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NARRATIVES AND OUTCOMES OF THE UPRISINGS
IN SYRIA AND BAHRAIN

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION
NARRATIVES AND OUTCOMES OF THE UPRISINGS
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The narratives deployed by the political elites and the opposition groups in Syria and Bahrain has undergone a process of evolution since the onset of the Arab Spring. The examination of the cases of Syria and Bahrain is useful from a methodological perspective, since it enables us to determining the nuances that come about from the manner in which the Arab Spring unfolded in the region. This dissertation attempts to unite a diverse range of elements to present a comprehensive analysis of the nature of revolutionary consciousness, the nature of Arab transnational collective action movements in an era of globalization, and the mechanisms governing the evolutions of protest rhetoric. This dissertation draws attention to the particular ways in which language and rhetoric are used on both sides of the struggle and the ways in which rhetoric changes in response to the expectation of an international audience.

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Chapter One

Introduction

This dissertation seeks to find out the manner in which the narratives involved in the context of the Syrian and Bahraini uprisings come to bear on the political outcomes generated by the protests deployed by the opposition groups in those two countries. This chapter begins by outlining the main research questions that will guide the dissertation as well as the historical and political background that gave rise to the protests that are currently taking place in Syria and Bahrain. There will also be a discussion of the main conceptual framework of this dissertation, paying attention to the differences between the narrative, discursive and rhetoric elements that stem from the examination of the protest movements in both countries. There will also be an analysis of the different theoretical perspectives to be included in the dissertation, including the comparative approaches to the theory of democratization and discursive institutionalism.

There will also be an exploration of the methodological approach to be undertaken, outlining the importance of process tracing method in order to find out the causal mechanisms involved in the deployment of the narrative that is framing the internal conflict in

Syria and Bahrain. There is also an outline of the sources to be used as well as a chapter outlining, containing information on each section of the dissertation.

Research questions

The main question of the dissertation is: How has the narrative of the Arab Spring developed and changed since 2011 on the part of both political elites and opposition in Syria and Bahrain? The dissertation to be undertaken out will be guided by four sub-questions:

- 1) To what extent was the Arab Spring in Syria and Bahrain caused by earlier uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen?
- 2) In what ways can the differences between the two uprisings facilitate an understanding of the potential development of the processes of political transformation that is currently taking place in the Middle East?
- 3) In an era in which social media has become important tool for social and political change, what can these uprisings teach us about how democratic, anti-authoritarian rhetoric has spread, and will continue spread, within the Arab world?
- 4) In what ways can the discursive elements of the uprisings in Syria and Bahrain help us to understand how the framing of the conflict has been posed as a sectarian conflagration on the part

of the political elites, and the democracy or social justice based dimension propagated by the protestors?

Background

The series of insurgencies that have since become known as the Arab Spring began with one momentous act of despair: the self-immolation of Tunisian fruit vendor Mohammad Bouazizi in December 2010. This event inspired uprisings in Tunisia and neighboring countries, all of them protesting the same human rights transgressions: unemployment, squalid health care and living conditions, a lack of opportunities for youth, and strict authoritarian systems that stifled the voice of the masses. The movements owe their momentum to the resentment of marginalized youth. This feeling of marginalization was entrenched by the lack of economic opportunities and the high level of repression exercised by the authoritarian style of regimes in the Middle East. Even though a growing number were able to attain higher education, employment opportunities were scarce for anyone other than a select few. Bouazizi's suicide in Tunisia would set off a chain of events that culminated in the ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali two months later. The uprising in Egypt, which began on January 25, 2011, culminated in the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. When his successor, Mohamed Mursi, failed

to enact the changes imagined by protestors, Egyptian demonstrations began anew. Perhaps inspired by these and other historic pushes for democracy, Bahrain organized its own protest on February 14, 2011, which was dubbed the “Day of Rage.”

The Arab Spring has achieved a variety of results in other nations that wanted to see political and economic transformation. It is important to highlight that many of these movements began to emerge as a result of economic grievances. However, they soon evolved into anti-government protests that aimed to install democracies. While Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya have succeeded in deposing their authoritarian style regimes, the new regimes have not become consolidated democracies. Syria’s uprising illuminated an equally tenuous line between unified revolution and sectarian conflict. Bahrain’s revolution appears to have subsided.

Conceptual Framework

To elucidate the main aspects related to the uprisings that have taken place in Syria and Bahrain, it is important to clarify some relevant conceptual and definitional stances. One of the most salient factors involved in the analysis of the subject matter of these investigations pertains to the differences that arise between the narrative, rhetoric and discursive aspects of the popular uprisings that

have taken place in Syria and Bahrain. A narrative is a way of describing a series of events, which may either be imaginary or real. The use of narrative denotes the presentation of a sequence of words or images with the purpose of projecting meaning upon a particular audience. The narrative aspects relates to the state of affairs that has unfolded in Syria and Bahrain are linked to the actual reporting of the events through the use of the written or verbal or audiovisual medium (Hauser, 1999: 84).

The use of rhetoric is meant to persuade a specific audience of a particular state of affairs. The rhetorical aspects of the uprisings in Syria and Bahrain are linked to the objectives attached to the narratives that inform the uprisings (Hauser, 1998: 86). Discourse represents the manner in which the different statements and signs are deployed during conversation or in the use of the written word. The discursive facet of the political challenges facing those two countries pertains to the dialectical intercourse that comes about as a result of the way in which the main protagonists of the uprisings communicate their objectives to the public and the manner in which these are recalibrated as a result of this interaction with the audience (Hauser, 1999: 88). It could be posited that in the Arab cultural mindset the lines between the narrative and rhetorical aspects of a particular

political process tends to be somewhat obfuscated.¹ This is because the political process in the Arab world has traditionally been directed from the top-down; a situation that allows little room for the discernment between the episodic and teleological aspects of the political process on the part of the public (Loader and Mercea, 2011: 759). In this context, the “episodic” aspect of the political process relates to the understanding of the one-off events that inform the narrative sphere. The “teleological” aspect of the political process concerns the specific demands for change that informs the narrative and rhetorical sphere.

These are relevant considerations for the purposes of analyzing the manner in which the concept of revolutionary narrative is employed by the political elites and the opposition forces in Syria and Bahrain. The use of narrative can be divided into revolutionary and non-revolutionary. A revolutionary narrative is one that uses words and images in order to overhaul the order of things. A non-revolutionary narrative uses words and images for the purposes of keeping the order of things. In addition, it is important to highlight that sectarianism is an important factor related to the way in which

¹ It should be noted that the term “Arab cultural mindset” (الذهنية الثقافية العربية) denotes a generalization that is useful in order to kickstart the debate on the narrative, rhetorical and discursive aspects of the Arab Spring and its implications for the uprisings that are taking place in Syria and Bahrain. This generalizable term has to be understood within the context of the great cultural, ethnic and religious diversity that exists in the “Arab world”.

both sides deploy their narrative, rhetoric and discursive instruments.² The former would tend to associate revolutionary narrative to the use of language that would lead to the disruption of the political status quo. It should be noted that language has been traditionally used by the ruling elite in order to frame the political discourse in a manner conducive to the entrenchment of their hegemonic position. As it transpires from a close examination of the works of Antonio Gramsci, the use of language can have an important hegemonic component that may result in the interpretation of revolutionary activity from either a negative or a positive stance through historical change (Gramsci, 1971)

The opposition force would be more inclined to look at the revolutionary narrative in the context of the utilization of language in order to create the basis for the politicization of society. This may be done for the purposes of establishing a new level of awareness among the citizenry, conducive to registering the dissatisfaction that arise from the injustices that may take place in society. The main source of change in political awareness has been the emergence of new forms of discourse as a result of the events of the Arab Spring. At the same time, it is important to remark that the conceptual and definitional

² Sectarianism, which will be discussed at length in chapter five, can be defined as the enhancement of religious identity as a tool geared towards the achievement of specific political, social and/or economic aims.

implications of the notion of the social media relate to the way in which instruments such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter are used in order to augment the flow of information between the members of the public in the Arab world.

The subject of my inquiry is the developing revolutionary narrative of the Arab Spring, as expressed in Syria and Bahrain: its origins, development, and effects. In order to measure the process of political change that took place as a result of the Arab Spring, I will examine the evolution of political discourse through the analysis of the deployment of narrative tools in outlets such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. I expect to find that protestors consciously employed a narrative of social protest that draws on previous protest movements from various locales and time periods—apartheid South Africa, the American Civil Rights movement, democratic transitions after the fracturing of the Soviet Union—with the explicit goal of appealing to an international audience through online media. I believe such a transnational, collaborative narrative of protest will be the standard discourse used in attempted democratization movements in the future. I do not yet know how sectarian conflict, if it is existed, influenced protestors' narratives, but the mechanism was likely

similar in Syria and Bahrain.³ A narrative is the objective interpretation applied to an event by interested actors, defining events within a historical perspective that emphasizes some social forces more than others and usually implies a value judgment.⁴ Understanding the changing narrative of the uprisings is of significant importance because it explains the outcomes that result from the actualization of the interests of the protestors and the government, respectively.⁵ The source of these interests lies in the acceleration of political change brought forward by the Arab Spring. It may grant some insight into the mechanisms that lead to popular uprisings, especially in the context of the 21st century Arab world, which is

³ The term “sectarian conflict”, as it relates to the uprising in Syria and Bahrain, is a very complex one. In the former case, it relates to divisions between Alawites and Sunnis and Arab and Kurds. In addition to this, Syria hosts a great number of Christians. In the case of Bahrain, the main dividing line is the Shi’ite-Sunni cleavage.

⁴ The definition of a narrative differs from the concept of rhetoric. It could be argued that rhetoric implies a higher form of narrative, geared towards achieving a particular political outcome. From the standpoint of the uprisings derived from the Arab Spring, the relevant differentiation to be made between narrative and rhetorical elements relates, in the case of the former, to the manner in which the both the Syrian and Bahraini governments and the people involved in the demands for social justice, outline their respective arguments. In this context, rhetorical elements are applied by both the Syrian and Bahraini governments and the populace, in order to actualize the maintenance of the status quo and/or to bring about a wider level of political transformation.

⁵ It is important to add that the concepts of narrative and rhetoric differ in a significant manner in the way that they are effectuated in the Arab world. It could be stated that these two discursive elements are applied in a different manner in Western locales. This is an aspect of particular importance in the case of the narrative aspects of the struggle, as it allows the publics of the Arab world to put forward their demands for social justice in a vehement manner. At the same time, the use of narrative techniques allows the political elites to defend their putative political legitimacy. In addition to this, it is important to note that the rise of the social media has brought forth the enhancement of the revolutionary consciousness in the Arab world, as measured by the flow of information circulating in outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

usually not the subject of social movement studies. In addition, it may also provide some insights into what an Islamic democracy might look like.

Contributions

The examination of the cases of Syria and Bahrain is useful from a methodological perspective, since it enables us to determine the nuances that come about from the manner in which the Arab Spring unfolded in the region. To begin with, the analysis of these two cases will facilitate the understanding of the reasons why the al-Asad and the Al Khalifa regimes have remained in power despite of the social unrest that has emerged in Syria and Bahrain. At the same time, the analysis of these two cases will also enable us to investigate the role of sectarianism in the events that have taken place in the context of Arab Spring, and their influence in these two cases.

The dissertation consists of an assemblage of questions and issues that will require further analysis. This can also be attributed to the open-ended nature of the struggle thus far. Because the uprisings in Syria especially are far from over, it is unlikely that any definitive conclusions will be made. However, I believe the analysis I provide will deliver a unique and necessary lens through which the conflict can be viewed. I chose Syria and Bahrain partially because of the

similarities and the differences in the revolutions that occurred in my two cases, and the point of departure being why other nations' resistance movements were able to achieve a preliminary set of goals just as quickly. Examine the two countries' histories of nonsectarian/sectarian narratives and places of interest in the perspective of international powers will also prove a productive background for the study of their evolving revolutionary rhetoric.

This dissertation attempts to unite a diverse range of elements to present a comprehensive analysis of the nature of revolutionary consciousness, the nature of Arab transnational collective action movements in an era of globalization, and the mechanisms governing the evolutions of protest rhetoric. This dissertation will also draw attention to the particular ways in which language and rhetoric are used on both sides of the struggle and the ways in which rhetoric changes in response to the expectation of an international audience. In addition , this work will outline the manner in which narrative elements have enabled the populace to put forward their demands in a manner that would bring about a change of the political system.

Moreover, this study will also show how the political elites of countries undergoing a process of political transformation use narrative discourse in order to entrench their legitimacy. It will locate the ways in which religious and class differences dictate the

parameters of a social struggle. It will highlight the ways in which authoritarian regimes learn and adapt to insurgents and the responses that protestors themselves adopt in response under the watchful eye of international media. Finally, this work will attempt to appraise the role of the military as well as the religious authorities in the context of the process of transformation going on in Syria and Bahrain in an integrated and cohesive manner. By connecting these elements and determining how they influence each other, I will present a diagnosis of the current conflict in the two nations and propose predictions for ways in which insights into these conflicts may generalize to other Arab uprisings or cross-culturally.

Theoretical frameworks

Political Process Theory

A useful model when analyzing the dynamics of a social movement as fluid and complex as the Arab Spring is the political process theory, of which Douglas McAdam is a prominent supporter. According to McAdam's conception, there are three fundamental components that, when combined, lead to an awakening of sorts and a subsequent mobilization of resources and personnel for the purposes of a unified aim.

The first, insurgent consciousness, occurs when particular members of a society, in this case the marginalized masses in North African and Middle Eastern states, express grievances towards a political system they believe to be unjust. When this group decides that its basic civil liberties are being infringed upon and that demands are warranted, the members of the group will organize. In order for the group to be effective and focused, it must ensure that it possesses efficient leadership and resources. This will dictate its organizational strength, its second component. Often the strength of a political movement will be enhanced by the recruitment of like-minded individuals. In other occasions, a pre-existing organization will send support with resources or personnel. Once it is determined that the existing social order is vulnerable to dissent, the members of the movement unite and attempt to enact a social change through praxis. This opportunity can arise due to several possible reasons, among them a diversity of political leadership or parties, sectarian conflict, or any other divisions among the elite class.

These three factors contribute to what McAdam deems a movement's cognitive liberation, the moment when its members realize the potential and its ability to take advantage of a political opportunity (McAdam, 1999). It has been argued that contingency plays a big role in determining the critical juncture at which political

transformation takes place. At some point the populace will not tolerate any more abuse of power on the part of the political leadership and will step forward in order to demand. The scholarly literature on the subject advances the notion that the emergence of “critical juncture” entails the appearance of a tipping point, which compels the population to mobilize for the purposes of exerting political change. (Capoccia and Keleman, 2007: 341).

In the case of Syria, this state of affairs came about as a result of the refusal of the al-Asad regime to grant further political rights to the opposition. Most importantly, the incident pertaining to the murder of Hamza Ali al-Khateeb, a young boy who was killed while under the custody of the Syrian government in May 2011. The international community also reflected the critical nature of this episode, as seen from a statement issued by Hillary Clinton, the U.S. Secretary of State:

“I can only hope that this child did not die in vain but that the Syrian government will end the brutality and begin a transition to real democracy...I think what that symbolizes for many Syrians is the total collapse of any effort by the Syrian government's to work with and listen to their own people” (Clinton, 2011).⁶

In the case of Bahrain, the tipping point originated in the

⁶ Dawn, Clinton, citing Syrian boy, sees 'total collapse' June 1, 2011 - www.dawn.com/news/633325/clinton-citing-syrian-boy-sees-total-collapse - Accessed on January 11, 2016

refusal of the Al Khalifa regime to grant additional rights to the Shi'ite population. This tipping point was eloquently manifested in the “Day of Rage”, in February 2011, when thousands of people took to the streets in order to claim for accelerating of political participatory. In the case of Syria, the international community also reflected the critical nature of this episode. This is demonstrated by the report compiled by the European Parliament:

“As Bahrain's existing state institutions do not adequately represent all Bahraini citizens, the institutions are currently in a deadlock situation and appear incapacitated to steer the country out of the political crisis and to build a sustainable system of governance for the country” (European Parliament, 2011: 4).⁷

It is important to note that the onset of this tipping points were brought forth by the events that had taken place in Egypt in the context of the Arab Spring.

Locating the political opportunity present in Syria and Bahrain respectively will be crucial to determining how political process theory can be used to elucidate the mechanics of the Arab Spring and how it is unique to our particular historical era. Throughout the Middle East, the opportunities available did not precipitate a political uprising in a way predicted by the political process theory. For

⁷ European Parliament - Down to the wire in Bahrain: Last chance for real political reform, December 2011- [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/briefing_note/join/2012/491449/EXPO-AFET_SP\(2012\)491449_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/briefing_note/join/2012/491449/EXPO-AFET_SP(2012)491449_EN.pdf) - Accessed on January 6, 2016

example, there was no weakening in the military or a change in leadership to provoke antigovernment factions to unite and exploit that weakness. Instead, the tools for mobilization were used by those elements that were completely outside politically administrative boundaries, mostly young people on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook (Goldstone, 2001: 139).

These individuals mobilized largely through online technology such as Twitter, exchanging opinion and sharing information and images not meant to be seen, such as videos depicting military forces engaging in human rights transgressions. Online technology also allowed demonstrators in different countries to witness each other's actions, giving rise to a common rallying cry: "Ash-shab yurid isqat an-nizam," or "The people want the downfall of the regime," a slogan that was seen first in Tunisia, followed quickly by Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, and Syria.

Bahraini individuals mobilized largely the collective drive towards democracy. Indeed, the Al Khalifa regime has made a gradual attempt to introduce elements of democratization, as seen in the establishment of constitutional arrangements that have led to the creation of a parliamentary system. In addition, the Bahraini government has not been able to prevent the emergence of a civil

society, whose main aim is to expand the political and social rights given to the Shi'ite population. Thus, the 2011 uprising was not particularly new. Bahrain has gradually adopted more democratic elements in its system of government. The intensity of popular support behind the new wave of protests, however, far exceeded that of past movements. Syria, on the other hand, has had a much less potent history of political protest. The coming to power of Bashar al-Asad in 2000 provided the regime with a great opportunity to introduce political reforms. However, the initial attempts to democratize the political system were reversed by the regime; an aspect that contributed to the advent of social unrest in 2011. The al-Asad regime has consistently denied the Syrian people a wider level of democratization.

There are, as we can see, some differences between the two cases; which makes this comparative study valuable in terms of the methodology used in order to appraise the implications of the Arab Spring . Yet the Arab Spring uprisings swept through both countries using many of the same strategies and slogans. Thus, the revolutions of the Arab Spring with their particular character and unprecedented mass participation became possible through conscious re-framing of strategic opportunities, but they took remarkably different shapes as they unfolded, yielding similar diverging results. The temporally and

geographically close movements offer a valuable testing ground for the application of the political process approach, and can be perhaps better understood through the lens of a complex diffusion of opportunities.

McAdam makes an astute observation that provides a foundation for analysis of the Arab Spring: should the numerous protests be considered a single movement or should they be considered offshoots distinct from their predecessor? How did the formation, progress, and outcome of earlier protests shape the formation, progress, and outcome of later protests? McAdam writes: “My own suspicion is that spin-off movements owe less to expanding political opportunities than to complex diffusion processes by which the ideational, tactical, and organizational lessons of the early rises are made available to subsequent challengers. But only through systematic empirical work will be able test this impressionistic hunch” (McAdam, 1999: 105). Unlike many case studies that have served as testing grounds for political process theory, the Arab Spring comprises a series of variations of similar conflicts occurring in virtually the same temporal plane.

These variations are all concerned with re-framing weaknesses/ opportunities within the political order for the populace as a whole, as

opposed to a very select group of antigovernment entities. As much as these variations share a common scope and purpose, they also feature important differences (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2004: 89). For example, the incumbent leader of Syria attempted to retrain the protests using rhetoric to rearticulate it as sectarian issues and using fears of minorities in the population of a dangerous extremist government that would replace the incumbent regime. In the case of Syria, the government engaged in the active repression of the opposition groups that demanded change, using violence as a method to stifle dissent.

It should be noted that the Syrian situation constitutes a special case in the context of the events that took place as a result of the onset of the Arab Spring. The special nature of the case is based on the fact that the al-Asad regime has been able to enjoy the support of powerful actors in the international stage, such as Iran and Russia. Accordingly, the al-Asad regime has been able to remain in power against all odds. As Tarrow (1998) writes, these “cultural frames” can themselves become objects of contention as warring sides attempt to control the narrative of the protest.⁸ In addition, there are relational implications regarding the deployment of contentious politics that are

⁸ Cultural frames is meant the different socio-cultural values that inform the way in which the process of political transformation.

useful in order to determine the way that protest movements evolve over time (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2004: 107).

Political process theory is intimately linked to social movements theory. The study of social movements purports to ascertain the reasons why collective mobilization takes place, the manner in which it comes about as well as the cultural, political and social implications of this phenomenon. In its original conception, social movements theory highlighted the importance of this theoretical approach in the context of the cathartic implications of the process of collective mobilization (Tilly, 2007: 78).

This theoretical approach posits that collective mobilization comes about as a result of the sense of inequality felt by a particular social group towards another in terms of the exclusionary amount of political and/or economic power held by the latter (Tilly, 2007: 82). This perspective postulates that cost/benefit calculations are used by individuals in order to gauge whether joining the spectrum of social protest maximizes their interest (Della Porta and Reiter in Della Porta and Reiter (eds.) 1998: 66). The mobilization of social forces tends to occur, according to this theoretical dimension, in circumstances that are propitious in order to advance a particular cause (Della Porta and Reiter in Della Porta and Reiter (eds.) 1998: 66). The level of

political opportunity increases in equal proportion to the concessions granted to the social group. In addition to this, opportunities may increase when the disenfranchised social group is allowed to participate in the decision-making process or because of the instability of the political force that had previously oppose the cause embraced by the aggrieved outfit (Tarrow, 1998: 20).

Democratization Theory

Democratization theory is another important perspective that needs to be incorporated into the discussion. Democratization theory deals with the manner in which countries ruled by authoritarian regimes make their gradual transition to a more democratic system of government. It is important to remark that democratization has effects on whether countries choose to adopt a bellicose attitude towards other countries (Tilly, 2007: 110). It has been stated that countries that embrace the process of democratization are less prone to engage in warfare against its neighbors or against its own population (Tilly, 2007: 115). Nevertheless, some countries undergoing the process of democratization do tend to experience some form of internal violence. This can be seen in the manner in which the regimes in Syria and Bahrain have dealt with the push for a more a responsive type of government generated by the Arab Spring. When pressed for political

reform, the regime in Syria chose to confront the demonstrators through the use of force.

In addition, Democratization is affected by causal factors that incorporate social, political and economic perspectives. For example, it has been argued that the level of economic development attained by a particular country has a tremendous influence on its chances of becoming a democracy (Tilly, 2007: 56). Furthermore, the older the history of democratic rule of a particular nation, the greater the chances of institutionalizing a system of government based on the participation of the masses on the political process (Welzel, 2013: 36). In other words, this means that countries that have a prior history of democratization tend to have a much larger measure of success in bringing about a democratic system of government. This can be seen in the manner in which the case of Bahrain differs from the situation that has unfolded in Syria since the entrenchment of al-Asad regime.

It is worth mentioning that democratization theory also highlights the importance of the existence of a civil society in order to consolidate the transition towards democratic rule (Dahl, 1972: 61). Civil society is a concept that describes the manner in which the citizenry mobilizes in order to establish non-governmental organizations and institutions capable of actualizing the needs and

interests of the citizenry (Tocqueville, 2003: 40).

The presence of non-governmental organizations and a high degree of political and social activism is an important precursor to democratic rule. Indeed, the existence of a civil society indicates that the hierarchical ontology of the state has been eroded to the point that the mechanisms of power sharing that are necessary for the development of a democratic system of government (Dahl, 1972: 69).

Comparative-Historical Model

The comparative-historical model is an important element of democratization theory. One of the most salient aspects of the model of democratization is the way in which the process of transition to a more responsive type of government varies according to the historical circumstances that inform the evolution towards a democratic system of government (Levitsky and Way, 2010: 56). In this context, it is important to underscore the fact that the waves of democratization that took place in different parts of the world generated different versions of democracy. For example, the first two waves of democratization that took place in Europe produced system of government that were rooted in the democratic tradition (Levitsky and Way, 2010: 59).

This is because first-wave democratizing countries such as Germany and Italy had a prior experience of democratic rule. In addition, second-wave democratizing nations such as Greece, Portugal and Spain consolidated a democratic system of government due to the influence of the European Economic Community on the development of their political set-up (Mahoney in Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (eds.), 2003: 112). Furthermore, the end of the Cold War produced a number of important changes in regards to the influence of extremist ideologies on the political systems of the countries behind the Iron Curtain (Kitschelt, 1993). This gave rise to the democratization of countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. It is nonetheless important to underline that these countries also had a prior tradition of democratic rule (Mahoney in Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (eds.), 2003: 115).

From this standpoint, it is relevant to highlight that the political evolution of the Syrian and Bahraini regime have arisen as a result of the historical circumstances of the phenomenon known as the Arab Spring. In this context, it is possible to detect significant differences in the way that both regimes reacted to the changes in the status quo. While the al-Asad regime refused to incorporate the opposition forces into the system of government, the Bahraini government took the opportunity to create the basis for a more democratized political

environment.

The notion of pluralism attached to some of the definitions of democracy are not indicative of the way in which countries move towards a more participatory system of government (Gunther, Montero and Botella, 2004: 46). In the context of the uprisings that have taken place in Syria and Bahrain is that there is a range of concessions that is unfolding between in the context of the political interaction between the opposition groups and the governing elite. In the former case, the regime led by Bashar al-Asad refused to take into consideration the demands made by the opposition groups, which led to the recrudescence of the internecine conflict taking place in that country. In the case of Bahrain, it is worth mentioning that there has been a gradual and consistent attempt at introducing elements of democratization in the political system.

The examination of these approaches to the theory of democratization is of paramount importance in order to understand the political evolution of the Syrian and Bahraini regimes. To be sure, the study to be undertaken parries the push and pull that is taking place between the political elites and the opposition forces in the process that is unfolding in Syria and Bahrain regarding the reform of the system of government.

The al-Asad regime has engaged in the systematic suppression of all forms of opposition. Contrary, the Al Khalifa regime has engaged in negotiations with the opposition groups. It would appear that in political systems that have a longer history of concession granting by the governing elite are much more adept at accommodating the demands of opposition groups at times of crisis (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 61).

Discursive institutionalism

The theory of discursive institutionalism poses the importance of substantive ideas in the framework of political action that takes places in a particular country (Schmidt, 2011: 34). This also involves a wide array of rhetorical elements that may be influencing the political system at any given time; especially through the interaction of the different elements coexisting in a particular polity (Schmidt, 2010: 45).

The communicational and deliberative aspects of the discursive process are also factors that ought to be reckoned with in order to fully appraise the way in which political transformation may be taken place (Schmidt in Fischer and Forester (eds.), 2011: 50). The narrative environment affecting the process of political transformation will be responsible for determining which party prevails in the push and pull between the political elite and the opposition forces in the quest for

revamping the order of things (Schmidt in Fischer and Forester (eds.), 2011: 54). This situation can be seen in eloquent terms in the cases of Syria and Bahrain, where the narratives of the Arab Spring, based on the demands for a system of government that will be responsive to the demands of the people. This theoretical approach, which has been concocted by Schmidt, constitutes a relatively novel approach to the study of the subject matter. In this context, it is worth mentioning that this analytical framework will not be used in an extensive manner throughout the work.

It is worth adding Discursive Institutionalism is indicative of a dialectical relationship between the public and the ruling elite. This is an aspect that relates to the idea of discourse as an instrument that provides relevant social actors with the opportunity to portray their ideas (Schmidt in Fischer and Forester (eds.), 2011: 58). In addition, there appears to be two ways in which discursive institutionalism is configured. To begin with, discourse is shaped by the actors involved in the coordination of policy as well as in the process of conveying it to the public.

From this standpoint, it is possible to argue that discursive institutionalism does not constitute a linear process (Schmidt in Fischer and Forester (eds.), 2011: 60). However, it is important to

point out that there always seems to be a tension between the state forces and the opposition that makes linearity a problem. Discursive institutionalism represents a dialectical form of attaining political legitimacy, involving members of the governing elite as well as the members of the citizenry.

Methodology: Process Tracing Method

The dissertation will analyze the way in which process tracing facilitates the exploration of the narratives that are dictating the outcome of the uprisings in Syria and Bahrain. Process tracing has been defined as a within-case analytical tool that is used in order to make deductions about causal mechanisms and intervening variables (such as events, values and processes) in social processes.⁹ Hence, the process tracing method identifies the way in which a cause produces an effect in periods of social transformation (Beach and Pedersen, 2013: 105).

It is worth noting that process tracing method is a linear method. Instead, it enables researchers to trace complicated and divergent narratives such as the ones that relate to the process of

⁹ In the context of this work, this entails the examination of the different narrative and rhetorical elements employed in the discourse deployed by the political elites in Syria and Bahrain and those used by the populace in order to bring about a wider level of political transformation.

political transformation that is unfolding in Syria and Bahrain through mechanisms such as Casual Process Observation (CPO). This will allow for an effective tracing of the different causal mechanisms involved in the narrative tools used by the political elite and the opposition groups (Beck, 2010: 499). This will be done by identifying the causal mechanisms that led to the initial outbreak of the protests in Syria and Bahrain and the evolution of their discourse as the Arab Spring unfolded in the region (Beach and Pedersen, 2013: 107).

The dissertation will use the process tracing method by looking at the causal mechanism brought to bear in the protests that took place in Syria and Bahrain by the diffusion of the events that took place in the context of the Arab Spring. In addition, the process tracing method examines the causal mechanism that stems from the spread of anti-authoritarian opinion in the Middle East as a result of the Arab Spring as well as the causal mechanism that arises from the way in which the narrative, rhetoric and discursive elements are framed by the political elite and the opposition groups.

It is important to point out that the problems associated with the linear approach that is part and parcel of the process tracing method can be overcome by incorporating the different perspectives into the narratives to be identified during the CPO process. This method will

work by exercising a constant monitoring of the narrative used in the context of the conflict that is taking place in Syria and Bahrain, for the purposes of determining the causality between narrative and episodic phenomena.

It is worth mentioning that process tracing dedicates itself to the discovery of causal mechanisms, which should be portable concepts. Portability, in this case, is defined as the ability to identify relationships between conditions and outcomes that can also be applied to other contexts (Mahoney, 2000: 507). After these variables are identified, there are at least two difficult questions to answer attempting to conduct a study: when the narrative should begin, or the original critical juncture that set a path-dependent process in place and when it should end (Collier and Collier, 1991: 100). In this case, the critical juncture appears to be Bouzazi's self immolation and the tide of protest that ensued. This was a seemingly insignificant event that had the unforeseeable effect of setting uprisings in motion across the Arab world. The interactions of the original contingent event must be studied in light of the social environment within countries because timing is important here, as well: why did Egypt erupt into mass collective action before Bahrain and Syria? There are several variables one can isolate when constructing a comprehensive comparison between cases. For instance, geopolitical issues and

concerns regarding the socio-economic aspects of the Arab Spring as they unfolded in Syria and Bahrain are among the different issues to be assessed in order to shed light on the outcome that unfolded as a result of the development of certain narratives on the part of the protestors and the government respectively.

It is important to underscore the fact that Syria and Bahrain both saw the exploitation of a sectarian narrative by the incumbent regimes to varying degrees of success. Both uprisings occurred slightly later within the initial Arab Spring chronology and would therefore likely demonstrate some evidence of adaptation. The view of the Arab Spring as a transnational phenomenon, employing a common rhetoric and frames, or “schemata of interpretation”, should be more visible by tracing the narratives that are informing the uprisings in Syria and Bahrain (Goffman, 1974: 109). Focusing on the decision making of particular actors is important because it is likely that behavior at the micro-level determined the disseminating effects on rhetoric. Examples of behavior at micro-level includes the individual use of social media and/or sudden acts of disobedience, such as the one seen in Tunisia with the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi.

At the same time, key protest leaders played an instrumental role in consciously adapting the slogans of other movements in order

to accomplish specific political purposes. The focus on the micro-level also accounts for how differences in cause and context can create differences in outcomes. In the realm of spontaneous and improvised conflicts such as the Arab Spring, when the effectiveness of a resistance effort depends largely on the effectiveness of communication, behavior becomes one of the most crucial elements for study (Aissa, 2012: 31).

The research to be undertaken will draw on the tools of content and discourse analysis (as seen in the portrayal of slogans and imagery) in order to trace the development of interpretative frames and their changes as protestors and government forces interact and engage in feedback loops. Herrera and Braumoeller are right to point out that, “the analysis of subjectivity and mediation is one of the primary goals of discourse analysis, and is embodied in the attention to context” (Herrera and Braumoeller, 2004: 16). A context-situated approach to the study of the Arab Spring phenomenon, as manifested in Syria and Bahrain will be used in order to assess the development of a revolutionary narrative that borrowed repertoires of action and slogans from the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings.

Sources

In regards to the sources to be used, it is important to underline

that there will be an equal amount of sources from all the parties that have been taking place in the Syrian and Bahraini uprisings. For example, use will be made of the weekly official statements that released by the Syrian and Bahraini regimes. In addition, extensive use will be made of the literature produced by the most effective opposition groups in Syria and Bahrain such as the Syrian Coalition and al-Wifaq, respectively. The extensive use of this type of literature includes the analysis of articles from Arabic language newspapers such as al-Hayat and Asharq al-Awsat, official government reports, and imagery; e.g. YouTube audiovisual material and photographs. In addition, social media has given a platform to endless social and political voices. They are innumerable first-hand accounts of the Arab Spring uprisings in the form cell-phone videos, blogs, and Twitter conversations. These research materials will prove indispensable to my research. In addition, I intend to make use of several secondary and primary sources of the literature on the Arab Spring published in Arabic. This is an aspect of particular importance to understand the full implications of the Arab Spring and its influence on the political transformation of Syria and Bahrain.

The use of online sources in the Arabic language will be carried out in accordance with the need to process and evaluate the most up-to-date information in an unbiased manner. This dissertation will

make extensive use of newspaper articles from the Arab world, statements by relevant actors, use of imagery and slogans from the social media as well as government reports. This primary sources will be analyzed in conjunction with the literature related to the theoretical perspectives to be examined as part of the research as well as the secondary sources related to the themes that emerge from the primary data.

In regards to the use of sources, it can be expected that some difficulties may arise as a result of the shifting and continuing nature of protests, especially in Syria that remains in a state of civil war. In the case of Bahrain, reliable data is difficult to obtain due to the sensitive nature of the events. However, it must be clarified that these are events that have either just unfolded or are still in the process of unfolding, the government documents are still not declassified and most researchers have to rely on news papers reports.

Chapter Outline

Chapter two, the investigations pertaining to the second chapter of the dissertation correlates to the subject matter of the first sub-question. This sub-question revolves around the elucidation of the manner in which the uprisings that took place in the context of the Arab Spring influenced the process of political transformation that is

currently impacting on Syria and Bahrain. In order to investigate the link between the overall phenomenon of the Arab Spring and the upheavals that are currently unfolding in Syria and Bahrain, there will be a through examination of the social, political and economic circumstances that led to the erosion of power of the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East. At the same time, this chapter will also elaborate on the similarities between the demands posed by the demonstrators in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt and those outlined by the groups that are currently destabilizing the status quo in Syria and Bahrain. In this context, there will also be a comprehensive examination of the narratives that are being utilized by the parties involved in the demonstrations to ascertain to what extent are the factors present in the phenomenon known as the Arab Spring linked to the outbreak of civil disorder in Syria and Bahrain. From this standpoint, it must be specified that there will be a full analysis of the theoretical and empirical factors involved in the phenomenon known as the Arab Spring and those that are currently impacting on the political transformation that is taking place in Syria and Bahrain.

Chapter three will focus on the ways in which the differences between the two uprisings facilitate an understanding of the potential development of the processes of political transformation that is currently unfolding in the Middle East. In this context, following

Mahoney and Ruschemeyer, there will be an analysis undertaken by using a comparative historical model, assessing the differences and similarities that arise from each case. By focusing on the particularities of the two uprisings, it is expected that a sound explanatory framework will be constructed in order to understand the overall process of political awakening that is taking place in the Middle East. In this context, there will be a theoretical and empirical linkage between the political and social trends that took place in Syria and Bahrain in the prelude to the events that took place in 2011. Moreover, this chapter will underline the main differences pertaining to the Syria and Bahrain cases. On the one hand, there will be an exploration in which the Syrian regime led by Bashar al-Asad contributed to engendering the circumstances that led to the upheavals that impacted upon the country since 2011 by failing to implement a series of reforms in the political system of the nation. At the same time, this chapter will also explore the intricacies involved in the process of top down political reform introduced by the governing elite and the reasons why it failed to avert the upheavals that took place. In addition, this chapter will argue that the determination of the differences between the cases of Syria and Bahrain enables us to ascertain the level of resilience of the status quo and the possibilities for transformation. By examining the differences between the two

cases, this chapter will contribute to outline a workable explanatory framework in order to understand the factors that have brought about the political transformation of the region in the aftermath of the phenomenon known as the Arab Spring.

Chapter four will investigate the way in which democratic, anti-authoritarian policies rhetoric has spread across the Middle East as a result of the technological tools available in the age of globalization; most particularly, the social media. This chapter will analyze the extent to which this rhetoric is influenced by the relationship between religious faith and class divisions in the context of the dynamics of the protests in Syria and Bahrain as well as the responses deployed by the respective governments. The concept of sectarianism will therefore be explained according to a criterion that links the deployment of religious identity to the attainment of some palpable political goals by the groups involved in the confrontation with the Syrian and Bahraini governments respectively. To be sure, the Shi'ite-Sunni divide has significant implications for understanding the genesis and evolution of the conflict. The Arab Spring conflicts have sparked a resurgence of sectarianism, which has exacerbated since the initial uprisings in 2011.

At the same time, the socio-economic pressure derived from the

age of globalization has also resulted in the inability of the Syrian and Bahraini governments to respond to the needs of the population, as both regimes failed to embark on a full process of social, economic and political modernization. This chapter will demonstrate that these factors are ultimately responsible for the spread of anti-authoritarian sentiment in the Middle East. In this chapter, there will also be an examination of the way in which technological advances have propitiated the spread of the ideas that gave rise to the furtherance of the process of democratization that took place in Syria and Bahrain. From this standpoint, there will be an analysis of the manner in which the social media has eroded the chances of the Arab regimes to entrench themselves in power. This chapter seeks to elucidate how the social media and the ubiquitous presence of satellite television and rapid telecommunications may become factors of destabilization for the authoritarian regime. In this context, there will be a comparative analysis between the events taking place in Syria and Bahrain and the trends unfolding in the Middle East at large; autocratic regime in the case of Syria and monarchial regime in the case of Bahrain.

Chapter five, in accordance with the fourth sub-question, examines the manner in which the discursive elements of the uprisings in Syria and Bahrain explicate how the framing of the conflict has been posed as a sectarian conflagration on the part of the political

elites, and the democracy or social justice based dimension propagated by the protestors. This chapter will also show the evolution of discourse that informs the actions of both the regimes and the protestors as they adapted to the change of circumstances surrounding the uprising. This section will highlight the ways in which regimes adapted to the insurgency and the responses that the protestors themselves adopt in response to the elements of repression deployed by the government authorities.

In order to do so, a thorough examination will be carried out for the purposes of determining the way in which language aided the process of repressive framing on the part of the authorities and the responses deployed by the protestors. In this chapter, there will be a comparative examination of the difference in the approach by the Syrian and Bahraini regimes have utilized narrative elements in order to consolidate a particular status quo in those countries. At the same time, there will be an analysis of the manner in which this narrative interacts with the discourse employed by the social elements that demanded the political transformation of Syria and Bahrain respectively.

Chapter six will summarize the findings of the work and put forward some general conclusions concerning the way in which the

Syrian and Bahraini uprisings have been framed by the political elite and the way in which the protestors challenged that narrative, placing emphasis on the significance of the extension of social rights to the population angered by the prolongation of authoritarian policies. By connecting these elements and determining how they influence each other, a series of predictions will be made in order to determine the manner in which these uprisings may facilitate an understanding of other internecine conflicts taking place across the Arab world.

Chapter Two

The diffusion of the events of the Arab Spring and its influence on the civil uprisings in Syria and Bahrain

Introduction

The main question to be asked in this chapter is: to what extent was the Arab Spring in Syria and Bahrain caused by earlier uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen? The Arab Spring has been described as an unprecedented social upheaval that swept through the Arab world, challenging all previous assumptions made about the political future of the region (Aissa, 2012: 15). The Arab Spring was motivated by the feelings of anger experienced by the young populations of the Arab world, in regards to the opportunities for social and economic improvement (King, 2007: 433). To be sure, there was an erosion of the political legitimacy enjoyed by the regimes that was influential in toppling the authoritarian administrations in Tunisia and Egypt. The social protests that led to the Arab Spring emerged as the embodiment of the collective will to establish the foundations of more responsive government institutions (Bellin, 2012: 127; Shabib, 2011; Sarah, 2012).

The second chapter of the dissertation seeks to ascertain the manner in which the uprisings that took place in the context of the Arab Spring influenced the process of political transformation that is currently

impacting on Syria and Bahrain. To investigate the link between the overall phenomenon of the Arab Spring and the upheavals that are currently unfolding in Syria and Bahrain, there will be a thorough examination of the social, political and economic circumstances that propagated the diffusion of the discontent, leading to the erosion of power of the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East.

Diffusion is defined as a process by which a social groups gets to be influenced by political, social and/or economic transformations taking place at a relatively distant locale (Della Porta and Reiter in Della Porta and Reiter (eds.) 1998: 70). For our purposes, this state of affairs entails that the political events that take place in one location will influence the course of political events in another geographical locality. The definition of diffusion to be applied in the assessment of the revolutionary upheavals taking place in Syria and Bahrain states that collective groups tend to borrow institutional tools and belief systems from other cultures in order to bring about political change (Della Porta and Reiter in Della Porta and Reiter (eds.) 1998: 71).

It is important to underline the fact that the process of diffusion is facilitated by the specific historical context that informs the social unrest that is taking place in Syria and Bahrain. It could be argued that the circumstances that inform the diffusion of the values of the Arab Spring enable the possibility of political transformation in Bahrain. This

is because of the history of concessions given to the populace by the al-Kalifa regime in the shape promises of political reforms. The element of concessions seems to be lacking in the case of Syria (Shabib, 2011).

In recent years, there has been a widespread phenomenon of “interactive diffusion,” due to the rise of transnational civil society (Strang and Soule, 1998: 265). This means that the social and political elements that inform the rise of a social movement in one area of the world is bound to make an impact on a social movement emerging in another part of the world. There is, in this context, a prevalence of diffusion of collective phenomenon that has informed the events that have taken place in the Middle East since 2011 (Della Porta and Reiter in Della Porta and Reiter (eds.) 1998: 76).

The diffusion of an anti-authoritarian framework of action was responsible for instigating the revolt against the authoritarian regimes of the Arab world in various geographical locales of the Middle East (Sarah, 2012). This diffusion of the narratives that underpinned the social unrest taking place in Syria and Bahrain were facilitated by the mobilization of collective groups through the use of technology and a narrative that underpinned the broadcasting of political and social grievances across the region (Shabib, 2011).

The definitional aspects of the concept of diffusion outlined above will be used to assess the manner in which the instrumental and

conceptual elements deployed by the revolutionary elements in Syria and Bahrain contributed to the transformation of the political environment in those countries. In any case, it is important to highlight that each case has its own form of structural change. In addition, the mechanism of diffusion varies from country to country. Furthermore, it should also be noted that diffusion is a complicated terms, which covers political, economic, social and cultural/physiological aspects that need to be taken into consideration in conjunction in order to avoid a generalizing error.

At the same time, this chapter will also elaborate on the differences and similarities between the demands posed by the demonstrators in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt and those outlined by the groups that are currently destabilizing the status quo in Syria and Bahrain. In this context, there will also be a comprehensive examination of the narratives that are being utilized by the parties involved in the demonstrations in order to ascertain to what extent are the factors present in the phenomenon known as the Arab Spring linked to the breakout of civil disorder in Syria and Bahrain. From this standpoint, it must be specified that there will be a full analysis of the theoretical and empirical factors involved in the phenomenon known as the Arab Spring and those that are currently impacting on the political transformation that is taking place in Syria and Bahrain.

The erosion of the power of authoritarian style regimes in the Middle East as a result of the Arab Spring

The wave of demonstrations that took place in the Arab world beginning in December 2010 erupted in Tunisia as a result of the events surrounding the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a market vendor who had his cart and produce confiscated after having a dispute with the police. After the local authorities refused to see him, Bouazizi burnt himself alive, spurring a flurry of protests against the Tunisian government (Nepstad, 2013: 337; Deeb, 2013: 14). It is worth mentioning that the authoritarian policies led by President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, had ruled the nation for over two decades, had imposed a system of government based on force and the creation of a lively investment environment for foreign capital (Anderson, 2011: 5; Ghubash, 2010: 102).

The authoritarian policies that managed to create a high level of economic growth (benefitting a small percentage of the population) at the expense of social inequality. In addition, the level of political force kept increasing as the economic disparities widened. From this standpoint, it could be argued that the dissatisfaction that gave rise to the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia spread to other Arab countries affected by the same type of authoritarian style regimes. Social mobilization was carried out through the use of the social media and the political

instrument of social mobilization. As we can see, there was a diffusion of the social and political values that informed the events of the Jasmine Revolution to other locales of the Middle East (Nepstad, 2013: 339).

The success of the Tunisian revolution in changing the foundations of the authoritarian system of government provided other publics in the Middle East with the knowledge that a wide level of mobilization would result in the onset of political change (Shehata, 2011: 27). The Jasmine Revolution paved the way for the protests that took place in Egypt, having its epicenter in Tahrir Square, Cairo. The events that unfolded in Tunisia emboldened the Egyptian people to take to the streets for the purposes of demanding the immediate fall of the regime led by Hosni Mubarak (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011: 1344).

It is important to underline the fact that the events that unfolded in Egypt and Tunisia responded to the social transformation that took place in the Arab world (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011: 1347). The process of social transformation entailed the revival of politicized religious thinking and the establishment of a collective consciousness capable of voicing out grievances pertaining to the political and economic sphere (Shehata, 2011: 31). At the same time, it is possible to argue that the protests that took place in the Arab world were also informed by secularist thinking, as seen in the willingness by the younger segment of the population to bring about a modicum of freedom and democracy to

their countries (Shehata, 2011: 33). The age of globalization resulted in a broader connectivity between the young populations of the Middle Eastern countries with the wider world and the diffusion of the values of freedom and democracy (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011: 1350).

In addition, the greater economic inequalities that resulted from the opening of Middle East to foreign investment and the adoption of the neoliberal tenets imposed by Western financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank were responsible for creating severe economic inequalities (El Azzazzi and Rashed, 2001: 22).

The Mubarak regime chose to confront the demonstrators by deploying a effective apparatus geared towards breaking the will of the Egyptian people (Anderson, 2011: 6). At the same time, the Mubarak regime also resorted to efforts for the purposes of regaining a modicum of legitimacy and instilling fear among the populace. These efforts included television broadcasts as well as a series of announcements made on newspapers close to the government led by Mubarak. Furthermore, the Bahraini state television network has been used as an element of medium of communication in order to reassure the population about the good intentions of the Al Khalifa regime.¹⁰ As the force exercised against the

¹⁰ The Atlantic, The Anti al-Jazeera: Bahrain's Notorious State Run TV Chanel, April 19, 2011 - www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/04/the-anti-al-jazeera-bahrains-notorious-state-run-tv-channel/237462/ - Accessed on January 6, 2016

people increased, the Egyptian armed forces broke off relations with the Mubarak regime, compelling the incumbent president to step down. In addition, the role of the United States was of paramount importance in order to impel the resignation of Mubarak (Shehata, 2011: 33).

Arab and Western academics failed to predict the upheavals that swept through the Middle East since December 2010. In spite of the social, political and economic problems that affected the region, there was a great deal of consensus regarding the resilience of the authoritarian system of government (El Azzazzi and Rashed, 2001: 25).

The resilience of the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East had been proven by the fact that they had survived the different waves of democratization that affected other parts of the world (Gause, 2011: 83). Surviving the different waves of democratization means that they were able to retain power in spite of the geopolitical pressure brought forward by the adoption of democracy in other parts of the world (Gause, 2011: 86). The focus given to the apparent stability of the authoritarian style of regimes resulted in the underestimation of the underlying forces of change in the Middle East (Noueihed and Warren, 2012: 61). From this standpoint, it could be posited that the historical context that informs the social unrest that has been generated in Syria and Bahrain is important for the purposes of understanding the possibility of political transformation in those two countries (Almufleh, 2014). Bringing about a

modicum of democratization seems to be more feasible in a country like Bahrain, where there is a longer history of political and economic concessions to the wider public. In the case of Syria, there is little precedent in order to back up the idea that the al-Asad regime would be willing to bring about a wider scope of political concessions (Saleh, 2012).

To understand the reasons behind the onset of the Arab Spring, it is incumbent to assess the different global, regional and domestic factors that explain the uprisings that affected the different Middle Eastern countries (Pacznyska, 2013: 217; Abu Dahir, 2013; Abu Shagara, 2014). One of the ways in which the phenomenon of the Arab Spring has been interpreted by Western and Arab analysts is centered on the notion that the process of political change that began in December 2010 resulted in the reform of the systems of government of the different Middle Eastern countries, rather than the establishment of democracies (Pacznyska, 2013: 219; Abu Dahir, 2013; Abu Shagara, 2014).

The justification for the notion that the Arab world underwent a bout of political reform instead of revolutionary activity can be seen in an eloquent manner in the case of Egypt. This country transitioned from an authoritarian policies of government under Hosni Mubarak to the democracy headed by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in order to prevent the Islamization of the country at the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood

(Noueihed and Warren, 2012: 65). To be sure, one may argue that the el-Sisi government reversed some of the non-democratic policies of the Mubarak regime but it still exercises a relatively level of non-democratic policies on the Egyptian population. From this perspective, it is possible to argue that the events that took place during the Arab Spring did not lead to the onset of democratization in the Middle East.

It is important to remark that the events of the Arab Spring were received with great hope in the Western world. President Obama referred to the process of political transformation taking place in the Middle East in the following manner:

“For six months, we have witnessed an extraordinary change taking place in the Middle East and North Africa. Square by square, town by town, country by country, the people have risen up to demand their basic human rights. Two leaders have stepped aside. More may follow. And though these countries may be a great distance from our shores, we know that our own future is bound to this region by the forces of economics and security, by history and by faith” (Obama, 2011).¹¹

Furthermore, comparing the onset of the Arab Spring to the Islamic Golden Age (between the eighth and the thirteenth centuries) Alain Juppé, the French foreign minister, expressed his hopes for the transition of the Arab world into the democratic system of government:

¹¹ Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa, May 19, 2011 - www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa - Accessed on January 3, 2016

“For too long we thought that the authoritarian regimes were the only bastions against extremism in the Arab world. Too long, we have brandished the Islamist threat as a pretext for justifying to an extent turning a blind eye on governments which were flouting freedom and curbing their country’s development” (Juppé, 2011).¹²

The passages mentioned above indicate that the prominent members of the international community harbored high hopes regarding the possibility of the democratization of the Middle East (Noueihed and Warren, 2012: 113). The discontent voiced out by the populace were interpreted in the Western world as the sincere desire to have a more transparent system of government and the toppling of authoritarian regimes which prevented the promotion of democracy and human rights in the region. It should be noted that some of the countries of the region took the opportunity to undertake a significant wave of reforms, as seen in the case of Morocco. This country has seen the rise of a moderate Islamist party, the Party of Justice and Development, capable of furthering the process of democratization in the country:

“The PJD.. in Morocco is presenting the 'third way' between revolution and the uncertainty of the current system," says Mustapha Khalfi, the head of the party's policy unit...We are presenting the way of reform without losing the stability, the unity

¹² “Arab spring” symposium – Closing speech by Alain Juppé, Ministre d’Etat, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to the Arab World Institute, April 16, 2011 - www.ambafrance-uk.org/Arab-spring-symposium-Closing - Accessed on January 4, 2016

of the country - but at the same time furthering the democratic agenda of Morocco” (Lewis, 2011).¹³

The onset of the Arab Spring had important geopolitical connotations attached to it. These geopolitical implications are underscored by important historical considerations. For instance, the social and political upheaval brought forward by the protests that took place in the Arab world had significant repercussions for the Western world, in terms of the possible advent of Islamist extremism and mass waves of immigration from the Middle East to Western Europe (Albrecht and Schlumberger, 2004: 371).

Nevertheless, there was a determination on the part of the most prominent Western leaders supported the process of political change taking place in the Arab world, as seen from the statement released by David Cameron, the British Prime Minister:

“I want a very simple and clear message to come out of this summit, and that is that the most powerful nations on earth have come together and are saying to those in the Middle East and North Africa who want greater democracy, greater freedom, greater civil rights, we are on your side” (Cameron, 2011).¹⁴

¹³ Lewis, A., Why has Morocco’s king survived the Arab Spring? November 24, 2011 - www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15856989 - Accessed on January 12, 2016

¹⁴ PM interview at the G8 Summit, May 27, 2011 - www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-interview-at-the-g8-summit - Accessed on January 15, 2016

It is important to remark that the international community was aware of the difficulties present in having to deal with the process of transformation that is taking place in the Arab world. However, it should be stressed that there is an important historical component to bear in mind when assessing the implications of the events that took place in the Arab Spring. It would appear that the Arab Spring represented the tipping point that brought about the state of social unrest that originated in Syria and Bahrain (Sarah, 2012).

The people wants to bring down the regime

/ Ash-shab yurid isqat an-nizam / الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام

The narrative informing the protests was informed by the slogan of *Ash-shab yurid isqat an-nizam / الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام / the people wants to bring down the regime* (Noueihed and Warren, 2012: 73). This slogan was significant, as it galvanized the idea of a collective force capable of uniting different strands of opinion and ethnic groups in order to demand and implement political change. There are, nonetheless, important variations that need to be underlined when appraising the political implications of that slogan (Anderson, 2011: 7).¹⁵ To begin with, the use of this slogan may refer to the willingness on the part of the public to see the advent of democratization, instead of the outright toppling of the

¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that chapters three, four and five will provide a detailed account of the narrative used by the political elites and opposition groups in Syria and Bahrain.

regime. At the same time, it is not clear whether the use of this slogan indicated the existence of a social movement that could bring forth the demise of the al-Asad regime. In other words, the use of this slogan indicates the presence of a social grievance, but does not indicate the particular form of action to be taken in order to bring about a higher level of democratization in Syria (Deeb, 2013: 33). The historical context plays an important role in this situation. It could be posited that the small scope of concession granted by the al-Asad regime to the Syrian populace, left the latter ill-equipped in order to project their demands in an effective manner (Sarah, 2012).

The semantic implications of the term have to be evaluated within the context of the particular political context in which the protests took place. The Arab Spring affected the countries of the Arab world in a different manner. In Egypt and Tunisia, the slogan clearly indicated the willingness of the populace to remove the regimes that they considered oppressive and incapable of responding to the needs and interests of the people (Albrecht and Schlumberger, 2004: 373). Nevertheless, in other countries of the Arab world, there was still a significant constituency that expressed support for the current regime, as seen in the case of Syria.

The Arab Spring narrative (based on the diffusion of political and economic dissatisfaction throughout the Middle East) was somewhat

recalibrated in countries that had initiated the process of political reform, such as Jordan and Lebanon. In the first case, the slogan referred to the willingness of the people to bring about a greater modicum of transparency into the system of government. The regime led by King Abdullah II of Jordan, responded to the narrative propounded by the demonstrators by expanding the powers of the legislative branch of government and by liberalizing the economic system, in an attempt to fend off the threat of social unrest. However, it should be noted that the process of political and economic reform has not been conducive to the liberalization of the social environment. One may argue that Jordan remains a non-democratic state, albeit one that is willing to introduce further layers of reform (Alianak, 2014: 49).

The slogan denotes the willingness of the public to see a greater level of responsiveness to the need to create a more prosperous economy capable of meeting the needs of every citizen (Albrecht and Schlumberger, 2004: 374). In Lebanon, the slogan was aimed at attempting to force a resolution of the conflict between the different religious factions. At the same time, it could be argued that the process of economic liberalization that unfolded in Lebanon, preceding the onset of the protests of February 2011, could not prevent the rise of social unrest, epitomized in the slogan of “bring down the sectarian regime”. In this case, it may be argued that the protests succeeded in bringing about

a modicum of change, as seen in the coming to power of Najib Mikati (Alianak, 2014: 155).

As we have seen in the previous chapter, a narrative is a way of describing a series of events, which may either be imaginary or real. The content of the Arab Spring narrative is based on the idea that a increased level of democratization would bring forth a higher level of social justice in the region. It should be noted that this narrative transcends ideological boundaries, as it is endorsed by all the strands of opinion involved in the political struggles of the Arab Spring.

It is also important to highlight that the narrative behind the slogan has been appropriated by reactionary elements in the Middle East, who changed the words in order to project their support for the regimes. Nevertheless, another important aspect of the narrative that was created during the Arab Spring relates to the high level of confidence displayed by the different social groups that participated in the uprisings. This level of confidence in their demands is high because of the instinctual knowledge held by the peoples of the Middle East regarding the legitimacy of their demands. From this standpoint, and making reference to the historical context, it is important to underline that the demonstrations arose as a response to decades of resentment and anger against the political elites, which stalled the process of modernization.

In the next section, we will see the manner in which the uprisings that took place in Tunisia and Egypt contributed to generated an environment conducive to the onset of overt protests that are taking place in Syria and Bahrain against the incumbent regimes.

The implications of the Arab Spring for Syria and Bahrain

A close examination of the events that took place in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt indicated the idea of the diffusion of the revolutionary uprisings to Syria and Bahrain, where vast segments of the population demanded political change (Seeberg, 2015: 88). One of the most important aspects that relates to the civil uprisings in Syria and Bahrain is the notion of the diffusion of transnational dissent via the technological media of the internet and outlets such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. This is eloquently shown in the amount of content flowing on those social media outlets (Saideman, 2012: 713).¹⁶ The concept of diffusion is an important element in order to fully appraise the reasons behind the advent of the protests in those two countries. McAdam clarifies the way in which the diffusion of social and political values takes place across geographical locales:

“[C]omplex diffusion processes by which the ideational, tactical, and organizational lessons of the early rises are made available to

¹⁶ It is worth mentioning that chapters three, four and five will provide a detailed account of the narrative used by the political elites and opposition groups in Syria and Bahrain.

subsequent challengers. But only through systematic empirical work will be able test this impressionistic hunch” (McAdam, 1999: 41).

The fall of communism in the Soviet Union and the Eastern European states show that there is a link between events taking place in one geographical location and others in the immediate area.¹⁷ In the case of the spread of the uprisings that took place in the context of the Arab Spring, it seems that the factors that contributed to the propagation of the uprisings were the high levels of unemployment and the discontent of the population (Saideman, 2012: 715).

There are some parallels between the events that took place in Tunisia and Egypt and those that unfolded in Syria (Tarabzouni, 2011). For example, the civil unrest that was produced as a result of the murder of Hamza Ali al-Khateeb, a young boy who died at the hands of the Syrian police in 2011, echoed the uproar caused by the death of Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia and the repercussions that it had for the unfolding of the confrontation between government forces and the elements of civil society.

The civil unrest that took place in Syria as a result of the inability and unwillingness of the regime led by Bashar al-Asad to reform the

¹⁷ The events that took place in 1989-90 demonstrate that the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe took place as a chain reaction, responding to the domino effect that the demise of each regime had on the other countries comprising the Soviet Bloc. This course of events ultimately led to the complete eradication of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the ultimate fall of the Soviet Union.

country's political system has parallels with Muammar Gaddafi's refusal to reforming the system of government (Ramadan, 2011: 23). It could be claimed that both leaders were unwilling to reform the political systems due to the fact that the actions of the protestors were perceived as being motivated by foreign "agent provocateurs", willing to destabilize the political regimes in Syria and Libya.

In his last speech before being toppled, Gaddafi emphasized the foreign link to the political upheavals that were taking place in the country, calling the opposition forces "foreign agents" and "greasy rats":

”حذار، أمريكا سوف تأتي وتحكمكم، مثل أفغانستان والعراق... أي ليبي يقوض السيادة ستتم معاقبته حتى الموت... الناس لا تريد ثورة. أهل العمامم واللحي الطويلة يريدون الثورة“ (القذافي، 2011).

“Beware, America will come and rule you, like Afghanistan and Iraq...Any Libyan who undermines the sovereign state will be punished with death...The people do not want a revolution. The people of turbans and long beards want revolution” (Gaddafi, 2011).¹⁸

At the same time, Bashar al-Asad has also expressed the view that the political unrest that has engulfed the country has been caused by people who respond to foreign interests:

”سورية هدفا لمؤامرة كبيرة من الخارج، داخليا وخارجيا. إذا كان هناك شيء يحدث فإنه يستخدم كغطاء لاتهام سوريا كاستجابة شعبية. وإذا هناك إصلاحيون سوف ندعمهم. هؤلاء الناس لديهم طرق فكرية مختلطة ومشوشة“ (الأسد، ٢٠١١).

¹⁸ Speech Muammar Qaddafi Green Square, February 22, 2011 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OarFceo_Yv8 Accessed on April 10th, 2015 - Accessed on January 3, 2016

“Syria is a target of a big plot from outside, both internally and externally. If there is something happening it is using the cover of accusing Syria of popular response .If there are reformers we will support them. Those people have a mixed and confused intellectual ways” (al-Asad, 2011).¹⁹

Nevertheless, there are some important differences in the way that the emerging situation was handled by the regime led by Bashar al-Asad (Ziadeh, 2011: 13). In this context, it should be mentioned that the al-Asad regime enjoys the support of revisionist countries such as Russia and Iran, a fact that was not in the case of Libya.

In the case of Bahrain, the manner in which the Egyptian and Tunisian people mobilized in order to topple the regime bears some resemblance to the way in which the Shi'ite population mobilized its resources for the purposes of demanding change in the system of governance in Bahrain (Ziadeh, 2011: 17). This was done by engaging in a series of protests against the regime and by setting in motion a heightened level of social and political activism. One of the ways in which the prevalence of diffusion may be established between the Egyptian and Bahraini case revolves around the fact that in both countries, the protestors congregated in a specific location that became the epicenter of their social activities (Ibrahim, 2012). In the case of the Egypt, the protestors mobilized around Tahrir Square in Cairo. The

¹⁹ Bashar al-Asad's Speech In Syrian Parliament, March 30, 2011 - <http://www.voltairenet.org/article173297.html> - Accessed on January 2, 2016

protestors in Bahrain used the emblematic location of the Pearl Roundabout in Manama as a meeting point in order to express their dissatisfaction towards the government. In this context, it is important to underline the relevance of the concept of space as a relevant outlet for the channeling of social mobilization (Katzman, 2015: 4).

There are, however, some important differences between the social mobilization in Egypt and that which took place in Bahrain. In Egypt, the social mobilization that took place responded to a concerted effort on the part of the emerging civil society, eager to see a broader level of social justice. Bahrain is a much richer country than Egypt, capable of meeting the economic demands of its relatively small population. In addition, it should be stated that the media coverage of the events that are taking place in Bahrain was not as comprehensive as the one that unfolded in Egypt during the period of civil unrest in 2011-12 (Khondker, 2011: 675). In any case, it is important to bring in the historical perspective that has informed the evolution of events in Bahrain. From this perspective, it may be posited that the history of concessions granted to the populace by the Bahraini government has been influential among the Bahraini people. The Al Khalifa regime has been willing to make concessions aimed at avoiding the level of polarization (Alshahabi, 2014).

In spite of the sincere willingness on the part of certain segments of the political opposition to initiate a widespread process of change in Syria, the regime led by al-Asad seems to be convinced of the collusion between the protestors and foreign vested interests (King, 2007: 438).²⁰ This might refer to Western powers such as the United States as well as their allies in the region, which would benefit from the weakening of the al-Asad regime. This is the narrative projected from the highest echelons of powers, as seen in the speech given by Bashar al-Asad before the Syrian parliament:

”قبل سنوات قليلة، زaidوا عليكم بالديمقراطية فمارستموها بأرقى صورها.. ورفضتم أن يشارككم غريب إدارة الوطن.. فاخترتم دستوركم وبرلمانكم ورئيسكم.. فكان الخيار خياركم والديمقراطية من صنعكم“ (الأسد، ٢٠١٤).

“A few years ago, some called for freedom – your response was to remain free in the age of subservience, to be masters in the age of slaves. They patronized you with their calls for democracy – your response was to show your will in the most democratic manner possible and refuse foreign intervention in your national affairs; you chose your constitution, you chose your parliament, you chose your president. Throughout, the decision was yours and your will has created our democracy” (al-Asad, 2014).²¹

²⁰ It is important to note that Bashar al-Asad may have referred to foreign vested interests such as the Western powers (led by the United States) as well as prominent nations of a Sunni majority, like Turkey and Saudi Arabia. In this context, al-Asad’s speech indicates the importance of geopolitical matters in the examination of the events that are taking place in Syria.

²¹ Inaugural speech of President al-Asad by Bashar al-Asad -Voltaire Network, Damascus, July 16th, 2014- <http://www.voltairenet.org/article184785.html> - Accessed on May 5th, 2015

In the case of Bahrain, it is possible to see the narrative by the country's leadership as a desire to delink the events that led to the toppling of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt and the protests that are taking place in Bahrain (Ibrahim, 2012). The difference in Bahrain was of social dissatisfaction of a group of people influenced by outside actors. However, the objective for the protestors was claimed for social reform and accelerating of political participatory. This is what transpires from the statement given by King Hamad ibn Isa Al Khalifa, the King of Bahrain:

"الربيع العربي؟ هذا العمل من بلدان أخرى. إذا كنت تقصد ب "الربيع العربي" الدعوة إلى الإصلاح الديمقراطي، ثم بدأنا هذه العملية منذ 10 عاما. كانت لدينا واحدة من أولى لاجراء انتخابات برلمانية في العالم العربي. انها عملت ... [في ما يخص الديمقراطية] لا يمكنك فرض النظام الأمريكي في تركيا، والنظام التركي في فرنسا الخ عليك أن تفهم الناس وثقافتهم. هذه هي القيادة" (آل خليفة، ٢٠١٤).

"Arab Spring? That's the business of other countries. If you mean by "Arab Spring" the call for democratic reform, then we started that process 10 years ago. We were one of the first to have parliamentary elections in the Arab world. It worked...[In regards to democracy] you cannot transpose the US system on Turkey, and the Turkish system on France etc. You have to understand the people and their culture. That's leadership" (Al Khalifa, 2014).²²

As we can see, there is a difference in the approach by the leaders of Syria and Bahrain and both tried to separate the level of the discontent that led to the toppling of the regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and

²² Der Spiegel, interview with the King of Bahrain: 'Arab Spring? That's the Business of Other Countries', February 12, 2013 - www.spiegel.de/international/world/spiegel-interview-with-the-king-of-bahrain-arab-spring-that-s-the-business-of-other-countries-a-814915.html - Accessed on May 4, 2015

Egypt and the uprisings which unfolded in Syria and Bahrain (Katzman, 2015: 7). The regimes that govern Syria and Bahrain have deployed rhetoric that is aimed at countering the effect of the demonstrations by depicting the protestors as elements mobilized by foreign influence. Additionally, as it was illustrated by the statement from Bashar al-Asad seen above, the implications of the geopolitical factors involved in each of these cases have to be reckoned with in order to determine the correlation between the uprisings in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt and those that occur in Syria and Bahrain (Seeberg, 2015: 1).

In the case of Syria, the civil unrest that took place evolved into an outright conflict between the military forces loyal to the regime led by Bashar al-Asad (bolstered by Iran, Russia and Hezbollah) and the opposition propped up by Saudi Arabia and other Arabian Gulf nations. The civil unrest that is taking place in Syria should be understood as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, at least to a certain extent. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are fighting for regional dominance, which means that their geopolitical needs and hegemony are going to be intertwined with the political events taking place in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The Sunni-Shi'ite rift that has emerged in the Middle East since the advent of the Arab Spring has been, to a significant extent, informed by the ideological confrontation between those two nations. From this standpoint, there is a historical aspect that is informed by the

confrontation between Sunni and Shi'ite elements in the Middle East since the onset of the Iranian revolution in 1979. Iran has increased the level of sectarianism in the region (Dabashi, 2013).

The sectarian implications of the protests represent an important facet of the narrative tussle between the Syrian and Bahraini government and the protestors. The civil aspects of the uprising cannot be seen as directly linked to religious in-fighting (Brownlee, 2007: 600). In fact, in both the Syrian and Bahraini cases there has been a great deal of tolerance between different ethnic and religious factions in the approach to their demands for a larger level of responsiveness to the needs and interests of the populace. Furthermore, the narrative employed by the protestors in Syria revolved, at least in the initial stages, on the demand for the bestowal of dignity upon the Syrian citizenry by the regime (Anderson, 2011: 3). This entails the granting of political rights as well as the endowment of a higher level of social justice. These demands have been portrayed in an eloquent fashion in one of the manifestos produced by the Southern Front, one of the groups involved in the fight for democracy in Syria:

”إن انهيار النظام الحالي بقيادة الأسد لن تكون نهاية ثورة الشعب السوري. ونهاية النظام إلا أن تكون بداية جديدة، ونأمل أن المرحلة النهائية لنضال الشعب من أجل الحرية. من أجل ضمان أن المرحلة النهائية نجحت في وضع نموذج وطني جديد للحكم يقوم على احترام كرامة الإنسان وولادة جديدة من إمكانيات هائلة في سوريا سوف تبدأ. ومن الضروري أن جميع القوى الوطنية تلتزم مسار العمل خلال فترة الانتقال من السلطوية التي من شأنها تحقيق إرادة الشعب“ (الجبهة الجنوبية،

البرنامج السياسي لمرحلة ما بعد أسد سوريا، ٢٠١٥).

“The collapse of the current Asad-led regime will not be the end of the Syrian people’s revolution. The end of the regime will be only the start of a new and, hopefully, final phase of the people’s struggle for freedom. In order to ensure that the final phase succeeds the establishment of a new national model of governance based on respect for human dignity and a rebirth of Syria’s tremendous potential will be initiated. It is imperative that all nationalist forces commit to a course of action during the period of transition from authoritarianism that will fulfill the will of the people” (Southern Front’s Political Program for Post-Asad Syria, 2015).²³

The al-Asad regime was decisively opposed to the process of political opening put forward by the Arab Spring demonstrators. Bashar al-Asad manifested these views in an interview given to al-Ahram al-Araby, an Egyptian magazine in 2012:

”تمارس الجماعات المسلحة الإرهاب ضد الدولة. ليست لديها شعبية داخل المجتمع... لن يكونون منتصرون في نهاية المطاف... [إن إسقاط الأنظمة العربية] لم تنجح في مصلحة الحرية والديمقراطية أو إنهاء الظلم الاجتماعي بقدر ما ساعد على خلق الفوضى... العنف، ومع ذلك، لا يجوز... والدولة لن تقف مقيدة يديها في مواجهة أولئك الذين يحملون السلاح ضدنا“ (الأسد، ٢٠١٢).

“The armed groups exercise terrorism against the state. They are not popular within society... they will not be victorious in the end... [The overthrow of Arab regimes] had not worked in the interest of freedom, democracy or ending social injustice as much as it helped create chaos... violence, however, is not allowed... and the state will not stand with its hands tied in the face of those who bear arms against us” (al-Asad, 2012).²⁴

²³ FSA Southern Front/www.spiegel.de/international/Asad Syria - notgeorgesabra.wordpress.com/2015/01/06/fsa-southern-fronts-political-program-for-post-Asad-syria/#more-1928 - Accessed on June 5th, 2015

²⁴ Reuters, Asad says rebels will not win, calls for dialogue , September 20, 2012 - www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-Asad-idUSBRE88J16220120920 - Accessed on December 22, 2015

From this standpoint, it may be posited that the al-Asad regime has used geopolitical grievances to suppress the scope of political reform (Ibrahim, 2012). This phenomenon is indicative of some important variations in the case of Syria. Notwithstanding the importance of the idea of diffusion to understand the events that took place in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt and the uprisings that unfolded in Syria and Bahrain, the historical and geopolitical connotations attached to the latter two cases created some differences that need to be acknowledged (Elbadawi, 2005: 293). To begin with, the push and pull between the different factions involved in the Syrian Civil War have contributed to establishing a diffuse narrative related to the conflict (Aljeser, 2013).

To be sure, the Alawite-Sunni differences had some influence in the manner in which the civil uprising evolved into an outright civil war (Sarah, 2012). There is a level of sectarianism present in the Syrian Civil War that has created a very unstable situation in the country, with Sunni, Alawite, Druze and Christian social groups attempting to actualize their needs and interests. The destabilizing efforts of military groups like the Islamic State have resulted in a tighter control of the government forces over the territory that they currently control. The state of social unrest has exacerbated the animosities that hark back to the period of French colonial rule, when the Alawite minority was given a significant amount

of power at the expense of the Sunni majority group (Deeb, 2013: 69).

This state of affairs is responsible for reducing the scope of political reform in Syria (Noueihed and Warren, 2012: 55). However, the regime led by Bashar al-Asad has used the narrative of foreign intervention in order to curb the level of protests that took place in Syria since the onset of the Arab Spring. The narrative of foreign intervention has been one of the most salient features of the regime installed in Syria by Bashar al-Asad since 2000. The content of the narrative used by the government is centered on the idea that foreign domination has been used in order arrest the possibility of political modernization:

”ما نراه اليوم، ومع ذلك، وما شهدناه خلال السنوات القليلة الماضية ليس النظام العالمي. وهذا هو الترتيب للدولة أو عدد قليل من الدول على هذا الكوكب، والباقي مجرد الدول السباحة داخل هذا النظام العالمي ... بعضهم تطفو إلى السطح مع صعوبة، ويجب أن يثبت باستمرار على حسن الإرادة والطاعة والالتزام. هم دائما على خطأ ومطلوبة للتكفير عن خطاياهم. وقد غرقت الآخرين إلى أسفل على البقاء هناك حتى إشعار آخر. وهكذا، ما يتوافق مع رغبات تلك الدول أصبحت الديمقراطية والعدالة، وما يدرك مصالحهم هو حقوق الإنسان حقوق الإنسان والحضارة“ (الأسد، ٢٠٠٠).

“What we see today, however, and what we experienced during the past few years is not a world order; it is the order of a state or a few states on this planet, and the rest are mere states swimming within this world order...Some of them float to the surface with difficulty, and must continually prove their good will, obedience and commitment. They are always wrong and are required to atone for their sins. Others have sunk to the bottom to stay there until further notice. Thus, what conforms to the desires of those states has become democracy and justice, and what realizes their

interests is human rights human rights and civilization” (al-Asad, 2000).²⁵

The Al Khalifa regime deployed a narrative content for the purposes of curbing the scope of some political demands taking place in Bahrain (Noueihed and Warren, 2012: 201). The Al Khalifa regime has blamed Iran for instigating the state of unrest in the country. This is a historical dimension that is informed by the confrontation between Sunni and Shi'ite elements in the Middle East since the onset of the Iranian revolution in 1979. The Al Khalifa regime has blamed Iran for spreading the seeds of violence in the country. This can be seen in a statement outlined by Bahrain's Minister of Culture Sheikha Mai bint Mohammed Al Khalifa:

”تورط إيران واضح جدا. لكي نكون صادقين، ما يجري الآن هو بسبب دور إيران، ولكن التأثير سيكون سلبيا على المنطقة بأسرها ... حركة اليوم ليست حركة وطنية، بل هو حركة طائفية شيعية. البحرين ليست تحت الاحتلال مثل فلسطين. لذلك عندما المواطنين قاموا بتدمير البنية التحتية المحلية، والمستشفيات، وهلم جرا، لا يمكن أن نسمي هذا بأنه ”الانتفاضة“ (الشيخة مي بنت محمد آل خليفة، ٢٠١٥).

“Iran's involvement is very clear. To be honest, what is going on right now is about the role of Iran, but the effect will be negative for the whole region...Today's movement is not a national movement, it is a Shi'ite sectarian movement. Bahrain is not under occupation like the Palestine. So when citizens are destroying

²⁵ President al-Asad 9th OIC Summit Speech, November 13, 2000 - www.presidentAsad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=106&Itemid=496 - Accessed on June 4, 2015

local infrastructure, hospitals, et cetera, you cannot call this as an “intifada” (Sheikha Mai bint Mohammed Al Khalifa, 2015).²⁶

In this context, it is possible to identify a narrative that deviates from the rhetorical tools which were involved in the uprisings in the Tunisia and Egypt (Seeberg, 2015: 4). In the case of Bahrain, the regime has received an enormous amount of support by the Gulf Cooperation Council in order to stave off the threat of geopolitical destabilization (Ayoob, 2012: 98). This can be seen in the case of Saudi Arabia, whose interests are grounded in curtailing the geopolitical influence of Iran in the Middle East (Ibrahim, 2012).

These factors need to be taken into consideration when broaching the manner in which the events of the Arab Spring propagated into the region and influenced the political situation that is unfolding in Bahrain (Ramadan, 2011: 24). In addition, it is important to highlight that in the case of Bahrain, the United States, which has an important military presence in the Gulf region, was willing to work with the Bahraini government in order to “normalize” the situation. The historical dimension also serves to explain this state of affairs. The geopolitical tensions that arose in the region since the advent of the Iranian revolution in 1979 have led the United States to establish a strategic

²⁶ Hurriyet Daily News, Bahrain's minister blames Iran for crisis, April 26, 2012 - www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nid=19284&NewsCatID=352 - Accessed on June 2, 2015

foothold in the region. The importance of the events that are taking place in Bahrain can be seen from a speech given by Hillary Clinton, former U.S. Secretary of State:

“[We are looking] at ways to help them to defuse the tension in Bahrain, and we have already sent roughly around 500 of our police force, who are there. The Saudis are there as well. There are other Gulf countries which are to support the Bahraini Government and to get calm and order in Bahrain and to help both the Bahraini Government and people to reach to a solution which is for the best for the Bahraini people” (Clinton, 2011).²⁷

It is possible to argue that the explanation of the events of the Arab Spring have been generalized in a manner which does not really result in the understanding of the process of political transformation that is taking place in the Middle East (Anderson, 2011: 5). It appears that notwithstanding some similarities in the events that took place in the Arab world since 2010, there also seems to be some differences worthy of consideration (Abu Shagara, 2014). For example, it could be argued that, while it is possible to talk about the prevalence of a revolutionary process in Egypt and Tunisia, that situation differs in the cases of Syria and Bahrain (Balgaziz, 2011: 103).

In any case, it is important to highlight that the cases of Syria and Bahrain, along with the uprisings in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt are

²⁷ Remarks by Hillary Clinton on Bahrain, Voltaire Network, 14 March 2011 - www.voltairenet.org/article168889.html - Accessed on May 15, 2015

indicative of an emerging political consciousness in the Arab world that have installed a new kind of social debate in the Middle East (Balgaziz, 2011: 106). This political consciousness has been responsible for the diffusion of political and economic grievances throughout the region (Della Porta and Reiter in Della Porta and Reiter (eds.) 1998: 76). This is another factor that indicates the importance of transnational process of diffusion in order to understand the events that unfolded in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt and the uprisings that took place in Syria and Bahrain (Noueihed and Warren, 2012: 33).

The Arab Spring seems to have originated a wave of political transformation in the Arab world that has shaken the foundations of the systems of government in the region. There is a realization that the authoritarian style of government would have to give way to a higher level of democratization and the fulfillment of the demands for social justice expressed by the publics of the region. In this regards and notwithstanding the importance of past practice, it might be argued that the level of social unrest that emerged in both Syria and Bahrain, since the advent of the Arab Spring indicates the impossibility of understanding present events by taking a look at the past. The level of concessions granted by the Bahraini government may not be enough to prevent further social unrest (Alshehabi, 2014). At the same time, the refusal of the al-Asad regime to meet the demands of the populace may

not necessarily lead to the demise of the regime (Sarah, 2012).

The diffusion of the transnational ideas pertaining to the transformation of the political system in the Middle East has influenced most countries in the region, bringing about the possibility of enhancing the level of democratic action in nations that have been ruled by authoritarian style of regimes for many decades.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it could be argued that there appears to be a level of diffusion of the discontent that informed the events that took place in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt to the uprisings that unfolded in Syria and Bahrain (Seeberg, 2015: 6). There are some factors that give a specific complexion to the latter two cases (Fildis, 2012: 148). As we have seen in the previous section, the geopolitical implications of the Syrian civil war and the Bahraini uprising has to be factored in as an aspect of relevant importance in order to appraise the manner in which the regimes deployed a narrative geared towards containing the social and political upheaval taking place in those countries (Noueihed and Warren, 2012: 211). The narrative propagated by the protests revolves around the desire to open up the political space in the Middle East. This means that the system of government in this region will have to become more responsive to the needs and interests of the population.

The geopolitical and historical factors enumerated in the previous sections support the idea that while it is possible to identify a strong sense of diffusion of the events of Arab Spring; a factor that influenced the uprisings in Syria and Bahrain. In spite of the differences exposed in the previous sections, the process of political debate that unfolded in the region as a result of the Arab Spring was responsible for establishing the foundations for the voicing of the dissatisfaction that took place in Syria and Bahrain since 2011 (Seeberg, 2015: 4). The common elements of the claim of political repression and socio-economic discontent in most the Arab nations were responsible for creating a causal thread between the events that took place in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt and the uprisings that unfolded in Syria and Bahrain (Anderson, 2011: 6). Furthermore, the historical context that inform the social unrest that is taking place in those countries is an important element to bear in mind for the purposes of ascertaining the long-term implications of the social unrest brought forth by the Arab Spring. At the same, there are substantial differences between the two cases, which stem from the level of concessions granted to the populace by the al-Asad and Al Khalifa regimes respectively.

The commonalities present in the Syrian and Bahraini cases stem from the fact that both the al-Asad and Al Khalifa regimes are not liberal democratic in nature. At the same time, it is important to remember that

Bahrain has moved forward much more quickly in granting some form of democratic rights to its population. In any case, both countries have been deeply influenced by the events that took place in the Arab world since 2011. It is in this context that the importance of the concept diffusion in order to evaluate the events that took place in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt and the uprisings that unfolded in Syria and Bahrain should be appraised.

Chapter Three

The differences between the cases of Syria and Bahrain and its implications for the analysis of the process of political transformation

Introduction

The question raised in this chapter asks, in what ways can the differences between the two uprisings facilitate an understanding of the potential development of the processes of political transformation that is currently taking place in the Middle East? This section of the dissertation will also analyze the historical background to the confrontation unfolding in Syria and Bahrain, pointing out the main facets of the discontent that developed as a result of the inability of the respective regimes to open up the political system. There will also be an examination of the state of the current conflict taking place in Syria and Bahrain, linking the developments unfolding in those countries to the overall impact that the Arab Spring had on the political transformation of the region.

Furthermore, this section of the dissertation will examine the most fundamental aspects of the perceptions arising from the upheavals that are taking place in Syria and Bahrain. From this

standpoint, it will be argued that the international community and the political leadership of countries tend to see the uprisings in those countries as part and parcel of the process of transformation that is taking place in the Middle East. In addition, there will be an examination of the discursive elements employed in the uprisings in Syria and Bahrain for the purposes of finding out the similarities and differences involved. Finally, this chapter will analyze the role of historical memory in the process of ascertaining the differences that emerge from the examination of the Syrian and Bahraini cases and the manner in which this explains the process of political transformation that is taking place in the region.

The historical background to the confrontation unfolding in Syria and Bahrain

The events that took place during the Arab Spring are the result of the long-term evolution of the system of government in Syria and Bahrain. The “Corrective Revolution” that occurred in Syria in 1970, headed by the Minister of Defense, Hafez al-Asad, had as its main purpose the institutionalization of the Syrian political system according to the principle of the Baath Party (Ziadeh, 2011: 155). Al-Asad did manage to gain the support of the economic elite based in

Damascus and strove to prove his credentials as a pious Muslim, in order to appease any possible reluctance of the Sunni majority to accept his rule (Lesch, 2012: 20).

It is important to examine the historical context in order to appraise the way in which the al-Asad regime managed to consolidate power in Syria. One of the ways in which the al-Asad family was able to institutionalize its rule was by forging strategic geopolitical alliances with some important actors in the region. al-Asad worked in order to improve relations with other prominent actors in the Arab world, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, in accordance with the Pan-Arabist platform of the Baath Party (Wieland and Almqvist, 2013: 25). However, the regime led by al-Asad made sure that the members of Alawite Islamic sect, to which his family belonged, occupied central positions in the political and economic life of the country (Ziadeh, 2011: 159). This created a great deal of resentment, particularly among fundamentalist religious groups, which were periodically subject to bouts of repression at the hands of the Syrian government (Lesch, 2012: 33).

When Hafez al-Asad died in 2000, a period of political relaxation ensued. His successor, Bashar al-Asad, discussed the idea of carrying out political and economic reforms, aimed at decreasing

the level of resistance against the regime. However, as it turned out, this period of relaxation, known as the “Damascus Spring”, was short lived (Ziadeh, 2011: 162). This state of affairs represented a wasted opportunity. Bashar al-Asad had the chance of bringing about a wider spectrum of democratization to Syria. Ultimately, the regime led by Bashar al-Asad entrenched its power by resorting to the same repressive tools used by his father, Hafez. This resulted in a process of popular unrest that would have its epitome in the events that took place in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring (Lesch, 2012: 36).

In regards to the political evolution of the Kingdom of Bahrain, there are some similarities with Syria, concerning the development of the circumstances that led to the social unrest that broke out in 2011 (Ziadeh, 2011: 166). Upon the onset of independence from the United Kingdom in 1971, the ruling elite instituted a system of universal suffrage for the National Assembly that was meant to assuage any possible unrest among the Shi’ite majority (Alothman, 2011). These constitutional arrangements were supplemented by legal provisions that authorized the incarceration of people deemed to engage in activities that would threaten the stability of the state (Cole, 2007: 78). From this perspective, one could argue that the historical context is an important element that explains the way in which the

political system of Bahrain evolved since independence from British rule. The elements of democratization brought by the Al Khalifa regime went in tandem with the affective instruments that were needed for the purposes of maintaining the political status quo (Allothman, 2011).

However, there are some differences between the Bahraini and Syrian case that need to be highlighted. Contrary to the situation that unfolded in Syria, Bahrain was able to capitalize on a number of factors to stem the tide of unrest during the 1970s and 1980s. The influence of Arab nationalism, as well as the relatively liberal social stance endorsed by the Bahraini government, meant that the latent unrest that would unfold in latter years was kept in check (Cole, 2007: 82). These developments facilitated, to some degree, the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 2002. The historical circumstances that led to the onset of the social unrest in 2011 are therefore important aspects to be taken into consideration for the purposes of evaluation the implications that the Arab Spring had for the Bahraini political system.

Moreover, the advent of the Iranian revolution in 1979 provided an important intellectual antecedent to the state of unrest that arose in the country in 2011 (Sharifi, 2012: 31). The Iranian

revolution in 1979 represented a significant milestone in the political unrest of Bahrain, as Iran began to extend its influence across the Middle East, especially in the Gulf region, inciting social and religious activism among the Shi'ite population of the Middle East.

The uprising that took place in Bahrain responds to the vigorous demands posed by the Shi'ite population, which claimed for the widening of the level of democratization in the Gulf region of the Middle East. The Arab Spring, and the political repercussions of the uprisings, have ensured that political relations between the Shi'ite population and the political leadership of the Gulf countries are at the most delicate point since the advent of the Iranian revolution in 1979. In addition, it has been claimed that in the case of Bahrain, the demands for the enfranchisement of the Shi'ite population have become synonymous with the demands for democratization.

It is important to point out the role of the Shi'ite ideology projected by the Islamic Republic of Iran in the process of political transformation that is taking place in Middle East (Ghubash, 2010: 211). The ideology exported by Islamic Republic of Iran threatens the political foundations of the monarchical regimes, since it instigates the practice of revolution and the demands for social

justice and geopolitical independence from the Western powers (Abu Shagara, 2014).

There are a number of factors that need to be incorporated into the discussion of the current state of affairs unfolding in Bahrain. Jones points out that the Bahraini society is divided according in different social strata, including the Al Khalifa family and its tribal allies in the upper echelons as well as Sunni elements that came from Persia (Jones, 2005: 4). In the lowest echelons, one finds the original Arab tribes that express an allegiance to the Shi'ite Islam. Furthermore, it must be stated that the demands for democratization had important historical milestones in the early 1970s and in 1994, when the demands for a wider system of representation encompassed various segments of the population, including Sunni elements (Jones, 2005: 4). The state of affairs indicated above that the connects the Iranian revolution and the onset of sectarian politics in the region is complex one, and it emerges from the historical context analyzed in previous sections. The Iranian revolution in 1979 has led to the raising tensions among the Shi'ite population claiming the social and economic problems that affect this social group (Ghubash, 2010: 194).

One of the most salient issues that transpire from the analysis of the historical antecedents that led to the uprisings since 2011 is the relevance of sectarian activity in both countries. In addition, it is possible to underscore the importance of the narratives constructed by both regimes for the purposes of providing legitimacy for their rule. One could argue that while in both cases there were significant attempts to introduce political and economic reforms. In the case of Syria, it fell way short of starting a process of democratization (Ibrahim, 2012). The different historical trajectory of the Syrian and Bahraini political system resulted with the latter, having a longer history of political openness.

The process of democratization in both cases cannot be divorced from the element of tolerance that is needed to develop a pluralist system of government. In other words, there is a danger that the demonstrations that are taking place in both countries would not lead to a higher degree of democratization, due to the increased level of conflict that is prevalent. In the case of Bahrain, the chances of bringing about a pluralist political order remain viable, due to the legacy of British rule and the efforts undertaken by the regime in order to democratize the political system. Indeed, thus far, the Al Khalifa regime has not responded to the demonstrations with a high

level of violence. Furthermore, there seems to be a great deal of social cohesion between the Sunni and Shi'ite communities on the subject of wider participation in the political process (Aljamri, 2013). Conversely, in the case of Syria, the loss of territorial integrity and the lack of help from prominent members of the international community in order to restore the conditions for a peaceful resolution of the conflict mar the possibility of the advent of democratic rule. The level of unrest that has affected the country since the advent of the Arab Spring has not been conducive to the possibility of bringing about a higher level of democratization in the country (Sarah, 2012). As we will see in the next section, the problem is compounded by the legacy of five decades of Ba'thist rule and the configuration of power exerted by the al-Asad family (Lesch, 2012: 40).

The state of the current conflict taking place in Syria and Bahrain

The Arab Spring conflicts have sparked a resurgence of sectarianism since the uprisings in 2011. Recent sectarian turmoil following the removal of various authoritarian leaders in the Arab world has been provoked by ideological divisions between liberals

and conservatives, secularists and Islamists, and most visibly, between the Sunni and Shi'ite factions of Islam (Lesch, 2012: 44). While this phenomenon is not new within the region, it has assumed new dimensions given the recent changes in the political atmosphere. While regimes seemingly overemphasize the risks of a sectarian conflict, further investigation reveals that the appearance of such conflicts serves their best interests (Lesch, 2012: 49).

In the case of Syria, where sectarian tensions have grown to the most alarming proportions, the conflict has been divided along primarily religious lines: the Alawite sect, a mystical Muslim Shi'ite faction comprising the ruling minority, and the Sunni Muslim majority. There are several reasons for this configuration of power. Prominent members of the Alawite sect were put in charge of government positions by the French rulers during colonial times, in order to implement a policy of "divide and rule" that would allow them to keep power. The French colonial rulers were of the opinion that the Sunni Syrians constituted the most significant threat to their rule. Furthermore, the al-Asad's most senior political and military associates are affiliates of the sect, leading to accusations of nepotism and prejudicial favoring (Lesch, 2012: 61). This favoritism

has extended to subsidies and benefits enjoyed by Alawi-owned businesses and members of the upper class.

The Syrian civil war did not originate as a sectarian-based conflict with a Sunni majority and a Shi'ite-backed regime as antagonists, however. Any sort of sectarian rhetoric was for the most part absent from the initial nonviolent protests, its rebel leaders opting for a more unified, multiethnic front calling for universal grievances of social and economic justice. These peaceful and inclusive demonstrations posed a serious threat to al-Asad's regime, given that they carried a potent narrative: they used the slogans of the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings to harness momentum within the context of a transnational movement. These are some of the slogans used by the demonstrators, there was a prominent use of the following one: the people wants to bring down the regime. If the al-Asad regime were to maintain order and reinforce the status quo, it would need to promote a muscular counter-narrative. This counter-narrative can best be described as the deployment of the myth of sectarianism, designed to alienate the people from each other and frighten them from become socially mobilized (Wright, 2013: 122). Al-Asad regime has been critical about the transnational religious extremism brought into Syria by external forces, positioning himself

in the process as the fearless defender of a religious minority (Wright, 2013: 134). The strategy deployed by the al-Asad regime has been based on highlighting the influence of foreign intervention in the rise of sectarianism. Moreover, the subject of protest (the Syrian people) and the object of protest (human rights infractions, corruption, lack of political participation) have their links cut. The rhetoric perspective used by al-Asad regime is used by creating the necessary amount of tension and rivalry between the different opposition groups, in order to keep a grip on power and maintaining a modicum of social order (Wright, 2013: 145). The use of this type of rhetoric has to be appraised by making reference to the historical context, that engendered the al-Asad regime and its firm grip on power, that the regime was able to maintain because of strategic geopolitical alliances that were forged (Sarah, 2012).

What makes this conflict especially volatile and worthy of further analysis is the inclusion of external actors, adding new complexity to the uprising. The civil war in Syria has inspired the involvement of other nations who seek to exploit the conflict to meet their own ends. For one, Iranian leadership sees itself at the vanguard of an ideological conflict with the intent of “liberating” the Middle East from foreign influences.

Thus, Iran has supported the Syrian regime with the flow of military advisors, weapons, and capital while some of the rebel groups have received similar political and financial support from the U.S., the U.K., France, and other Western nations (The Independent, 2015). Other major global economies, among them Russia and China, have supported the al-Asad regime by defending it against criticism from the U.N. Security Council, and in the case of Russia, through shipments of munitions. The degeneration of the uprising into civil war has resulted in large numbers of Syrian refugees fleeing to neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan provoking tensions with local populations. In Turkey, for example, the presence of Sunni refugees has caused anxiety among the local Alawite population (Wright, 2013: 149). Fighting has also spread to Lebanon and Iraq, both of which have histories of civil war and are entangled in the Syrian conflict.

The use of sectarianism in the framing of the narrative used in Syria and Bahrain

Asad's use of sectarian conflict as a framing device for the Syrian uprising has had consequences outside of Syria as well. By resurrecting the "central narrative of Shi'ite-Sunni conflict," Abdo

(2013) writes, “the Syrian war has provided a mechanism for amplifying traditional sectarian conflict, effectively elevating it to a transnational affair” (p. 2). In response, protestors in the uprisings have sometimes explicitly chosen to challenge the sectarian narrative. The Bahraini protest movement, albeit was led by Shi’ite protestors, emerged from years of activism both online and offline, they explicitly rejected sectarianism and attributed the protests as instead as democratic reform. While a great majority of the protesters were of the Shi'ite faith, as is Bahrain as a whole, they assured others that they represented the political interests of both Sunnis and Shi’ites. (Gengler, 2015: 144). The state of affairs indicated above has increased polarization between the two sides and marginalized moderates within each. Moreover, it leaves Bahrain and Syria vulnerable to regional influences that could hinder an effort to reconciliation. What the Bahraini protest movement has seen is a strengthened coalition between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to promote regional stability.

It is therefore possible to identify a number of themes that emerge from the context of the protests that have taken place in Syria and Bahrain. In the case of Bahrain, the protests represent the culmination of years of activism by the Shi’ite community. In the

case of Syria, the protest movement emerged in a sudden manner. In the case of Bahrain, the degree of polarization is not as strong as in the case of Syria. This is due to the fact that Bahrain is a richer country. Moreover, the Al Khalifa regime has been willing to make concessions aimed at avoiding the level of polarization. In the case of Bahrain, Iran has played a huge role in provoking the sectarian divide and Bahraini government ends up perceiving Iran as an enemy for the blame for the civil unrest among the Shi'ite majority. The state of affairs describes above is directly linked to the influence that the Iranian revolution had in raising the political awareness of the Shi'ite community in Bahrain. Again, it is possible to see the influence of the historical context in the understanding of the manner in which the current situation developed in Syria.

Table 1. Differences between Syria and Bahrain in regards to the framing of the narrative used

	Syria	Bahrain
1- Onset of the confrontation	Abrupt onset of the confrontation: The events of the Arab Spring took the al-Asad regime by surprise – The lack of history of social activism is reflected in the fragmented nature of the political opposition to the al-Asad regime.	Influence of years of social activism: The Arab Spring was a corollary to a prolonged period of bargaining between the Al Khalifa regime and the Shi'ite community for accelerating of political participatory.
2- Level of polarization of the different communities.	High level of polarization of the different communities: The high level of polarization is linked to the high level of foreign intervention in the conflict and the rhetoric employed by the al-Asad regime in order to fragment the opposition forces.	Low level of polarization between the Sunni and Shi'ite communities: The low level of polarization stems from the strong level of support given by the Sunni community to the demands made by the Shi'ite group.

3- Presence of the enemy narrative.	High presence of the enemy narrative: The enemy rhetoric is used in order to fragment the opposition forces and prevent the onset of democratization.	Low presence of an enemy narrative: The Al Khalifa regime combines the element of political concessions with the strategic deployment of the enemy narrative; the ideology exported by Iran threatens the political foundations of the monarchical regime.
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The historical context also serves to frame the narrative in a way that suits the interests of the regime. Rhetoric like this allows the ruling class to subjugate the masses and maintain the status quo. The United States, a distant factor in the equation, uses Bahrain as a host for the Fifth Fleet of its Navy (Gengler, 2015: 149). This location is crucial strategically for the U.S. due to its position in the Arabian Gulf. Since the rest of the Middle East is not always sympathetic to the American agenda, the U.S. is best served by retaining Bahrain as a cooperative ally.

Bahrain is also crucial as an asset to Saudi Arabia, because it is neighbor and the geographical influence aspect of it. To maintain

the status quo within their own borders, as well as to prevent future Iranian conflicts, Saudi Arabia and other Arabian Gulf nations have pledged preserve to the Bahraini nation in the form of military forces (Wright, 2013: 141). The Bahraini authorities have pointed out that the Islamic Republic of Iran has disseminated their ideological influence in the region, upsetting the state of social unity that prevails among the Sunni and Shi'ite communities. (Alsheik, 2014). This is what emerges from a statement produced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bahrain, who asked Iran to:

”[١]للإلتزام بمبادئ حسن الجوار واحترام السيادة الوطنية في البحرين والتوقف عن التدخل في الشؤون الداخلية“ (الشيخ خالد بن أحمد بن محمد آل خليفة، ٢٠١٥).

“[A]dhere to the principles of good neighbors and respect Bahrain’s national sovereignty and stop interfering in internal affairs” (Sheikh Khalid Bin Ahmed Bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, 2015).²⁸

In case of Syria, there exists a strong dichotomy between class and faith. Whether grounded in history or economics, this narrative (which is concocted by the powers that be in order to divide and rule) is exploited heavily by the al-Asad regime in order to alienate

²⁸ Bahrain Condemns “Blatant Interference” in Its Internal Affairs by Iran, February 4, 2015 - www.thetower.org/1598-bahrain-condemns-blatant-interference-in-its-internal-affairs-by-iran/ - Accessed on January 18, 2016

subjects from themselves and from each other, reducing the probability that they will attempt to mobilize for united anti-autocratic action (Wieland and Almqvist, 2013: 40). Here we see a clear contrast between the vertical and horizontal approach to the allocation of power.²⁹ The regime in Syria is interested in preserving power through a strict level of division between the political elite and the people. Conversely, the Syrian citizenry prefer a horizontal system of power allocation. These nations are also subject to the ambitions of more powerful nations as they rearrange the geopolitical landscape to serve their interests.

We see how order in Bahrain is intertwined with the destinies of several wealthy nations while they devote considerable time and energy constructing strategies to subdue a volatile sociopolitical situation in Syria. Both struggles seem to self-consciously reference strategies and rhetoric from other movements affiliated with the Arab Spring yet their differing histories of protest movements and geopolitical situations have created divergent outcomes: a protracted and bloody struggle in Syria, and effectively a contained and addressed discontent in Bahrain's case.

²⁹ Vertical means there is a top down system of working towards actualizing them. Horizontal is when it is grassroots-based.

The process of political transformation taking place in Syria and Bahrain

To fully appreciate the way in which the differences which emerge from the Syrian and Bahraini cases is engendering the process of political transformation in those country, it is important to point out that those differences are not as apparent as one may think. In order to justify this assertion, one may refer to the fact that the international community tends to see the events that are unfolding in Syria and Bahrain as a continuum derived from the upheavals that took place in the context of the Arab Spring.

Large segments of the international community sees the protests that are taking place in Syria and Bahrain as an important component of the process of political transformation that is taking place in the Middle East. This transpires from a statement released by President Obama, giving his opinion about the sectarian violence that is impacting on several parts of the Middle East:

“And this includes efforts to resolve sectarian tensions that continue to surface in places like Iraq, Bahrain and Syria... Sectarian conflict has reemerged. And the potential spread of weapons of mass destruction continues to cast a shadow over the pursuit of peace...Nowhere have we seen these trends converge more powerfully than in Syria. There, peaceful protests against an authoritarian regime were met with repression and slaughter. In the face of such carnage, many

retreated to their sectarian identity -- Alawite and Sunni; Christian and Kurd -- and the situation spiraled into civil war” (Obama, 2013).³⁰

The concept of identity that gives rise to the onset of sectarianism is strongly connected to the system of power allocation that is present in the Middle East; where certain social groups tend to be in possession of an unfair amount of power.³¹ The idea that the events that have emerged in the Middle East have to be seen in an undifferentiated way has also permeated the frame of reference utilized by the local elites. In essence, both the Syrian and Bahraini leadership work under the assumption that the events of the Arab Spring have spread political tensions; tension that arises, according to them, from foreign influence in the internal affairs of the nation. Notwithstanding the tensions which have affected that is impacting the country, the Bahraini political leadership constantly reiterates that sectarianism is a problem imposed by foreign powers such as Iran:

³⁰ Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly, September 24, 2013 - www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly - Accessed on July 6, 2015

³¹ The concept of identity can be defined as the series of beliefs and cultural habits that hold together a particular social group. Sectarianism, which will be discussed at length in chapter five, can be defined as the enhancement of religious identity as a tool geared towards the achievement of specific political, social and/or economic aims.

”دعم جلالة الملك للجهود الفكرية والرؤى السياسية والتنظيمية لبناء دولة المؤسسات التي توفر فرصا متساوية للمواهب والإبداع لجميع مواطنيها لأنها تسعى إلى لعب دورهم كمواطنين نشطين في العالم المعاصر. كل هذا لتحسين بلادنا ضد أي توترات الطائفية والصراعات التي تشهدها العديد من البلدان الأخرى، على الرغم من أعمال العنف التي ارتكبت في بلادنا من قبل بعض الجماعات المتطرفة والإرهابية التي تستهدف رجال الأمن والمقيمين والمغتربين بقصد نشر الرعب والفتنة وتخريب جهود الاقتصاد والتنمية الوطنية“ (الشيخ خالد بن أحمد بن محمد آل خليفة، ٢٠١٣).

“His Majesty's support to intellectual efforts and political and organizational visions for the construction of a state of institutions that provides equal opportunities to the talents and creativity of all its citizens as they seek to play their role as active citizens of the contemporary world. All this has immunized our country against any sectarian tensions and conflicts witnessed in many other countries, notwithstanding the acts of violence perpetrated on our country by some extremist and terrorist groups targeting security officers, residents and expatriates with the intention of spreading terror and discord and sabotaging the national economy and development efforts” (Sheikh Khalid Bin Ahmed Bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, 2013).³²

In the case of Syria, there is a tendency among the relevant political actors involved in the confrontation with government forces to regard the necessity to topple the incumbent regime as a *sine qua non* for bringing about political transformation. For instance, the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council, which has amalgamated the different rebel groups involved in the fight against the al-Asad regime, had been active in promoting the idea of unity among the

³² H. E. Sheikh Khalid Bin Ahmed Bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Bahrain before the Sixty-Eighth Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 30 September 2013 - gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/68/BH_en.pdf - Accessed on July 6, 2015

people of Syria regarding the need to bring about the demise of the government among the international community. This can be seen from a statement released by the organization in August 3, 2014:

”امتثالاً لأمر الله سبحانه وتعالى (واعتصموا بحبل الله جميعاً ولا تفرقوا) فقد انطلقت مبادرة ”واعتصموا“ من قبل عدد من العلماء وطلاب العلم في سوريا وذلك بهدف توحيد الفصائل العاملة على الاراضي السورية وتم بحمد الله اجتماع عدد كبير من قادة الفصائل والجبهات الممتدة على مختلف المحافظات السورية واتفقوا على مايلي: اولاً: تشكيل (مجلس لقيادة الثورة السورية) تحت مسمى مجلس قيادة الثورة السورية ليكون الجسم الموحد للثورة السورية“ (بيان حول تشكيل مجلس قيادة الثورة السورية، ٢٠١٤).

“In compliance with God’s command to “hold fast (wa i’tasimu) by the rope of God together and be not disunited,” a number of scholars and students of religion (Tullab al-‘Ilm) in Syria started the “Wa I’tasimu Initiative” with the goal of uniting the factions active in Syria. Thanks be to God, a large number of the leaders of the factions and fronts spread out over several Syrian provinces met and agreed to the following: First: To form a council to lead the revolution in Syria called the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council (Majlis Qiyadat al-Thawra al-Suriyya) to be the united body for the Syrian revolution” (Statement on the Formation of the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council, 2014).³³

As we can see, the tendency to regard the events that are taking place in Syria and Bahrain in a non-differentiated manner may not be conducive to understanding the full implications of the process of transformation that is unfolding in those countries and the real magnitude and content of political cleavages that are being created in those two countries. It is important to regard the social unrest that is

³³ Statement released by the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council, August 3, 2014 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ry9daTPHM&feature=youtu.be> - Accessed on July 5, 2015

taking place in both countries in a differentiated manner because the elements of polarization and sectarianism as well as the framing of the narratives that underpin it are deployed in a different way by the al-Asad and Al Khalifa regimes.

A historical analysis of the discursive elements employed in the uprisings in Syria and Bahrain-Similarities and differences

In order to make a proper examination of the symbolic elements that are attached to the uprisings in Syria and Bahrain, it is important to take into consideration the historical context that influences the unfoldment of the protests. In the case of Syria, the lack of democratic tradition has not been conducive to establishing a nuanced deployment of symbolic and rhetoric elements for the purposes of bringing about wider political openness in the country (Wieland and Almqvist, 2013: 166). This explains the sudden emergence of violence as a vehicle for political mobilization. The al-Asad regime, since the very beginning, has failed to bring forth a level of political openness. This aspect ultimately resulted in the development of underlying tensions between the country's political elite and the populace. These factors would come into bear when examining the events that unfolded in the country in aftermath of the Arab Spring.

In the case of Bahrain, the uprisings that have been taken place since the advent of the Arab Spring are informed by the gradual process of political openness that was propelled by the Al Khalifa regime since the 1970s. This level of liberalization has resulted in the nuanced projection of political and economic dissatisfaction directed against the Al Khalifa regime (Shehabi and Owen Jones, 2015: 119). In addition, the history of concession informs the manner in which the social forces of the nation are mobilized in order to bring forward a broader degree of political openness. From this perspective, it may be posited that the history of concessions granted to the populace by the Bahraini government has been influential among the Bahraini citizens. The Al Khalifa regime has been willing to create concessions targeted at avoiding the level of polarization (Alshahabi, 2014).

One of the most significant elements involved in the uprisings that are taking place in the Arab world concerns the use of slogans that can serve to mobilize the drive towards the reform of the political system.³⁴ From an examination of social media sites, it is possible to detect a number of similarities and differences involved

³⁴ Chapter four will discuss the power of social media as an instrument for disseminating information. That chapter will also provide images that correspond with the uprisings that are taking place in Syria and Bahrain. Chapter five will interpret the narratives attached to the slogans used by the protestors as well as the statement issued by the political actors involved in the uprisings.

in the deployment of the rhetoric that are meant to accelerate the process of political transformation in Syria and Bahrain.

One of the slogans used in the Syrian uprising was: يا الله مالنا / غيرك يا الله / *Ya allah malna ghayrak ya allah* / Our victory will come from God.³⁵ This slogan denotes a number of important aspects. To begin with, this slogan is influenced by the Islamic revival that has taken place in the region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. From this standpoint, one may argue that this slogan is indicative of the connection between this Islamic awakening and a democratic revival. Although these two terms may be contradictory in some ways, the Arab Spring has brought to the fore the need to bring about a wider level of democratization in the Middle East. It might be argued that the Islamic awakening that is taking place in the Middle East as a result of the advent of the Arab Spring may have resulted in an increased political awareness on the part of the publics of the region regarding the actualization of their political and social rights. In turn, the process of Islamic awakening might have been responsible for bringing about the possibility of democratization in the Middle East. In this context, it could be posited that the revival of Islamic

³⁵ Slogan 1: "Our victory will come from God" December 30, 2013 - <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/ya.allah.malna.ghairak> - Accessed on May 20, 2015

sentiment may be an alternative way to open up the political process and usher in a more responsive system of government.

The slogan may also point out to the relatively high level of unity that emerged in Syria as a result of the uprising, with Muslims and Christians marching together in order to demand a higher level of democratization on a regular basis. Cooperation between the different groups tends to prevail when there is a prospect of broader participation in the political process for all groups. Conversely, there seems to be a revival of sectarianism when this prospect is blurred (Tarabzouni, 2011).

The use of religious elements constitutes one of the most significant rhetorical tools employed in order to amalgamate support for the cause of political reform. This can be seen in the following two slogans, deployed by the Syrian opposition:

- الله.. سورية.. حرية.. وبس / *Allah.. Suriah.. huriya.. wa bas* / God.. Syria.. Freedom.. and that's it³⁶

- لا سنية ولا علوية سورية وحدة وطنية - / *La Souniah wala al'awiah Suriah wah'dah wat'taniah* / Neither Sunni nor Alawite Syria is national unity³⁷

³⁶ Slogan 2: "God.. Syria.. Freedom.. and that's it" May 15, 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntUD0XWvR8Q> - Accessed on December 25, 2015

³⁷ Slogan 3: "Neither Sunni nor Alawite Syria is national unity" April 5, 2013 - <https://www.facebook.com/mohammad.revolution/posts/446751638744993> - Accessed on July 20, 2015

The religious connotations involved in the uprising can also be seen in the case of Bahrain, as evidence in these slogans:

- لن نركع إلا لله / *Lan nar'ka ella lellaah* / We will only kneel to God³⁸

- هيهات منا الذلة / *Hayhat minna zilla* / Woe unto the Wretched³⁹

- هذا الوطن مانبيعه.. إخوان سنة وشيعة -
ikhwan Sunna wa Shi'ah / This homeland is not for sale..
brothers Sunni and Shi'ite⁴⁰

The use of these slogans denotes a tendency to regard the struggle for political transformation as a religious duty, informed by the aspect of unity between the Shi'ite and Sunni communities.⁴¹ At the same time, there was a big focus made on the fact that the ultimate aim of the protests was to exert a degree of political transformation. This can be seen in the following slogans, used by protestors in Syria and Bahrain:

³⁸ Slogan 4: "We will only kneel to God" March 18, 2011 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rW9OJrcLbKg> - Accessed on July 20, 2015

³⁹ Slogan 5: "Woe unto the Wretched" April 21, 2011 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9C9G6XuDX_0 - Accessed on October 10, 2015

⁴⁰ Slogan 6: "This homeland is not for sale.. brothers Sunni and Shi'ite" May 18, 2012 - <https://twitter.com/AMJK88/status/203555274785689600> - Accessed on July 10, 2015

⁴¹ Politicized religion serves to evoke the sentiment that is needed in order to mobilize the social protestors in the Arab nations. The influence of religious sentiment in the Middle East is important in order to appraise the real possibilities for political transformation in the region.

- حركتنا سلمية مطالبنا مشروعة - / ha'raktuna salmiah matalibuna mashro'ah / Our movement is peaceful our demands are legitimate⁴²

- سلمية سلمية / *Salmiah salmiah* / Peaceful Peaceful⁴³

- سلمية سلمية.. ثورتنا ثورة حريّة - / *Salmiah salmiah.. thawratuna thawrat hurriya* / Peaceful peaceful.. our revolution is revolution for freedom⁴⁴

One may argue that the main difference that can be highlighted between the use of slogans in the Syrian and Bahraini case is the ultimate goal of the political slogans being utilized. In the case of Syria, the demands for political reform result from the fact that the majority of the population has not been democratically represented. In the case of Bahrain, the protestors have claimed that the main motivation is to ensure for accelerating of the democratization.

It is also possible to state that, in both cases in Syria and Bahrain, the slogans emphasized the resolute nature of the protest movement and the determination to see this phenomenon to a successful completion:

⁴² Slogan 7: "Our movement is peaceful our demands are legitimate" October 11, 2011 - <https://twitter.com/BahrainPulse/status/124006847945515008?lang=en> - Accessed on July 10, 2015

⁴³ Slogan 8: "Peaceful Peaceful" May 9, 2011 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2jpiVvOktI> - Accessed on July 10, 2015

⁴⁴ Slogan 9: "Peaceful peaceful.. our revolution is revolution for freedom" September 26, 2011 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wiMKstssxEQ> - Accessed on July 10, 2015

- حريّة حريّة / *Hurriya hurriya* / Freedom Freedom⁴⁵

- واحد واحد واحد واحد الشعب السوري واحد / *Wahid wahid wahid ash-shab al-Suri wahid* / One One One the Syrian People are One⁴⁶

- بدنا نزيلوا لبشار وبهمتنا القوية وسورية بدنها حريّة / *Bidna na'shilu l'Bashar be'himetna alqawiah wa Suriah bedha huriya* / We want to remove Bashar by our powerful interest and Syria wants freedom⁴⁷

- بدنا ولادنا اللي بالسجون / *Bidna awladna illi bi sajun* / We want our kids who are in the prisons⁴⁸

In the case of Bahrain, the following slogans are being used by the protestors:

- يسقط حمد / *Yasqut Hamad* / Down Hamad⁴⁹

- باقون حتى إسقاط النظام / *Baqun hat'a isqat al'nizam* / We will stay till the fall of the regime⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Slogan 10: "Freedom Freedom" March 27, 2012 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yt-8PJJuRxg> - Accessed on November 3, 2015

⁴⁶ Slogan 11: "One One One the Syrian People are One" April 13, 2011 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1g1b3adRVs> - Accessed on November 3, 2015

⁴⁷ Slogan 12: "We want to remove Bashar by our powerful interest and Syria wants freedom" August 18, 2012 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4JhrAlj3o0U> - Accessed on November 3, 2015

⁴⁸ Slogan 13: "We want our kids who are in the prisons" March 18, 2015 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Imf-n8ZrQeY> - Accessed on November 3, 2015

⁴⁹ Slogan 14: "Down Hamad" December 16, 2015 - https://twitter.com/sufala_media/status/677095146601730048 - Accessed on December 25, 2015

⁵⁰ Slogan 15: "We will stay till the fall of the regime" August 24, 2015 - <https://twitter.com/a7rarqurayah/status/635856036667092992> - Accessed on December 25, 2015

- لا حوار لا حوار.. حتى اسقاط النظام / *La hiwar la hiwar.. hatta is'qaat al'nizzam* / No dialogue no dialogue.. until the overthrow of the regime⁵¹

These slogans indicate a high level of determination to ensure the success of the demand for the democratization of the political system. In the case of Syria, the rhetorical instruments deployed through the slogans were also meant to restore a level of dignity to the Syrian people, who had been politically oppressed for decades under the Asad regime (Wieland and Almqvist, 2013: 39).⁵² It is possible to argue that the differences detected in the use of the political slogans indicate some fundamental differences regarding the ultimate aims of the protestors. To be sure, there are important commonalities that stem from the willingness to bring about the restructuring of the political system (Wells, 2015: 51). However, the main difference resides in the call for the acceleration of the process of political transformation in Syria as well as the magnitude of the changes required in order to bring about greater degree of democratization.

⁵¹ Slogan 16: "No dialogue no dialogue.. until the overthrow of the regime" September 3, 2012 - <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/NoDialogue.Feb14> - Accessed on December 25, 2015

⁵² Dignity entails the granting of political rights as well as the endowment of a higher level of social justice.

The role of historical memory in the uprisings that are taking place in Syria and Bahrain

The concept of historical memory is an important one in order to fully evaluate the implications of the rhetorical tools deployed by the opposition groups in Syria and Bahrain and the differences that emerge from an examination of the two cases. The concept of historical memory can be defined as the recollections of the past used by members of society in order to actualize a set of political interests. Davis (2005) writes: “Historical memory may be defined as the collective understanding that a specific group shares about events in the past that is perceives to have shaped its current economic, social, cultural, and political statues and identity” (p. 4). The opposition groups have a better organizational structure in Bahrain as well as a broader history of participation in the process of political transformation, as seen in the case of the political party al-Wifaq. The Shi'ite opposition groups in Bahrain follow the hierarchical lead informed by the doctrine of *al-Marja*, which insists on the doctrine of emulation and following the religious authority of a highly respected cleric to bring about political change (Davis, 2005: 109).

To date, the scholarship has identified two types of historical memory that are relevant to this study. The most significant type of

historical memory is the one that is sanctioned by the state and concerns the shaping of collective identities (Davis, 2005: 111). This is accomplished by manipulating certain images which correspond to the need shape a particular political identity that serves the political status quo. This type of historical memory may be sometimes overridden by one that is based on the need to reappraise the position of a particular social group who feels disenfranchised (Davis, 2005: 103).

In Syria and Bahrain, there is a dual process of politicization in the manner in which historical memory is used. In the case of Syria, the government uses its rhetoric to perpetuate its power, as seen in the deployment of a discourse that is centered on the ideological principles of the Baath Party. It is important to indicate that the influence of Baath ideology has somewhat waned in recent times (Sarah, 2012). However, membership in the Baath Party continues to be a requirement in to hold any position of power within Syria. Some of the main tenets proclaimed by the Baath Party include the need to build an economy which reflects the social needs of the population, the preservation of independence from foreign powers and the promotion of a Pan-Arabist political worldview (Neep, 2014: 104). In fact, the basic principles that guide the Baath Party are

based on the perennial nature of the Arab nation, transcending all possible sectarian boundaries:

“The Arab nation is considered, philosophically speaking, not as a social and economic formation, but as a transcendent fact inspiring different forms, one of its highest contributions taking the form of Islam” (Petran, 1978: 44).

In this context, it is easier to understand the manner in which the al-Asad regime deploys its discursive mechanisms. The slogans utilized by the Baath Party are meant to reinforce particular form of historical memory in a way that promotes the survival of the regime (McHugo, 2015: 37). The al-Asad regime has claimed that certain foreign powers have a vested interest in seeing about the demise of the political system in current operation; an event that could lead to the total collapse of the country, according to the nation’s political elite.⁵³ At the same time, this narrative is contested by the protestors, who have been influential in preserving the historical memory of the independence movement that led to the self-determination of the country in the early 1930s (Neep, 2014: 49).

In the case of Bahrain, the regime has made reference to the historical memory of bargaining with the different social and political forces of the nation. This is done by referring to a historical

⁵³ The al-Asad regime has also deployed this rhetorical tool among overseas Syrian communities - <https://www.facebook.com/events/523555907657853/> -

memory, which is linked to the process of political liberalization that has taken place in the country since the 1970s. The different historical trajectory of the Syrian and Bahraini political system resulted with the latter, having a longer history of political openness.

In this context, the protests that have emerged in Bahrain have focused on anti-regime narrative and the protestors have constantly tried to debunk the government narrative. To be sure, it is important to remark that use of historical memory on both sides of the confrontation has become an important tool in order in shaping the configuration of a new political compact, based on the inevitability of the process of democratization and the bargaining mechanisms that are needed in order to attain this goal (Katzmann, 2004: 38).

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, an analysis of the differences that emerge between the two uprisings facilitates an important comprehension of the potential for political transformation in the Middle East (Ibrahim, 2012). The rhetoric used by the protestors (deployed through the use of slogans) and the usage of historical memory is important for the purposes of understanding the differences that emerged in each case and the way in which they affected the process of political transformation. The slogans utilized

by the protestors in both countries have a great deal in common, as the protestors are interested in bringing in a favorable to the protestors demands type of government in both countries (Sarah, 2012).

Nevertheless, the calls for the end of the regime in each country differ in substantial ways. This can be seen in the case of Syria, where the slogans used indicate the willingness of the Syrian population to achieve a profound transformation of the political system (Sharifi, 2012: 50). In the case of Bahrain, the usage of slogans claims the eagerness on the part of the dissatisfied Shi'ite social groups to bring about a liberal democratic government for the Shi'ite community. At the same time, it should be noted that the many slogans used by the protestors in the Middle East have been deployed for the purposes of bringing about political transformation in both countries (Sharifi, 2012: 54).

In the case of Syria, it appears that this rhetorical tool is deployed in a manner that appeals to the origins of the movement for self-determination that took place in the 1930s (Wieland and Almqvist, 2013: 51; Wright, 2013: 63). At the same time, the al-Asad regime has been active in promoting the use of historical memory in a manner that emphasizes the need to keep Syria free from foreign intrusion (Wieland and Almqvist, 2013 54; Davis, 2005: 105). This

means that the chances of resolving the confrontation in a peaceful manner are dim, as neither side is willing to engage in the process of political bargaining (Abu Shegara, 2014).

In the case of Bahrain, the state has attempted to contain the dissent by making reference to the historical memory of political accommodation and liberalization that has gradually taken place in the country since the 1970s (Shehabi and Owen Jones, 2015: 51). Nevertheless, the protestors have been active in debunking many aspects of this rhetoric, claiming the history of injustices and disenfranchisement directed at the Shi'ite community (Shehabi and Owen Jones, 2015: 56).

For all the reasons cited above, it is possible to conclude that the differences identified in the deployment of rhetoric on the part of the protestors and the government of authorities (such as the use of slogans) in the cases of Syria and Bahrain are of paramount importance in order to ascertain the manner in which the process of political transformation is being articulated in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (Legrenzi, 2011: 65). In the case of Bahrain, we see some considerable efforts on the part of the Al Khalifa regime to engage in a bargaining process with the opposition groups (Khatib, 2012: 78). In the case of Syria, the differences that were identified and point out to a situation in which neither side is willing to engage

in the process of political bargaining, hence marring the possibility of the expansion of the system of representative government.

Chapter Four

The use of the social media and the spread of anti-authoritarian rhetoric in the Arab world

Introduction

This chapter discusses the different ways in which the social media has become important tool for social change. The question to be asked in this chapter is the following: in an era in which social media has become important tool for social and political change, what can these uprisings teach us about how democratic, anti-authoritarian rhetoric has spread, and will continue spread, within the Arab world? This chapter begins by exploring the influence of social media on the introduction of anti-authoritarian ideas in the context of the Syrian and Bahraini uprisings. In this context, social media acted as an alternative outlet for political expression, due to the autocratic nature of the al-Asad regime and monarchical system of the Al Khalifa regime. The second part of the argument presented in this chapter elaborates on the differences regarding the social acceptance of anti-authoritarian views in the Syrian and Bahraini cases. As such, it pays particular attention to several factors involved in the propagation of these views through the social media. The third section of

the chapter examines of the images of the Syrian and Bahraini uprisings disseminated by social media, giving special emphasis to the political repercussions involved in the propagation of these images.

The influence of the social media on the introduction of anti-authoritarian ideas in the context of the Syrian and Bahraini uprisings

One of the most relevant features involved in the spread of the anti-authoritarian views in the Arab world in the aftermath of the Arab Spring is the use of the social media. This communication technology has enabled the oppositional groups in Syria and Bahrain to disseminate their views in a rapid manner. Farah argues that the Arab revolutions were mainly brought about by the demands articulated by young people, who used the social media to become more activity involved in the political process (Farah, 2015). At the same time, the use of social media for the purposes of spreading anti-authoritarian views has been facilitated by the fact that the populations of the Arab world tend to be young (Wells, 2015: 67).

Moreover, the lack of economic opportunity was also a powerful factor in the propagation of revolutionary activity. Social media, made up for the lack of the mechanisms of social mobility. In addition, social media sites like Facebook and Twitter acted as a sort of public space to be used in

order to voice out long-held social, political and economic grievances and promote a spirit of openness (Farah, 2015).⁵⁴

Ajam points that in the Arab world, there are more than twenty million people who use social media.⁵⁵ According to Ajam, Arab people are not traditionally accustomed to their grievances expressed through an open channel. Social media provided them with the medium of open and free press to communicate and express their social, political and economic grievances (Ajam, 2015). In other words, social media provided them with the medium of open and free press to communicate and express their social, political, economic grievances through an open channel in a spirit of openness (Farah, 2015). As an example of the transformation brought forth by social media, it should be noted that in Twitter domain, the hashtag #Bahrain had been mentioned almost three million times within the first two months of 2012 (AlZawba'i, 2014).

The political leadership of Syria did not pay attention to the spread of anti-authoritarian rhetoric in the region. Instead, the regime in Syria attempted to control the tide of political openness which was taking place in the region (Lawless, 2010: 78). This can be seen in a speech given by

⁵⁴ Social media acts as a “public space” in the Arab world due to the inability of the public to express their views in the mainstream media and civil society organizations in a free manner.

⁵⁵ Most globalization scholars would agree, that the advent of the social media (such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) revolutionized the way with in which people express themselves in political terms (Ajam, 2015).

President Bashar al-Asad, who reiterated the illegitimacy of the demands made by the opposition forces:

”أي عرض سياسي لا يعتمد أساسا على مكافحة الإرهاب ووضع حد له هو غير فعال عمليا... زادت الدول الداعمة للإرهابيين دعمهم لهم مؤخرا، وفي بعض الحالات، تدخلت مباشرة لدعمها... لا يمكن الاعتماد على تغييرات في الغرب دامت كما أنها تتبع سياسة الكيل بمكيالين. نحن لم نتوقف على دعمهم بل اعتمدنا على أنفسنا منذ اليوم الأول، على أمل النوايا الحسنة من أصدقاء حقيقيين للشعب السوري“ (الأسد، ٢٠١٥).

“Any political presentation that does not essentially rely on combating terrorism and ending it is practically ineffective ... Countries supporting have increased their support to them recently and in some cases, they directly intervened to back them...changes of the West cannot be counted on as long as they follow the double-standards policy. We have not depended but on ourselves since the first day, hoping good intentions from the real friends of the Syrian people” (al-Asad, 2015).⁵⁶

Altarawli argues that the social media has become the most important medium of effective communication and power deployment for the discontented groups (Altarawli, 2013). This assertion is measured by the proportionality between the level of social media traffic in the Arab world and the level of engagement in the political process, particularly as it relates to the unfolding of the uprisings in geographical locales such as Syria and Bahrain (Wells, 2015: 188). This state of affairs indicates a causal mechanism between the use of social media and the propagation of political opinion in the Arab world.

⁵⁶ Talk of political solution to Syria crisis is ‘hollow, meaningless’ July 26, 2015 - www.rt.com/news/310799-syria-conflict-west-terrorists/ utm_source=browser&utm_medium=application_chrome&utm_campaign=chrome Accessed on July 13, 2015

Social media allows the young population of the any part of the world to highlight their discontent and dissatisfaction with the government.

Altarawli also maintains that the social media allows this constituency to become aware of the historical importance of the Arab Spring and the political repercussions of the wave of anti-authoritarian sentiment that is sweeping the region (Altarawli, 2013).

Tarabzouni maintains that social media has enabled the Arab world to use a forum that would enable the citizenry to develop and share ideas regarding the construction of a more participatory and stable political environment. Tarabzouni also maintains that the social media is has enabled the Arab citizenry to develop a civil society and circumvent the restrictions that exist in the framework of mainstream media (Tarabzouni, 2011).

Nevertheless, it is also important to highlight the fact that to exert its influence in a more effective way, the mobilization that takes place via the social media needs to be accompanied by structural political change (Wells, 2015: 177). It is also important to highlight that authors such as Ibrahim have pointed out the adverse reaction that the opening of the political debate has on society.

To reverse the impact of the social media of political opening, the Bahraini government has implemented a series of restrictions on the use of social media. The same *modus operandi* has been employed by the al-Asad

government, which is under constant attack by multiple sectarian forces (Ibrahim, 2012). In this context, These are actions that tend to curtail the extent to which the anti-authoritarian discourse may be dispersed throughout the Middle East (Wells, 2015: 181).

Western commentators have been somewhat reticent to acknowledge the possibility that the widespread use of social media may facilitate the dissemination of anti-authoritarian views in the Middle East (Lawless, 2010: 176). The social mobilization that is taking place via the social media is changing the political consciousness of publics in the Arab world. However, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, there has not been any concerted effort to translate the level of mobilization propagated by the social media into effective political change.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a willingness to accept that the political turmoil that has taken place in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. This is what emerges from an interview given by Bernard Lewis, where he outlined his views on the political prospects in the region:

“Why should we expect them to adopt a Western system? And why should we expect it to work?...To lay the stress all the time on elections, parliamentary Western-style elections, is a dangerous delusion...Not because Muslims' cultural DNA is predisposed against it—quite the contrary...The whole Islamic tradition is very clearly against autocratic and irresponsible rule...There is a very strong

tradition—both historical and legal, both practical and theoretical—of limited, controlled government” (Lewis, 2011: 64).

These are some relevant aspects to take into consideration when appraising the spread of anti-authoritarian views in the Middle East since the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011. In addition, it is important to highlight the fact that the spread of anti-authoritarian views across the Middle East does not automatically mean the entrenchment of the democratic process, as Fukuyama points out:

“Despite those thrilling revolutionary days in Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2011, the Arab Spring doesn't look like it will yield a real democracy anywhere but the country where it started, Tunisia. Still, it is likely to mean more responsive Arab politics over the long haul. Expectations that this would happen quickly were extremely unrealistic. We forget that following the revolutions of 1848—Europe's "Springtime of Peoples"—democracy took another 70 years to consolidate” (Fukuyama, 2014).⁵⁷

Fukuyama has expressed some concerns regarding the possibility that social media could become a medium for the propagation of anti-authoritarian views. The reason adduced by Fukuyama revolves around the inability of the liberal elements within the Arab world to fully capitalize on the opportunities afforded by the social media. In addition, there is a marked absence of a civil society and government institutions capable of

⁵⁷ Fukuyama, F., At the End of History Still Stands Democracy, June 6, 2014 - www.wsj.com/articles/at-the-end-of-history-still-stands-democracy-1402080661 - Accessed on January 6, 2016

facilitating the advent of further political liberalization (Lawless, 2010: 81).

Fukuyama uses the case of Egypt in order to illustrate this state of affairs:

“Political parties exist in order to institutionalize political participation; those who were best at organizing, like the Muslim Brotherhood, have walked off with most of the marbles. Facebook, it seems, produces a sharp, blinding flash in the pan, but it does not generate enough heat over an extended period to warm the house” (Fukuyama, 2012).⁵⁸

Notwithstanding the validity of these comments, the use of social media has been very effective for the purposes for disseminating anti-authoritarian views. In addition, the gradual and slow progress made in Syria and Bahrain in regards to the advent of a more open political environment indicate the difficulties involved in attempting to bring about a more responsive political compact. In the next section, there will be an evaluation of differences between in the acceptance of anti-authoritarian views between the Syrian and Bahraini cases (anti-autocracy in the case of Syria and anti-non democracy in the case of Bahrain) and the prospects for the propagation of political openness in the Middle East.

⁵⁸ Fukuyama, F., The Failures of the Facebook Generation in the Arab Spring, May 21, 2012 - www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/05/21/the-failures-of-the-facebook-generation-in-the-arab-spring.html - Accessed on January 3, 2016

The differences between in the acceptance of anti-authoritarian views between the Syrian and Bahraini cases

As we will see in this section, the acceptance of anti-authoritarian views in the Arab world is intimately linked to several factors, including educational attainment, size of the population and access to communicational devices.⁵⁹ It is important to remark that the Syrian population has a more limited access to the social media, compared to the Bahraini citizenry. In the case of Syria, only less than thirty per cent of the population has access to the Internet, compared with 97 per cent in the case of Bahrain (CIA World Factbook, 2015). In addition, it should be added that the smaller size of the Bahraini population accelerates the dissemination of information through the social media.

⁵⁹ The Arab world has traditionally accepted an authoritarian style of government, as it is often regarded as more charismatic and more attentive to the needs and interests of the different social groups. It seems that the population of the Arab world is more comfortable with personalistic systems of government, rather than in the dispersion of power among several segments of society.

Table 2. Elements that influence the differences between in the acceptance of anti-authoritarian views between the Syrian and Bahraini cases

	Syria	Bahrain
1-Level of internet connectivity	Low level of internet connectivity: The relatively low level of economic development and the political fragmentation that exists in Syria comes to bear when examining the low usage of the internet in Syria.	High level of internet connectivity: The higher level of economic development and the country's territorial integrity enable Bahraini citizens to have wide access to the internet.

2-Level of proficiency in the English language.	Lower level of proficiency in the English language: The Baath ideological input that informs the Syrian educational system has been responsible for the low level of English knowledge among Syrian citizens.	Higher level of proficiency in the English language: The friendly attitude exhibited by the Al Khalifa regime has been responsible for the higher level of penetration of the English language among the Bahraini citizens.
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3- Level of educational attainment.	Lower level of educational attainment: The lower level of economic development that is prevalent in Syria has led to a reduced level of educational attainment, which also resulted in a lower level of political awareness among the Syrian citizenry.	Higher level of educational attainment: The higher level of economic development has led to a higher level of educational attainment and a higher level of political awareness among the Bahraini citizenry.
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There is also a higher level of sophistication in the manner in which the social media has been used for social mobilization in the case of Bahrain. This responds to the relatively high level of educational attainment that exists in Bahrain. Furthermore, the telecommunications system is much more better organized in Bahrain than Syria. Another aspect that also needs to be factored in relates to the knowledge of the English language on the part of the Bahraini population, which allows them to reach an international audience in their attempt to propagate their political demands. This is an

important factor to take into consideration, as the use of the English language allows the Bahraini population to have contact with the wider world and to absorb democratic ideas coming from the Western world.

Most fundamentally, the Bahraini citizenry has been able to enjoy a wider level of social mobilization due to the way in which the social media has been used in order to raise awareness among the population through the attendance to mosque prayers (Bebawi and Bossio, 2014: 41). This is seen in the highly attended Friday prayer, where the opportunity is taken to disseminate audio-visual material related to the uprising. This state of affairs indicates the importance that religious networking has in the context of political mobilization (Bebawi and Bossio, 2014: 44).

From this standpoint, one could argue that religious networking is therefore providing in the case of Bahrain the framework (if not the content) in which groups voice out of their dissatisfaction. Religious networking can be defined as the type of mobilization that highlights the relevance of the social aspects of Islamic practice for the purposes of raising political awareness among the populace. This is an aspect of particular importance in order to understand the manner in which the social media allows for the dissemination of views. These are aspects that do not obtain in the case of Syria, where the population is less homogenous and more steeped in the statist thinking of the Ba'th Party (De Angelis, 2015). This state of affairs

from the Bahraini case, where the citizenry has not been exposed to any particularly strong ideological output by the state.

Nevertheless, it is important to remark that the events that took place across the Arab world in 2011 have brought forward the emergence of citizen journalism, as seen in the proliferation of alternative media in the form of magazines, radio stations and websites (De Angelis, 2015).⁶⁰ In this manner, it may be posited that in spite of the lower level of socio-economic development and educational attainment, the Syrian citizenry remains active in searching alternative ways of bringing about a more responsive political order through the use of the social media. These are aspects that bodes well for the possibility of the dissemination of anti-authoritarian views in the Middle East at large. The social media has propelled the reformulation of the tenets that inform the configuration of the political compact in the region. In this manner, it could be argued that the changes propelled by social media are ideational in nature; instead of driving forward an agenda based on institutional transformation. As we will see in the next section, the propagation of audio-visual material on the part of the protestors in Syria and Bahrain has led to the consolidation of the calls for political changes in the Middle East.

⁶⁰ An example of citizen journalism and alternative media would be the case of Wael Ghonim in Egypt.

**An examination of the images of the Syrian and Bahraini uprisings
disseminated by the social media**

One of the most salient features of the way in which social media allows for the dissemination of anti-authoritarian views in the cases of the Syrian and Bahraini uprisings is reflected in the imagery deployed by the protestors connected to the political upheavals that are taking place in those countries.



Image 1: <http://aljumhuriya.net/13997> (Hama, Syria on July 13, 2013)



Image 2: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/syriafreedom/6904497841> (Damascus, Syria on February 19, 2012)

In Images 1 and 2, we can see the presence of Syrian women in the protests that are unfolding in the country. This is an aspect of relevant importance to appreciate the impact that the social media has on the political of the uprising. It may be argued that that the presence of women in the demonstrations prevents the government forces from being more violent towards the protestors. The strong presence of women indicates a level of opening that encourages the discussion of other social issues pertaining to the need to bring about a more democratized level of action in Syria (Ibrahim, 2012). The presence of a multitude of women in the image indicates the comprehensive nature of the struggle, which encompasses

different social segments and ethnic groups. In addition, the images show in an eloquent manner the way in which women are taking advantage of this uprising in order to elevate their own position in society (Shabib, 2012).



Image 3: <http://s.alriyadh.com/2011/08/13/img/985094899960.jpg> (Homs, Syria on August 13, 2011)



Image 4: <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CT9PPjAU5AACj9Q.jpg:large> (Amman, Jordan on December 9, 2011)

In Images 3 and 4, there is a depiction of a willingness to engage in political protest for the purposes of ushering in an era of democratic rule in Syria. We can see the presence of the Syria flags in both images. There seems to be a clear call to engage in political protest for the purposes of ushering in an era of democratic rule in Syria (Shagara, 2014). The propagation of these images through the social media indicate that the

Syrian people are responsive to the idea of the dissemination of anti-authoritarian views in their country, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (Ibrahim, 2012).



Image 5: <http://alasr.me/articles/view/12274> (Idlib, Syria on November 26, 2011)

Image 5 shows the extent of the political aspirations that stemmed from the onset of the uprising in Syria. The banner shows a number of protestors demanding for a change in the political leadership of Syria. At the same time, the image shows how the protestors framed these political demands within the framework of the democratic revolutions that sprawled

all over the Middle East. The image shows the anger of the people towards the al-Asad regime. Therefore, this image has the purpose of creating a clear political choice between further democratization or the continuation of autocratic rule (Abu Shegara, 2014).



Image 6: <http://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/middle-east/61066-150214-protests-set-to-mark-four-years-after-bahrain-uprising> (Manama, Bahrain on March 2, 2011)

In Image 6, we can see the description of the state of affairs that has been unfolding in Bahrain since the beginning of the uprising. The fact that a large number of women wearing the Islamic veil took to the streets of Manama in order to protest against the regime, points out the willingness of the local population to accept the anti-non democratic views that have become prevalent in the Middle East since the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011. It is important to underline the fact that anti-non democratic views do

not necessarily convey the idea of the propagation of democratic values as conceived in the West. To be sure, it might denote the willingness to accelerate the level of government responsiveness towards the needs of the population. The image shown above indicates that the political demands propagated by the demonstrators are framed within the context of religious tradition. This can be seen in the wide usage of the abaya (traditional female Islamic robe) on the part of the women.

At the same time, it is worth mentioning that the fact that these protestors were waving the flag of Bahrain indicates a willingness to engage in political discussions with the government (Shehabi and Owen Jones, 2015: 40). Unlike the pictures disseminated through the social media regarding the political situation in Syria, Image 6 portrays the feeling of social dissatisfaction. However, the protest is carried out with the use of the Bahraini flag. In any case, it is important to bring in the historical perspective that has informed the evolution of events in Bahrain. From this perspective, it may be posited that the history of concessions granted to the populace by the Bahraini government has been influential among the Bahraini people. The Al Khalifa regime has been willing to make concessions aimed at avoiding the level of polarization (Alshahabi, 2014).



Image 7: <http://www.lobelog.com/wp-content/uploads/Bahrain-Uprising-620x350.jpg> (Manama, Bahrain on April 19, 2013)

In Image 7, we can see the way in which the protestors used the English language in order to propagate visual imagery that could be understood by the masses throughout the world. From this standpoint, it is important to indicate that visual imagery becomes an effective political tool when it is supplemented by the competent use of slogans (Ayoob, 2012: 99).⁶¹ Furthermore, it could be argued that the combination of slogans written in Arabic and English, as shown in Image 7, help to entrench the regional and international perspective related to the uprising, clearly illustrating the demands posed by the protestors. At the same time, the

⁶¹ This can be seen in the deployment of social activism during the events that took place in Tunisia and Egypt during the initial stages of the Arab Spring, as evidenced by the demonstrations that took place in different parts of Bahrain.

protestors used the English language in order to broadcast their dissatisfaction indicates the internationalization of the struggle against the regime and the constant evolution of the uprisings.

We can see a commitment on the part of the Bahraini people to defy (through demonstrations and the use of the social media) the mechanisms deployed by the authorities (Shehabi and Owen Jones, 2015: 117). In addition, it is important to remark that social media has become an important forum for the dissemination of photographs that depict a direct confrontation between the Bahraini citizenry and the security forces. The visual representation portrayed in this image indicates the central place that the uprising has in the political evolution of Bahrain.

In the case of Syria, we see a reluctance on the part of the al-Asad regime to deal with the political grievances expressed by opposition groups (Khondker, 2011: 680). This is because in the case of Syria, the uprising is also related to questions regarding the geopolitical reconfiguration of the Middle East. While in the case of Bahrain the regime has received an enormous amount of support by the GCC countries in order to stave off the threat of geopolitical destabilization (Ayoob, 2012: 98).

In any case, both the Syrian and Bahraini governments have also been active in the use of imagery meant to strengthen the status quo and legitimize the existing political order. This can be seen in the following Syrian YouTube video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FO9_7TSefhQ),

which shows a pro-government demonstration in Damascus, on November 13, 2011, in response to the financial and economic sanctions imposed by the Arab League in 2011. This video is meant to strengthen the legitimacy of the regime by projecting the view that the government led by al-Asad has a broad level of popular support. This shows a consistent attempt at defying the calls for political openness instigated by the international community as well as several opposition groups in Syria.

In the case of Bahrain, there is also a use of the social media in order to show the support given to the Al Khalifa regime by certain segments of the Bahraini population (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=io9PdI_NOv8). This video, shot in Manama on February 18, 2011, is not necessarily geared towards convincing the Bahraini population about the popularity of the regime. Instead, it is directed at illustrating some level of support for the regime among the international community. It is important to acknowledge that the al-Asad and Al Khalifa regimes enjoy some level of support among the key segments of populace, such as the armed forces; an aspect that has contributed to their entrenchment in power (Alothman, 2011).

As we can see, in both Syrian and Bahraini cases, the government has acknowledged the importance of social media in the propagation of political ideas. It could be argued that while Bahrain has been more active in responding to the calls for political openness propagated through social media, Syria has been more reluctant to usher in a broader level of

responsiveness (McHugo, 2015: 110). Social media has opened the discussion regarding the reconfiguration of the authoritarian political environment, and in the process creating a tide of change that has proven to be irreversible. Notwithstanding the efforts of the Syrian government to stem that tide, it is expected that the lively debate that has been facilitated by the advent of the social media could entrench the level of anti-authoritarian sentiment in the Middle East.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of the use of the social media and the spread of anti-regime rhetoric in Syria and Bahrain demonstrate a number of important aspects regarding the prospects for the dissemination of anti-authoritarian views in the region (Gelvin, 2011: 55). To begin with, it should be noted that notwithstanding some apprehension regarding the possibility of a wider level of democratization in the region, the level of mobilization facilitated by the advent of the social media has been influential in spreading the calls for political openness. The indicator of measurement that needs to be applied in order to measure political openness revolves around the link between social media traffic and social mobilization directed at creating a higher level of political awareness among the population (McHugo, 2015: 122). It may also be postulated that in spite of the differences that exist between the Syrian and Bahraini cases, there

seems to be a common thread; as seen in the communicational way in which protestors in both countries have pursued the fight for anti-regime rhetoric.

At the same time, it is important to point out that the spread of audio-visual material through the social media has been a relevant factor in the dissemination of anti-authoritarian views. The examples shown in the previous section demonstrates the importance of this factor in the propagation of the calls for political openness, in spite of the fact that the governments of Syria and Bahrain have used this mechanism for the purposes of entrenching their grip on power (Abdo, 2013: 33). For all the reasons cited above, it may be concluded that the social media has accelerated the level of political openness in the region, as it accelerated the process of mobilization in a part of the world with a rudimentary (but emerging) civil society (Ibrahim, 2012).

Chapter Five

The relationship between sectarianism and social justice discourse in the case of the uprisings taking place in Syria and Bahrain

Introduction

The question that will guide the writing of this chapter is the following one: in what ways can the discursive elements of the uprisings in Syria and Bahrain help us to understand how the framing of the conflict has been posed as a sectarian conflagration on the part of the political elites, and the democracy or social justice based dimension propagated by the protestors? One of the most salient features of the uprisings which are taking place in Syria and Bahrain relates to the differences in the discourse utilized by political elites and protestors. While the first constituency labors under the assumption that the protests are taking place as a result of sectarian sentiment, the demonstrators emphasize the notion that the protests are the result of the desire of vast percentage of the population to bring about a higher level of democratization and social justice in those countries.

This chapter raises the question pertaining to the way in which the discourses on sectarianism and social justice are interconnected in the cases of Syria and Bahrain. This chapter analyzes the meaning of sectarianism

within the context of Islamist social movements and its implications for the understanding of the uprisings that are taking place in Syria and Bahrain. It also examines the way in which sectarianism is shaping the political evolution of the uprisings in both nations as well the narrative attached to the slogans used by the protestors and the government in Syria and Bahrain.

The semantic and conceptual definitions of the notions of sectarianism and social justice

Sectarianism is the politicization of religious or ethnic identity as an alternative mode of collective social identity. The concept of sectarianism that needs to be operationalized to examine the onset of conflict in the Arab world in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the spread of anti-authoritarian rhetoric revolves around the idea that certain social groups create a set of political demands geared towards bolstering the social standing of this collective (Durac and Cavatorta, 2015: 88). There is a historical perspective that informs the course of events that is taking place in both Syria and Bahrain. The Middle East is a region that has been profoundly affected by the onset of sectarianism. In this context, the Iranian revolution of 1979 became a powerful motivation of the notion of sectarianism, as it created an awakening of Shi'ite/Alawite religious fervor in the Middle East. The spread of sectarianism is often linked to the negation of political rights for certain

social groups (Durac and Cavatorta, 2015: 91). Altuwaijri maintains that sectarianism has become a source of discord in the political structures of many countries across the Arab world. This sectarianism is fuelled by the cleavage that originated with the advent of the Iranian revolution in 1979. The expansion of the doctrinal tenets of Shi'ite ideology has had a profound impact on the region, as it ushered in the rise of sectarianism in region. The phenomenon described above has threatened nations in the region (Altuwaijri, 2015). Alsheik argues that sectarianism is an instrument that prevents the democratization of the Arab world according to a national narrative aimed at constructing a broad social consensus among the different communities (Alsheik, 2014).

In the case of Syria, the onset of sectarianism has led many segments of the population to blame the lack of actualization of political and economic rights on parts of the population with connection to the circles of power (Khatib, 2012: 103). This is the reason why various groups of Sunni extraction, which tend to create individuated political demands that tend to run counter to the social rights of communities such as the Alawites, closely linked to the al-Asad regime (Amel, 2013: 51).

In the case of Bahrain, the operationalization of the concept of sectarianism is manifested in a slightly different way. The dividing lines within the level of political demands are rooted in the fragmentation between

the Al Khalifa regime and the protestors are better defined than in the case of Syria (Ameen, 2015). While the protestors have established their own set of political demands, they have done in the context of the consensus between the Shi'ite and Sunni communities (Khatib, 2012: 108).

At the same time, social justice is the provision of fair treatment and wider participation of the citizenry in the political and economic system. It is incumbent to broach us the concept of social justice to determine the manner in which it is intertwined with the notion of sectarianism (Milton-Edwards, 2011: 133). The concept of social justice is based on the idea of the actualization of the political rights of disenfranchised groups through the spread of anti-authoritarian views in the Middle East (Milton-Edwards, 2011: 139).

In the case of Syria, the concept of social justice is operationalized by the spread of anti-authoritarian views and the promotion of civil rights which are geared towards compelling the opening of the political space (Durac and Cavatorta, 2015: 91). In the case of Bahrain, the notion of concept of social justices leads to the spread of anti-non democracy, albeit from the perspective of a closer level of cooperation between the Shi'ite and Sunni communities.

The meaning of sectarianism within the context of Islamist social movements

Before examining the manner in which sectarianism affects the discourse used by the actors of Syria and Bahrain, it is incumbent to define the meaning of sectarianism and situate it in the context of the development of Islamist social movements. The sectarian issue poses a series of challenges to the relations between the state and the citizenry (Ameen, 2015). Ghalioun argues that the sources of legitimacy enjoyed by the state are compromised when there is a fracture caused by the onset of sectarianism. That cleavage is caused by the political friction that is caused as a result of the drive towards the accomplishment of political and social rights by the different social and political groups involved in the confrontation. This prevents the state from maintaining the level of power that is necessary to monopolize the use of violence within its borders (Ghalioun, 2012: 104). The presence of social and political activism based on religion propagates the decoupling between the state and the citizenry when it is based around the actualization of sectarian interests.

Sectarianism may be defined as the rhetorical and pragmatic mode that propels political actions among the members of disenfranchised social groups. In recent years, there has been a surge of Islamist activity in the Middle East at large, which in many cases derived in the configuration of political parties that attempted to carve a space for themselves in the democratized social space (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 46). The Da'wa Party in Iraq, which purports to

represent the interests of the country's Shi'ite majority, has been influential in democratizing the political space. At the same time, the advances of Islamist political parties in countries such as Egypt produced the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood, which attempted to maximize their presence in the political arena through the attempt to reconstitute the cultural foundations of the country from the top down (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 49).

Aldakhil points out that the best way to examine the outburst of sectarianism that is affecting the Middle East is by looking at the history of Islam. The doctrinal differences that arose between Sunni and Shi'ite were of a political rather than a religious nature. Therefore, the traditional slogans used in the context of the political circumstances that inform the protests in Syria and Bahrain employ religious elements for the purposes of disguising the true intentions of the demonstrations (Aldakhil, 2015). Several Arab authors and commentators have pointed out the advent of sectarian politics in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (Ibrahim, 2012; Abu Shegara, 2014). According to this perspective, the phenomenon of sectarian politics in Iraq after the toppling of Saddam Hussein has been extended to Lebanon and Syria as well as North Africa, where the old rivalries between the Arab and Berber segments of the population has been reignited as a result of the general state of political tension reigning in the region (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 114).

This phenomenon seems to be inimical to the idea of pooling social resources for the purposes of initiating the process of full democratization in the Middle East (Abu Shagara, 2014). In the context of the uprisings that have been taking place in Syria, sectarianism as well as foreign influence has become a discursive tool to deflect criticism towards the regime and pin down the blame on the protestors for the onset of violence. There are some important differences and similarities that can be identified. As the al-Asad regime in Syria is dominated by members of a religious minority (Alawite Shi'ism). This means that there is a natural tendency for the regime to accuse opposition groups of sectarianism to bolster their own legitimacy (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 119). In addition, it seems that in the case of Syria, there is a gradual realization on the part of some segments of the population regarding the inevitability of the political decay leading to sectarianism, notwithstanding the efforts of the protestors to present a common front (Abdo, 2013: 39). This case does not apply in regards to the demonstrations that are taking place in Bahrain, where the Shi'ite protestors have been seeking the support of their Sunni counterparts in the extension of democratic rights for the Bahraini population (Deeb, 2015: 144).

The notion of sectarianism in the context of the uprisings unfolding in Syria and Bahrain

Sectarianism seems to be a contested concept, which needs to be examined in according to the political circumstances prevailing in Syria and Bahrain. Deeb maintains that the level of sectarianism in Syria is not strong enough as to be backed up by strong scientific evidence. In addition, the author argues that even if the range of sectarianism existed, it is not acute enough in order to cause a significant cleavage in the political process (Deeb, 2015: 17). Most importantly, the author argues that the sectarianism should be understood as a social construct geared towards the institutionalization of individuated communal identities, and not as an element that demarcates the political sphere (Sharifi, 2012: 26). In this context, it could be argued that under this categorization, the regime that is currently in power in Syria should not be construed as an “Alawite” regime but as the epitome of a particular political template instead as the standard-bearer of the aspirations of the Alawite sect (Deeb, 2015: 19). From this standpoint, it may be posited that sectarianism is used by the opposition as a tool in order to advance their own political agenda (Abdo, 2013: 67).

There is another perspective which links the rise of sectarianism to the manner in which the al-Asad regime reacted to the demands for political openness that are propagated by the protestors:

”في بلد عندما تقمع قضاياها الطائفية بقسوة لعقود عديدة، وحيث ” انفجار المسألة الطائفية “ كان الاتهام للتغطية ضد كل المعارضين السياسيين، والنمو الهائل في الخطابات الطائفية للقبض على النخبة المثقفة تماما على حين غرة“ (ديبو، ٢٠١٤).

“In a country where sectarian issues were ruthlessly suppressed for many decades, and where “instigating sectarian tensions” was a blanket accusation against all political dissidents, the explosive growth in sectarian discourses caught the intellectual elite completely off guard” (Dibo, 2014).⁶²

The statement shown above indicates the difficulties inherent in attempting to use the notion of sectarianism in order to explain the political transformation which is taking place in Syria. Sectarianism seems to be a relatively new phenomenon in Syria, at least in terms of its deployment for political purposes. It would appear that the phenomenon appeared as a response to the inability of the al-Asad regime to bring about a modicum of democratization to the country. According to Dibo, what is needed is:

”لتجاوز تبسيط مسألة النظر عما إذا كان النظام السوري هو في الواقع طائفي أم لا، يجب أن يتم تحقيق وتأطير للمفاهيم الأساسية - وخاصة الطائفية منها وعلاقتها بالسلطة“ (ديبو، ٢٠١٤).

“[T]o move beyond the simplistic question of whether the Syrian regime is indeed sectarian or not, but rather to investigate and to critically frame the underlying concepts - particularly, sectarianism and its relation to authority” (Dibo, 2014).⁶³

⁶² Opening the debate on sectarianism in Syria, September, 22, 2014 - <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/mohammad-dibo/opening-debate-on-sectarianism-in-syria-arabic> - Accessed on August 15, 2015

⁶³ Opening the debate on sectarianism in Syria, September 22, 2014 - <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/mohammad-dibo/opening-debate-on-sectarianism-in-syria-arabic> - Accessed on August 15, 2015

The al-Asad regime has nonetheless been active in accusing the protestors of responding to the sectarian interests of prominent Arab monarchical regimes that are willing to prop up their legitimacy by engaging in a proxy confrontation with countries allied to Iran:

”لا تزال الثورة السورية مستمرة، واصبحت لديها طبيعتان، طبيعة حراك سياسي سلمي، وطبيعة عنفية متمثلة بالجيش السوري الحر، الذي نشأ كردة فعل على القمع الوحشي الذي انتهجه نظام الاسد بمواجهة الحركة الشعبية. ورغم البيانات والهتافات المتعددة التي اطلقها الثوار في سوريا، رفضاً للطائفية وللمطالبة بوحدة الشعب السوري، نرى الكثير من القوى المساندة للنظام تحاول ان تبين ان الثورة تطغى عليها الجماعات الاسلامية المتطرفة، التي تدعمها السعودية وقطر، وبالمقابل تحاول هذه القوى بالشراسة مع النظام كما لو كان نظاماً علمانياً تقدمياً، وحامياً للأقليات الدينية“ (أبو ظاهر، ٢٠١٣).

“The Syrian revolutionary process is still ongoing and has taken now both a peaceful and armed nature to confront the violent repression of the regime. The popular movement in Syria, despite its messages, statements and chants of unity and solidarity of the Syrian people, had had to face the continuous accusations by the regime and some specific groups on the left regionally and internationally of being dominated by religious extremist Islamist while the supporters of the regime has portrayed the Asad regime as secular and protector of the religious minorities” (Abu Dahir, 2013).⁶⁴

Dauib maintains that the issue of sectarianism is related to the gradual political transition that has taken place in Syria in the last two decades, with the rise of opposition to the regime and the slow Islamization of society. This is an aspect of particular importance to appraise the onset of sectarian violence in Syria, particularly when taking into consideration the historical context that led to the onset of social unrest in 2011. Since the 1980s, the

⁶⁴ Sectarianism and the Assad regime in Syria, March 2013 - <http://permanentrevolution-journal.org/ar/issue3/assaad-sectarianism-syria> - Accessed on August 15, 2015

Muslim Brotherhood has been making inroads into the political arena of the nation. One of the consequences of this state of affairs is related to the jihadist drive that contributed to the advent of the military struggle against the regime in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (Dauib, 2015).

Alzain maintains that the issue of sectarianism has to be examined in a more rigorous way to ascertain the manner in which it has affected the political evolution of Syria. In this context, it is relevant to remark that in other locales the rise of sectarianism did not degenerate into a situation of widespread violence, as seen in the case of Bahrain (Alzain, 2014). In the case of Syria, the issue of sectarianism has derived in a state of warfare in which every segment has been able to carve a territorial space, eventually leading to the fragmentation of Syria. In other words, sectarianism did not create the conditions for widespread conflict. Instead, it could be argued that sectarianism was brought forth by the advent of conflict in the context of the events of the Arab Spring. The dissemination of social and political grievances were responsible for fragmenting the social space into the different groups with particular needs and interests. At the same time, it has been noted that geopolitical matters are of paramount importance in order to appreciate the relevance of sectarian issues in the conflict that is taking place in Syria (Alzain, 2014).

Ameen argues that there are difficulties in ascertaining whether one should look to sectarianism as the real reason behind the upheavals that are unfolding in Syria. This poses a significant methodological problems which prevent scholars from assessing the implications of the conflict that is unfolding in Syria. The main methodological problem pertains to the state of confusion that appears to arise from the way in which the drive towards the actualization of communal interests has been misunderstood by the international publics as sectarianism (Ameen, 2015). In this context, it is important to point out that there seems to be some differences between the Syrian and Bahraini case in this regard. In the case of Syria, both the protestors and the regime seem to use sectarianism as a political tool. For example, the protestors tend to associate political repression to the influence of the Alawite community. At the same time, the government tends to point its fingers at the Sunni community in order to explain the state of political disarray. It pays to highlight that the level of fragmentation that has unfolded in Syria (with the occupation of much of the country by the forces of the Islamic State) has expanded the level of sectarianism to a significant extent. Syria has been territorially reconfigured in a way that reflects its ethnic diversity, with the Islamic State occupying the Sunni-majority areas and the al-Asad regime in charge of the areas with a substantial Alawite population (Abu Shagara, 2014). Nevertheless, in the case of Bahrain, sectarianism appear to derive from external influences and the regime noted that the

protests stem from the growing influence of Iran amongst the Shi'ite segment of society. The Al Khalifa government pointed out this influence by using the state television, which showed that the social unrest in the country has been caused by the dissemination of the interests of Iran among the Shi'ite Bahraini population (Altarawli, 2013; Karolak, 2011: 7).

The al-Asad regime has linked the onset of hostilities to the rise of sectarianism. Sectarianism which in the view of the Syrian regime is propagated by elements which are keen on asserting political control over the country. According to Bashar al-Asad, this represents a throwback to the colonial era:

”أما بالنسبة للغرب، سليل الاستعمار وسياسة التفرقة والفتنة الطائفية المقيتة، فإنه هو الذي يغلق باب الحوار وليس نحن، لأنها تستخدم لإعطاء أوامر للإنقياد، ونحن معتادون على السيادة والاستقلال وحرية القرار، لأنه مدمن على أجراء وقهرا ولأننا رفعت على الكرامة والعزة، وهكذا سنبقى“ (الأسد، ٢٠١٣).

“As for the west, the descendant of colonialism and in the policy of division and despicable sectarian strife, it is the one who closed the door of dialogue not us, because it's used to giving orders to the submissive, and we're used to sovereignty, independence and freedom of decision, because it's addicted to hirelings and the subjugated and because we're raised on dignity and pride, and so shall we remain” (al-Asad, 2013).⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Bashar al-Asad's Speech On Syrian Crisis, January 7, 2013 - www.ibtimes.com/bashar-al-Asads-speech-syrian-crisis-full-text-998536 - Accessed on August 15, 2015

Opposition groups have acknowledged the presence of sectarian attitudes in the context of the protests which are taking place in Syria. Here we see an important element of differentiation vis-à-vis the demonstrations that are unfolding in Bahrain:

”يؤكد الائتلاف السوري إلى حل سياسي الذي يجب أن يؤدي إلى نقل سلطات نظام الأسد التنفيذية والتشريعية والقضائية إلى هيئة الحكم الانتقالي ووضع الأساس لنظام ديمقراطي وتعددي للحكم. وهذا يستلزم استبعاد الأسد وزمرته من المرحلة الانتقالية أو مستقبل سوريا ... بينما تتجاهل الخطة المقترحة انتهاكات نظام الأسد الواضحة والمتكررة لقرارات مجلس الأمن الدولي ٢٢٠٩ و ٢١٣٩، فإنه لم يحدد آليات لوقف إراقة الدماء في سوريا أو للتخفيف من معاناة الشعب السوري الناجمة عن نظام الأسد والميليشيات الطائفية والإرهابية“ (الائتلاف الوطني لقوى الثورة والمعارضة السورية، ٢٠١٥).

“The Syrian Coalition stresses that political solution should lead to the transfer of executive, legislative and judicial powers of the Asad regime to a transitional governing body and lay the foundation of a democratic and pluralistic system of rule. This entails excluding Asad and his clique from the transitional phase or the future of Syria. While the proposed plan ignores the Asad regime’s clear and repeated breaches of the UN Security Council resolutions 2209 and 2139, it didn’t set mechanisms to stop the bloodshed in Syria or to alleviate the Syrian people’s suffering caused by the Asad regime and the sectarian and terrorist militias” (National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, 2015).⁶⁶

It could be posited that this declaration includes the element of sectarianism by precluding the possibility of incorporating Alawite elements into the system of government which would emerge in the aftermath of the potential toppling of Bashar al-Asad (Ameen, 2015). The notion of

⁶⁶ National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Political Committee Will Continue Working With de Mistura’s Team, August 31, 2015 - en.etalaf.org/search.html?searchword=sectarian&categories=&format=html&t=1441111770854&tpl=search - Accessed on August 31, 2015

sectarianism related to the protests which are taking place in Bahrain has to be juxtaposed to the widespread level of a spirit of coexistence that exists between the Sunni and Shi'ite communities. Alshahabi argues that the spirit of friendliness permeates every segment of society, creating a level of social cohesiveness. This is an aspect that is of paramount relevance in order to understand the demonstrations which are unfolding in Bahrain. The low level of sectarianism is an aspect which legitimizes the struggle for political rights undertaken by the demonstrators. One may argue that it has been historically demonstrated that the political and social dissatisfaction manifested by the Shi'ite community have not been carried out as an attempt to initiate a state of confrontation with the Sunni community (Alzawba'i, 2014). In other words, the demonstrators have postulated to legitimize their political struggle by appealing to a broad social base that includes Sunni and Shi'ite (Alshahabi, 2014). This emerges from the political statement issued by opposition groups as well as the social harmony that prevails between the two communities (Amel, 2013: 90).

One of the most salient features of the phenomenon of sectarianism is the way in which religious identity is politically constructed. In this context, one may argue that in the case of Bahrain, it is possible to see the way in which allegiance to Sunni or Shi'ite Islam (or Alawite Shi'ism in the case of Syria) tends to dictate political preferences. The distribution of of

government jobs that exists in both countries represents an important example in order to appraise the way in which ethnic/religious affiliation operates in Syria and Bahrain (Amel, 2013: 18). For example, in Syria, the Alawites tend to be in charge of top positions in the civil service. In the case of Bahrain, the political differences which are a result of religious affiliation have been enhanced as a result of the Arab Spring. In addition, the linkage between religious revival in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and political activism is also an aspect that explains the onset of sectarianism. This is because religious activism becomes a political tool geared towards the actualization of rights for discontented groups, as it individuates the demands that are brought to bear on the political elites of Syria and Bahrain (Sarah, 2011; Abu Shagara, 2014).

Regarding the demonstrations that are taking place in Bahrain, Almanaei argues that the sectarian problem that affects the nation is of a political, rather than of a religious nature. Most crucially, the author maintains that people who claim to be motivated by religious reasons engage in a process of social mobilization for the purposes of addressing a political problem (Almanaei, 2014). It could be posited that religious thinking has become such a prevalent force in propelling the social and political rights of dissatisfied groups because of the vacuum that exists in regards to the existence of secular ideologies. In other words, religion occupies the space

that ideologies such as conservatism, liberalism and socialism occupy in Western political systems. It is important to note that the constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain officially opposes the exercise of sectarianism. This is an aspect of political life that manifests itself in article four of the constitution, which states that:

”العدالة هي أساس نظام الحكم. التعاون والتفاهم المتبادل الوثيق بين المواطنين. الحرية والمساواة والأمن والطمأنينة والعلم والتضامن الاجتماعي وتكافؤ الفرص بين المواطنين دعائم للمجتمع تكفلها الدولة“ (دستور دولة البحرين، ١٩٧٣).

“Justice underlies the system of government. Cooperation and mutual understanding are firm bonds among citizens. Liberty, equality, security, tranquility, education, social solidarity and equal opportunities for citizens are the pillars of society guaranteed by the State” (Constitution of the State of Bahrain, 1973).⁶⁷

It should also be pointed out that Bahrain traditionally enjoyed a political system that was liberal than the one that operated in other countries of the region, as seen in the high levels of literacy and political participation. From this standpoint, it could be posited that the Arab Spring was responsible for the propagation of some of the conceptualizations articulated by the people who took place in the demonstrations that arose in the context of the Arab Spring. In many regions of the Middle East, there has been a marked intertwining between religious fervor and political demands.

⁶⁷ Constitution of the State of Bahrain, May 26, 1973 - confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/Bahrain.pdf - Accessed on August 10, 2015

In 2009, the government of Bahrain initiated a new series of political measures directed at expanding the scope of political rights for the population. The political reforms implemented by the regime had the ultimate aim of responding and addressing the discontent of the Shi'ite population. The slogans used by the demonstrators in Bahrain manifest a desire to tackle issues of common concern from the platform of religious coexistence (Alshahabi, 2014). This state of affairs leads us to conclude that the notion of sectarianism has to be analyzed in the context of the geopolitical turmoil that has impacted the Middle East since the onset of the Arab Spring. In addition, an explanation is needed in regards to the narrative that has informed the perceptions of the demonstrations among the international community (Shehabi and Owen Jones, 2015: 117). Instead of looking at the complex nuances involved in the uprising, large segments of the international community tend to see the struggles between the different social groups involved in conflict in rather simplistic terms. This means that the political realities attached to the social unrest which have emerged in the Middle East as a result of the Arab Spring can only be explained by analyzing the evolution of the system of governance on a case by case basis.

Rajab claims that the political transformation which is taking place in Bahrain since the onset of the Arab Spring has to be understood within the historical context of the relationship that has developed between the

demonstrators and the government. The dimension of this relationship is of political nature, with the gradual enfranchising of the Shi'ite population since the beginning of the demonstrations (Almanaei, 2014). From this perspective, it may be posited that the history of concessions granted to the populace by the Bahraini government has been influential among the Bahraini people. The Al Khalifa regime has been willing to provide concessions in order to avoid the level of polarization (Alshahabi, 2014).

The groups that have been influential in garnering social support for accelerating the political change in Bahrain as they claimed to be, such as the National Democratic Opposition (composed of political groups like al-Wifaq, Waad, al-Qawmi, Wahdawy and Ekha) have been active in distancing themselves from any accusations of sectarianism. The National Democratic Opposition appears to have a pluralist conception of the political process. At the same time, they reiterate their commitment to enhance the level of democratization in Bahrain:

”إن المعارضة الوطنية الديمقراطية تعلن دعمها الكامل للجهود الدولية لقمع الإرهاب، ولكن لن تقبل الدعم للديكتاتورية والاستبدادية التي تسيطر على الثروة الوطنية وصنع القرار في البحرين. محاولات لإخفاء انتهاكات المستمرة لحقوق الإنسان والقتل ضد شعب البحرين وصمة عار بشكل كامل. هذه الانتهاكات وعمليات القتل البشعة، التي ترتكبها السلطات البحرينية، وقد تم توثيق والإبلاغ عنها من قبل منظمات حقوق الإنسان الدولية مثل هيومن رايتس ووتش ومنظمة العفو الدولية، منظمة حقوق الإنسان الأولى، والاتحاد الدولي لحقوق الإنسان وكذلك مقرري الأمم المتحدة المتخصصين. البحرين تعاني من النظام المستبد الذي حكم بالسجن على أكثر من ١٠,٠٠٠ من السجناء السياسيين منذ اندلاع الاحتجاجات المؤيدة للديمقراطية في عام ٢٠١١. واليوم، السجنون مكتظة بسجناء الرأي، مع ١٥٠ مواطنا بالسجن المؤبد، ١٦٠ طفلا يقضون أحكاما جائرة وأكثر من ٢٠٠ مواطن

يعانون من تشوهات من التعذيب الوحشي في السجن“ (المعارضة الديمقراطية الوطنية، ٢٠١٤).

“The National Democratic Opposition declares full support of international efforts to clamp down on terrorism, but will not accept support to the dictatorship and authoritarianism that controls national wealth and decision-making in Bahrain. Attempts to veil ongoing human rights abuses and killings against the people of Bahrain are a total disgrace. These abuses and atrocious killings, perpetrated by the Bahraini Authorities, have been documented and reported by international human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Human Rights First and the International Federation for Human Rights as well as the UN Special Rapporteurs. Bahrain has been suffering from a tyrannical regime that has jailed more than 10,000 political prisoners since the eruption of the pro-democracy protests in 2011. Today, prisons are overcrowded with prisoners of conscience, with 150 citizens sentenced to life, 160 children serving unfair sentences and more than 200 citizens suffering from deformations from brutal torture in custody” (National Democratic Opposition, 2014).⁶⁸

Nevertheless, the Bahraini government remains adamant about their view of the protests, arguing that the opposition groups are keen on destabilizing the country in order to accomplish their sectarian goals:

”ما يحدث في البحرين اليوم هو جهد منسق من قبل الجماعات المتطرفة الإرهابية لاستهداف أفراد الأمن والوافدين بهدف نشر الخوف والانقسام داخل المجتمع البحريني، فضلا عن استهداف اقتصاد والتنمية الوطنية“ (بيان البحرين الشيخ خالد بن أحمد آل خليفة، ٢٠١٣).

“What is occurring in Bahrain today is a concerted effort by terrorist extremist groups to target security personnel and expatriates with the intent of spreading fear and division within Bahrain's society, as well

⁶⁸ Bahrain opposition supports efforts to combat terrorism, support of tyranny unaccepted, December 14, 2014 - <http://alwefaq.net/cms/2014/12/13/34641/> - Accessed on August 31, 2015

as targeting Bahrain's national economy and development” (Statement by Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, 2013).⁶⁹

The notion of sectarianism has been used by the various actors involved in the demonstrations (the regime and the protestors) in order to attain definite political aims in the Middle East (Allothman, 2011). In the case of the al-Asad regime, the accusation of sectarianism has been used to deflect criticism regarding the shortcomings of the regime; particularly, the failure to democratize the political space (Shehabi and Owen Jones, 2015: 91). This can be seen in the use of rhetorical tools that are meant to connect the uprisings to foreign influence by actors with geopolitical vested interest (Ibrahim, 2012). This is eloquently manifested in the statements produced by the al-Asad regime and in the use of TV propaganda (Abu Shagara, 2014). These are aspects of significant importance in order to appraise the full extent of the advent of sectarianism in Syria.

The examination of the narrative attached to the slogans used by the protestors and the government in Syria and Bahrain

The slogans used by the different actors involved in the process of political transformation that is taking place in Syria and Bahrain do not always have attached to it a clear sectarian discourse. To determine the

⁶⁹ Statement by Sheikh Khaled bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, September 26, 2013 - www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/26/us-bahrain-usa-idUSBRE98P0G620130926 - Accessed on August 20, 2015

political implications of the slogans that are used by the government and the opposition groups (Allothman, 2011). In the case of Bahrain, the opposition groups have utilized slogans that denote the willingness to exert political influence in the context of the religious tenets that inform social life in the country and in unity with the Sunni community:

- لن نركع إلا لله / *Lan nar'ka ella lellaah* / We will only kneel to God⁷⁰
- لبيك يا حسين / *Labbayka ya Hussain* / At your service Hussain⁷¹
- هيهات منا الذلة / *Hayhat minna zilla* / Woe unto the Wretched⁷²
- وعد ونص آية.. لظلمكم نهاية / *Wa'iad wa nass aaya.. li'zalmakum ne'haaya* / Promise and verse text.. there is an end to your injustice⁷³
- هذا الوطن مانبيعه.. إخوان سنة وشيعة / *Hatha alwatan ma'nabie'ah.. ikhwan Sunna wa Shi'ah* / This homeland is not for sale.. brothers Sunni and Shi'ite⁷⁴

Nevertheless, a closer examination of these slogans indicates the presence of sectarian connotations. There are three different themes that are connected to some of the slogans used by the demonstrators. For instance, the

⁷⁰ Slogan 17: "We will only kneel to God" March 18, 2011 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rW9OJrcLbKg> - Accessed on July 20, 2015

⁷¹ Slogan 18: "At your service Hussain" October 22, 2015 - <https://twitter.com/COALITION14/status/657218254138658816> - Accessed on December 25, 2015

⁷² Slogan 19: "Woe unto the Wretched" April 21, 2011 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9C9G6XuDX_0 - Accessed on October 10, 2015

⁷³ Slogan 20: "Promise and verse text.. there is an end to your injustice" May 9, 2015 - <https://twitter.com/abonajem8/status/597108363181305856> - Accessed on December 25, 2015

⁷⁴ Slogan 21: "This homeland is not for sale.. brothers Sunni and Shi'ite" May 18, 2012 - <https://twitter.com/AMJK88/status/203555274785689600> - Accessed on July 10, 2015

idea of “We will only kneel to God”, “At your service Hussain”, “Promise and verse text.. there is an end to your injustice” or “Woe unto the Wretched”⁷⁵ may denote the willingness to abide by the religious teachings of a particular brand of Islam; in the case, Shi’ism. In addition the fifth slogan calls for unity between the Shi’ites and Sunnis. However, the idea that the “homeland is not for sale” may indicate a rejection of the action of the Al Khalifa regime, of Sunni affiliations, and may indicate a social harmony that prevails between the two communities (Amel, 2013: 90).

These slogans are indicative of a subtle use of sectarianism, geared towards differentiating the political demands of the opposition groups from the discourse used by the regime (Alothman, 2011). As we were able to see in previous sections, the Al Khalifa regime as it was threatened by Iranian influence highlighted the sectarianism. In addition, the statements produced by Bahraini officials link the concept of sectarianism to the actions of foreign actors; most notably, Iran.

In the case of Syria, the slogans that are being utilized are indicative of the drive towards influencing the political process of transformation from the standpoint of unity between the different ethnic groups:

⁷⁵ The second slogan refers to Imam Hussain. The third slogan is claimed from the Shi’ism that “the slogan of Imam Hussain (as) in Karbala” <https://www.facebook.com/isopakistanofficial/videos/297738326413/>

- عالجنة.. رايعين.. شهداء بالملايين / *Al'jnt.. rayhyn.. shuhada' bialmalayin* / To the heaven.. we go.. millions of martyrs⁷⁶
- قولوا الله وعلوا الصوت.. أنا سوري ما بهاب الموت / *Quluu Alllah we Alou al'sawt.. 'ana suri ma bihab almawt* / Say God and rise the voice.. I am Syrian who does not fear of death⁷⁷
- واحد واحد واحد الشعب السوري واحد / *Wahid wahid wahid ash-shab al-Suri wahid* / One One One the Syrian People are One⁷⁸
- حرية.. حرية.. وبس / *Allah.. Suriah.. huriya.. wa bas* / God.. Syria.. Freedom.. and that's it⁷⁹

The idea of emphasizing the conceptual unity of the slogans used by the parties involved in the struggle overlooks the complexities involved in the process of political transformation. The idea of conceptual unity may denote the inability of the protestors to tackle the problems associated to actualizing the needs of the different ethnic and religious groups involved in the confrontation against the government. In this case, the slogans that are being utilized by the opposition groups postpone the power-sharing discussions that are to take place to secure the democratization of the country (Abdo, 2013: 113).

⁷⁶ Slogan 22: "To the heaven.. we go.. millions of martyrs" May 5, 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPifa4Jpbk> - Accessed on December 25, 2015

⁷⁷ Slogan 23: "Say God and rise the voice.. I am Syrian who does not fear of death" April 29, 2012 be seen at <https://twitter.com/AlaAlsoory/status/196742303287738368> - Accessed on December 25, 2015

⁷⁸ Slogan 24: "One One One the Syrian People are One" April 13, 2011- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1g1b3adRVs> - Accessed on November 3, 2015

⁷⁹ Slogan 25: "God.. Syria.. Freedom.. and that's it" May 15, 2011 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntUD0XWvR8Q> - Accessed on December 25, 2015

As we have seen in previous sections, the opposition groups within Syria have been active in denouncing the use of sectarianism as a result of the reluctance of the al-Asad regime to share power with other political groups. Interestingly, as we were able to observe from the statements released by the government, there is a tendency to use the element of foreign intervention instead of referring directly to the onset of political and military activity by the opposition as blatant acts of sectarianism. The Al-asad regime has used this tool in order to legitimize the use of repression and the maintenance of the political status quo.

In the case of Syria, there seems to be a hypocritical attitude on the part of the government. While the accusation of sectarianism seems to be less pronounced on the part of the al-Asad regime, the Syrian government used this rhetorical tool to deflect attention from their reluctance to create a more equitable political system, capable of including the different strands of thinking prevailing in each nation (Abdo, 2013: 119).

The Bahraini government recently issued a statement criticizing a report compiled by Amnesty International, which indicates the systematic violation of basic human freedoms by the Al Khalifa regime:

”[!] إن حكومة البحرين لن تتسامح مع الهجمات العنيفة أو التحريض على أعمال العنف التي ارتكبت تحت ستار حرية التعبير والتظاهر السلمي“ (بيان صادر عن حكومة البحرين، 2015).

“[T]he government of Bahrain will not tolerate violent attacks or incitement to violence committed under the guise of free speech and peaceful protest” (Statement by the Government of Bahrain, 2015).⁸⁰

The accusation of incitement to violence on the part of the demonstrators points to the determination to disregard the calls for an acceleration of the political process postulated by the opposition groups in Bahrain. It should also be noted that the Syrian government has also used the concept of “terrorism” and replaced sectarianism, when referring to the actions of the oppositions groups fighting for political transformation in Syria:

”مواجهة الغرب للإرهاب هو نفاق بالمعايير المزدوجة... ما يقوم به الغرب هو السبب في انتشار الإرهاب وليس القضاء عليه... الإرهاب هو مرادف للاستعمار والفجور“ (الأسد، ٢٠١٥).

“The West tackling of terrorism is hypocrite with double standards...what the West has been doing caused terrorism to proliferate and not to be eliminated... terrorism is synonymous with colonization and immorality” (al-Asad, 2015).⁸¹

As we can see, the notion of sectarianism has been used in different ways by the actors involved in the protests that are taking place in the Middle East. The concept of sectarianism is being disguised by the opposition groups and the government of Syria with the use of terms that denote a process of

⁸⁰ Statement by the Government of Bahrain in reply to Amnesty International Report, April 116, 2015 - www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/664146 - Accessed on August 22, 2015

⁸¹ President al-Asad's July 26th 2015 Speech - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5Gzln1LHY> - Accessed on August 13, 2015

differentiation between the interests of the protestors and those upheld by the government. Thus, the notion of sectarianism was construed in a way that served and continues to serve the political aims of the Syrian forces involved in the confrontation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the notion of sectarianism is intimately intertwined with the discourse on social justice deployed by the demonstrators in the cases of Syria and Bahrain. In the case of the protests that are taking place in Syria, the regime have used the notion of sectarianism and international involvement as a political tool to justify their repression against the groups involved in the protests (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 140). In addition, the regime uses sectarianism as a political instrument aimed at propping up their legitimacy. The notion of sectarianism is linked to the actions that have destabilized the territorial integrity of Syria (Shehabi and Owen Jones, 2015).

To be sure, the concept of sectarianism has a religious connotation that is meant to socially and politically differentiate between those who adhere to different interpretations of Islam. However, in the cases of Syria and Bahrain, there seems to be a distinct political connotation attached to the use of the concept of sectarianism and the manner in which it is connected to the discourse on social justice. In the case of Bahrain, the protestors have been active in claiming that the calls for accelerating the democratization are

undertaken as a common cause between the different communal groups.

However, in the case of Syria, the reluctance of the regime to grant a wider level of political openness has resulted in the rise of political demands. This regime policy is geared towards suiting the needs and interests of the different communal groups. In the case of Bahrain, the calls for social justice and democratization have been undertaken in the context of the collaboration between Shi'ites and Sunnis.

In spite of this, it is expected that the notion of sectarianism will continue to evolve to reflect the transformation of the political space that is taking place in Syria. At the same time, it is also expected that the changes in the geopolitical circumstances that inform the political evolution of the Middle East will also guide the influence of sectarianism in the conflict that is taking place between the regimes and the citizenry in Syria.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

The narratives deployed by the political elites and the opposition groups in Syria and Bahrain has undergone a process of evolution since the onset of the Arab Spring. This evolution responded to the different levels of political bargaining that were utilized by the government and the opposition groups (Khatib, 2012: 22). Accordingly, the narrative employed in Bahrain has been more successful in mobilizing the calls for social justice and democratization. Where as in the case of Syria, the evolution of the narrative has been informed by the inability of the political elites and the opposition groups to achieve a workable framework to iron out their differences (Durac and Cavatorta, 2015: 50).

In the previous chapters, we investigated the manner in which the opposition groups in Syria and Bahrain have deployed their rhetorical capabilities in order to induce a higher level of political openness (Khatib, 2012: 29). At the core of these investigations is the question of the way in which these opposition groups define the notion of “democracy”, as it applies to their respective social and political context. In the case of Syria, we can see that democracy is a concept that is forged in the framework of the drive for a higher degree of political pluralism that could accommodate the interests of the different groups

that occupy the social space. In the case of Bahrain, the political cleavages that underpin the quest for a higher level of openness seem to be better defined (Durac and Cavatorta, 2015: 59). The Shi'ite community is seeking a broader level of participation in the political process as well as wider access to government services. Social justice appears to be an important propeller for political action (Khatib, 2012: 35). However, there are some important differences that ought to be highlighted. In regards to Syria, the level of acquiescence to the demands made by the different opposition groups on the part of the al-Asad regime appears to be lower than in the case of Bahrain (Durac and Cavatorta, 2015: 55).

The lower level of socio-economic development and the state of political turmoil that has engulfed Syria in recent years have not been conducive to the actualization of the rights and interests of opposition groups. Conversely, in the case of Bahrain we see some considerable efforts on the part of the Al Khalifa regime to engage in a bargaining process with the opposition groups (Khatib, 2012: 78). It should be noted that the demands for democratization and social justice in the cases of Syria and Bahrain needs to be framed in the context of the events that took place as a result of the Arab Spring. We see diffusion of the dissatisfaction, that informed the uprisings, in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt to the uprisings in the Syrian and Bahraini political context

(Seeberg, 2015: 7). Nevertheless, these two cases are subject to some important differences as they were discussed in the previous chapters. The geopolitical factors that informed the course of events in the Syrian and Bahraini cases have enormous implications for examining the possibility of the enhancement of democratization and social justice (Fildis, 2012: 153). Geopolitical considerations have guided the narrative constructions made by the actors in Syria and Bahrain. In both cases, we can see the way in which the political leadership attributed the blame for the onset of political turmoil on the influence of foreign powers; most decidedly in Bahrain, where the regime accuses the opposition groups of being influenced by Iran (Noueihed and Warren, 2012: 104).

In the Arab world, we see the revolutionary narrative on the part of the opposition groups that is centered on the idea of democratization and wider responsiveness to the needs and interests of the population at large. We can detect a strong sense of diffusion of the events of Arab Spring in the uprisings that took place in Syria and Bahrain (Khatib, 2012: 88). Notwithstanding the differences identified in previous chapters, the political debate that is taking place in the Middle East as a result of the Arab Spring has established the foundations for the voicing of political, social and economic dissatisfaction as they unfolded since 2010. The common elements of the claim of political repression and socio-economic discontent in most Arab countries were responsible for

creating a causal thread between the events that took place in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt and the uprisings that unfolded in Syria and Bahrain (Anderson, 2011: 6).

The autocratic nature of the regimes in states like Syria and Libya faced a clash between the advent of modernization and the preservation of the status quo. This state of affairs resulted in the onset of uprisings that affected these countries (Farah, 2015).

In the previous chapters, there we examined the differences between the Syrian and Bahraini cases. The analysis of these differences facilitates the comprehension of the potential for political transformation in those two countries and the larger Middle East (Gelvin, 2011: 119). The narrative utilized by the protestors in the Arab countries such as Syria to induce a higher level of democratization and social justice is compounded by memory mechanisms that impact on the process of political transformation. The slogans deployed by the protestors tend to have a high degree of commonality. These rhetorical tools are geared towards propagating an environment conducive to the entrenchment of anti-authoritarian tendencies. The constant demands for democratization and social justice disseminated through the use of slogans tend to consolidate the idea that the opening of the political environment should be “the only game in town” (Dauib, 2015).

However, the use of slogans also points to some important differences. In the case of Syria, the rhetoric deployed by the protestors indicate that opposition groups want to implement a profound political transformation in the country (McHugo, 2015: 29). The slogans constantly call for the removal of the al-Asad regime from the political scene and its replacement with a pluralist and democratic political system. This state of affairs denotes a political position that is quite intransigent and not conducive to a process of political bargaining with the al-Asad regime (McHugo, 2015: 30).

In the case of Bahrain, it may be postulated that the use of slogans are indicative of the willingness expressed by the Shi'ite population to accelerate the specter of democratization. However, unlike the Syrian case, these demands are put forward in the spirit of collaboration with the Al Khilafa regime (Abu Shagara, 2014).

Although in both cases there is a substantial use of historical memory as a political instrument, there are some differences in the way that this rhetorical tool is deployed in Syria and Bahrain and its impact on the process of transformation which is taking place in those two countries (Sharifi, 2012: 29). In the case of Syria, the use of historical memory is mobilized to create the impression among the populace that a self-determination similar to the one that unfolded in the 1930s could lead to the establishment of a more democratic environment (Wieland

and Almqvist, 2013: 38). The al-Asad regime has also used the rhetorical tool of historical memory to consolidate its position. This is done by appealing to the past memory of events that evoke the necessity of keeping Syria free from foreign intervention. In some respects, the opposition groups are seen as elements that respond to foreign interests. As such, they need to be confronted with constant calls for patriotic action which basically means submission to the political will of the al-Asad regime on the part of the Syrian population (Sarah, 2012). This state of affairs underscores the difficulties involved in the possible resolution of the conflict in a peaceful manner, as neither side is keen on engaging in the process of political bargaining (Kechichian, 2001: 94).

In the case of Bahrain, the Al Khilafa regime attempted to reduce the dissent by appealing to the historical memory of political accommodation and the process of democratic liberalization that has gradually unfolded in the country since the 1970s (Shehabi and Owen Jones, 2015: 58). However, the opposition groups involved in the demonstrations which have been taking place in the country have been continued to highlight the socio-economic dissatisfaction of the Shi'ite population (Shehabi and Owen Jones, 2015: 66).

As we can see, the differences that emerge from the deployment of rhetorical tools on the part of the opposition groups and the government in Syria and Bahrain are aspects of relevant importance to examine the

way in which the process of political transformation has unfolded since the onset of the Arab Spring (Legrenzi, 2011: 76). In Bahraini, the differences might be observed above have been responsible for the broadening of democratization (Kostiner, 2000: 105). In the case of Syria, these differences indicate a situation in which neither side is willing to engage in the process of political bargaining for the purposes of establishing a more representative type of government (Kechichian, 2001: 98). In any case, it is important to bring in the historical perspective that has informed the evolution of events in Bahrain. From this perspective, it may be posited that the history of concessions granted to the populace by the Bahraini government has been influential among the Bahraini people. The Al Khalifa regime has been willing to make concessions aimed at avoiding the level of polarization (Alshahabi, 2014).

Another important aspect that was raised in previous chapters pertains to the use of social media as an important tool that propagate anti-autocratic rhetoric in the case of Syria and anti-non democracy in the case of Bahrain. Social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter have been elements of paramount importance to disseminate democratic ideals in the Middle East; particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (Sarah, 2012). The lack of a powerful civil society in the Middle East as well as the dearth of a free press has arrested the development of

a democratic system of government.

From this standpoint, social media has served as a mechanism that accelerated the demands for political openness and change in the region (Ibrahim, 2012). In spite of the differences that exist between the Syrian and Bahraini cases in regards to the use of the social media by opposition groups, there are some important commonalities that facilitate a broad understanding of the process of political transformation (Bayat, 2010: 39). The use of audio-visual material propagated through the social media by the opposition groups has been of significant importance in the establishment of political demands among the population of Syria and Bahrain. In addition to this, the social media has allowed the demonstrators to showcase their discontent to the wider world (Gelvin, 2011: 121). However, as we were able to see in the previous chapters, social media has also been used by the incumbent regimes to consolidate their grip on power. This is an aspect of relevant importance in the case of Syria. The al-Asad regime has been known to carefully choreograph a number of demonstrations in support of the government. The audio-visual material gathered during these demonstrations has been disseminated through social media outlet such as Facebook and YouTube. In spite of this, the social media has been an element that has accelerated the advent of a civil society in countries such as Syria and Bahrain. The social media has become an instrument that allowed the propagation of anti-

authoritarian policies as well as alternative political outlooks (Shehabi and Owen Jones, 2015: 45).

Another relevant aspect involved in the evolution of the narratives employed in the Syrian and Bahraini cases concerns the issue of sectarianism (Shehabi and Owen Jones, 2015: 60). As we were able to observe, sectarianism is a contested concept that can be used to accomplish a wide variety of political purposes (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 111). In regards to the demonstrations that were unfolding in Syria, the al-Asad regime utilized the concept of sectarianism and foreign involvement as a political instrument to directly justify the repression exercised against the opposition groups (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 112). Furthermore, the Al-asad regime leveled accusations of sectarianism at the opposition groups in order to bolster their declining legitimacy (Tarabzouni, 2011).

At the same time, using sectarianism as a narrative tool correlates to a certain degree with a process of destabilization that has taken place in Syria, particularly in regards to the territorial fragmentation that has affected the nation. In the case of Bahrain, the use of sectarianism as a narrative tool has affected the political order prevailing in the country (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 118).

At the same time, we have seen the manner in which sectarianism has become a concept that is intertwined with the doctrinal interpretation of Islam in countries such as Syria and Bahrain. This enhances the level of politicization attached to the concept (Gelvin, 2011: 125). The notion of sectarianism, as compounded by the level of social fragmentation brought forward by the onset of religious militancy, has informed the process of political transformation in Syria and Bahrain. It has been illustrated that the demonstrators in both Syria and Bahrain have been keen to go beyond the social cleavages created by the advent of religious militancy and highlight the commonalities pertaining to the demands for social justice and democratization (Rajab, 2011).

In the case of Syria, the refusal of the al-Asad regime to make political concessions has resulted in the the demands on the part of the different social groups that make up the opposition to the regime (Ameen, 2015). The political demands (which were construed by the regime as sectarianism) has come about as a result of the need to actualize the interests of the disenfranchised groups (Deeb, 2015). In the case of Bahrain, the political demands for social justice and democratization have been carried out within a continuous framework of collaboration between the Shi'ite and Sunni communities (Shehabi and Owen Jones, 2015: 63).

Although the Al Khilafa regime attempted to offer more support to the socio-economic demands invoked by the Shi'ite opposition groups, however the question is could this prevent social fragmentation (Shehabi and Owen Jones, 2015: 66). The concept of sectarianism has been influential in shaping the narrative that guided the process of political transformation in the Arab world. Furthermore, the geopolitical circumstances that affect the Arab region has impacted in the way that sectarianism shaped the narratives deployed by the political actors.

To sum up, the evolution of the narrative deployed by the political elites and the opposition groups in Syria and Bahrain has been signposted by a number of crucial factors. As we have seen, the dissemination of anti-authoritarian policies have been facilitated by the events that took place in the Middle East since the advent of the Arab Spring. The social media has occupied a central role in the propagation of the calls for accelerating the different mechanism of democratization in Syria and Bahrain. There have been different mechanisms of expressing rhetoric that have been used by the governments as well as the opposition groups in the Arab world for the purposes of gaining a wider political legitimacy. In regards to the demands made by the opposition groups, the social media has acted as a useful mechanism to establish the foundations for a strong civil society.

The narratives employed by the regime and the opposition groups in the Arab region has been informed by the notion of sectarianism. The social fragmentation brought forth during the events that took place after the onset of the Arab Spring was guided by a revival of religious militancy. Although the opposition groups in the Arab world have been downplaying the influence of sectarianism, this concept has created important social and cultural cleavages that impacted the process of political transformation that is taking place in Syria and Bahrain.

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