermore, while still ongoing, it is becoming evident that the COVID-19 pandemic has further restricted field research in the MENA (Allam et al., 2020).

In the long run, we see two potential outcomes resulting from shrinking field access. On the one hand, it is very likely that research will focus on seemingly safe, apolitical topics and countries, such as Tunisia. On the other hand, wherever direct field access is obstructed researchers need to explore alternative resources in order to avoid ending up without any empirically-grounded research at all.[2] One promising example in this regard is crisis mapping as a means of collecting and mapping real-time data from various sources, using big data, satellite images and crowd sourcing to provide information on political dynamics on the ground (Ziemke, 2012), such as for

instance, the civil wars in Syria and Libya, or the protests in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan in 2019/20. Another important case is the work undertaken under the label of 'forensic architecture', which uses architectural techniques in order to investigate armed conflicts and human rights violations (Weizman, 2017).

Conclusion and outline of the special issue

The aim of this introductory article to the SI has been threefold. First, the article has undertaken a stocktaking of MENA political science research a decade after the Arab uprisings. We have focused on the three scholarly fields of social movement and protest research, CP and IR in order to identify important scholarly developments in these areas. Second, this article has identified three cross-cutting key issues which we consider relevant for research related to the Arab uprisings. In this regard, we highlighted the importance of the question to what extent 2011 represented a critical juncture for knowledge production on MENA politics. Second, we emphasized the need to revisit the Area Studies Controversy in the face of the Arab uprisings, and finally, we stressed the need to pay closer attention to the ethical and practical implications of changing field access in the MENA. While these key issues guide the contributions to this SI, we also hope we can provoke a constructive debate on these issues that we consider relevant in multiple contexts, also beyond the study of the MENA region.

The contributions to this SI address at least two of these three key issues with different emphases, based on the respective research foci. In the final part of this article, we will briefly present the respective contributions to the SI and thereby also highlight how they take these key issues into account. From the perspective of social movement and protest research, Irene Weipert-Fenner observes an increased interest in studying protests in the MENA so that the Arab uprisings triggered extensive and nuanced engagement with this topic. In other words, 2011 made a considerable difference in this regard and thus clearly marked a critical juncture. In this context, the contribution identifies three research trends, namely, rationalist-structuralist approaches looking at both emergence and success of protests, micro-level analyses of protests within the framework of social movement theory (SMT) and approaches focusing on political economy. On this basis, Weipert-Fenner suggests to combine insights from political economy with insights from SMT in a way that enables comparisons between different regions. Accordingly, reflecting upon the ASC, she advocates against Middle East exceptionalism and instead stresses the importance of concepts that can be of use in different regional contexts, for instance, by drawing on insights on the 'incorporation crisis' from Latin America. Further, the article introduces potential ways around the challenge of more difficult research access to many

parts of the MENA. In particular, in addition to the more common fieldwork methods, it innovatively discusses protest event dataset based on press analyses and social media sources which become increasingly important.

Repression is a widespread response to protests, and the article by Maria Josua and Mirjam Edel, situated in CP research on authoritarianism, identifies rising levels of repression in the MENA ten years after the Arab uprisings. Given the previously widespread assumption that it was an unchangeable factor, systematic research on repression was rather rare pre-2011. Moreover, 2011 represented a turning point insofar as political science research in general became interested in the region with important results for CP theory development. Josua and Edel not only point out that research on repression needs to account for its multiple variations, they also succeed in offering a disaggregated account of these variations. In particular, Josua and Edel distinguish between forms, agents, targets and justifications of repression as well as their digital and transnational dimensions. In relation to the ASC, they show that the trends observed are not exclusive to the MENA but can rather be observed in other world regions as well, forming part of a global increase and differentiation of repression as a mode of political domination. Relatedly, and pointing to the third key issue, this leads to substantial difficulties in terms of field access in counterrevolutionary states, among them the Arab monarchies but also Egypt and Syria. Repression therefore affects scholars themselves. It further renders comparative research between countries with different levels of repression difficult. As a means to overcome these challenges, Josua and Edel point to alternative, in part digital, sources of data and call for triangulation of research methods so as to cross-check the findings and mitigate potential weaknesses.

Morten Valbjørn's contribution to the SI maps the ways in which sectarianism has been studied before and after 2011 in the MENA region. It offers a distinction between how sectarianism can be conceptualized and explained in order to answer the question whether the study of sectarianism has progressed in the past decade. As Valbjørn shows, 2011 represents a critical juncture insofar as, while the overall debate has not yielded certainty or consensus, it has progressed to a much greater conceptual, methodological and theoretical sophistication. In this sense, sectarianism research clearly escapes a categorization according to the classic compartmentalization of the ASC but rather combines conceptual advancements with empirical refinement and case specification. As a result, the study of sectarianism clearly overcomes the classic divide of the ASC and instead recognizes the growing need for cross-fertilization between political science generalists and area studies specialists. Resonating with the third key issue, Valbjørn highlights that the way in which sectarianism has been studied in the MENA has considerably evolved, leading, for instance, to systematic,

cross-case comparisons and the introduction of novel methodological approaches.

Situated in the field of IR, May Darwich's article turns to the topic of MENA alliance politics and offers a thoughtful overview over the evolution of related research since 2011. Strikingly, Darwich stresses that after 2011 the alliance research programme has not yielded tangible insights in terms of theory development; seen in this way, the Arab uprisings did not constitute a critical juncture for this sub-field of IR. In relation to the ASC, Darwich's contribution represents an attempt of the aforementioned cross-fertilization, of a 'dual exploration' combining insights from IR theory and MES in order to explore how both camps can constructively enrich each other. In this regard, Darwich engages with the topic of alliance cohesion and convincingly shows how the alliance politics of non-state armed groups such as Hamas and the Syrian Kurds pose a conceptual challenge to existing scholarship. Finally, she offers a brief, critical assessment of the ethics of 'desk research' in alliance studies.

Equally rooted in IR, Stephan Stetter's SI contribution advocates for a revisiting of the ASC by relying on theories of global modernity. Taking Halliday's (1996) distinction of analytic universalism and historic particularism as point of departure, Stetter argues that the post-2011 MENA justifies a re-adjustment of this formula. Hence, he identifies 2011 as a critical juncture insofar as it offers the chance to thoroughly revisit the ASC in response to both political developments and scholarly, theoretical innovations of the past decade. Accordingly, in terms of a rejuvenated debate about the relationship between disciplinary political science research in general, and IR in particular, on the one hand and area studies on the other, Stetter suggests distinguishing between 'analytic polycentrism' and 'historic entanglements' which can best be grasped drawing on insights from theories of global modernity. On this basis, Stetter introduces the concepts of emergence and evolution as well as differentiation and subjectivity in order to highlight the potential that theories of global modernity and world society can have for the understanding of Middle Eastern politics.

The concluding article by Marc Lynch offers comparative reflections on the SI as a whole. In terms of the importance of 2011, Lynch calls for more thoroughly differentiating between research fields for which the Arab uprisings signified a critical juncture, even a 'rupture', while for others 2011 might be better understood as a more modest 'inflection point'. In terms of the ASC, Lynch highlights a kind of transatlantic gap: whereas the ASC continues to be important for European scholars of MENA politics, it has lost significance in North America over the last decade. When it comes to field access in the MENA post-2011, Lynch discusses the effects of increased repression, the targeting of foreign researchers, and the travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, he innovatively stresses several areas to which MENA political

scientists should pay more attention to in the future: the epistemological questions of scholar's normative commitments and the adequate standpoint for analysis as well as thematic discussions around topics such as the 'wall of fear' or 'civil war memory'.

Notes

1. Contrary to other publications which use terms such as 'Arab spring', 'Arab revolts', 'thawra' (Arabic for 'revolution') or 'intifada' (Arabic for 'tremor' or 'shuddering'), we have opted for the relatively neutral term 'Arab uprisings' for this Special Issue. This will be done unless we aim to point to a specific aspect of the political dynamics in the MENA region in late 2010, early 2011 and their aftermath.
2. By no means, though, do we imply that field work is dispensable, but we deem it necessary to address this issue if the alternative is no empirical data at all.

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