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## Case Analysis

# The Tunisian Revolution: An Analysis of Analyses

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## Introduction

The Tunisian “revolution” has raised various questions about the concepts relating to the means of bringing about political and social change in the arenas of intellectual and political debate. These include such questions as: is what took place to be described as a *revolution*, an *intifada*, or something else? Does the event carry with it a specific ideology or a clearly defined alternative political project? How did a mobilization of this scale come about without the use of the commonly known forms of revolutionary mobilization?

The revolution has puzzled those seeking a comprehensive analysis of the situation and its historic depth, especially in terms of the local, regional and human context of the events. It has also bewildered those who set out to offer predictions on the future, at a time in which pessimistic views have predominated due to the stagnation of the Arab condition. Is it possible that the scenario of the Tunisian Revolution will be replicated in other Arab spaces? Is the event a prologue to major changes in the existing regional and international balances? Furthermore, does the event not call for a profound revision of ideas, visions and strategies? Is it not necessary that we question the validity and strength of dominant perceptions about the revolution, as well as the leadership and the identity of the social figures who have brought about about such major change?

Analysis of what happened in Tunisia, and the method of dealing with the problems raised, depend on the situation of the analyst in relation to the event, and the lens through which he conducts his analysis. The research begins with the birth of a discourse that is interested in the event, describes and explains it, and meditates upon its essence, dimensions and implications. The examination, then, is of what has been written about the Tunisian Revolution; as such, it distinguishes itself from a treatment of the event as a social or political constant (as would be undertaken by a sociologist or political analyst) or even as a historical constant as within the discipline of history. Similarly, the aim was not to examine the event in the form of a current affair requiring documentation and commentary, as would be the case in a journalistic inquiry. Indeed, discourses surrounding the events of Tunisia encompass all that which is written by the academic, the historian, the sociologist, the political analyst and others. Examining these writings provides insight into the event from different perspectives, using a variety of methodologies that facilitate a greater depth of understanding. It should be noted, however, that the temporal proximity between the event and this study inevitably leads us to rely primarily upon what has

been written in print and electronic journals,<sup>1</sup> on the websites connected to research and study centers, and in discussion forums known for their academic integrity and prestige.<sup>2</sup>

It may be that reliance on such fresh material — where the lines between the epistemological and the existential are blurred and where the subjective and the objective intermingle — results in this study's deviation from the scientific method that it claims. By the same token, it is important not to overlook the nature of what happened in Tunisia before, during and after January 14, as these represent a largely unprecedented sequence of events. To the extent that a researcher can adhere to the spirit of objectivity, the magnitude and dimensions of what has taken place in Tunisia intercede to allow him some slight freedom from maintaining complete neutrality. He remains a social actor engaged in intellectual and social concerns as he attempts, to the best of his abilities, to avoid emotional reaction while striving to make a constructive contribution. The position, then, is one of "implicated subjectivity, that which is implicated by its sought-after objectivity" in the words of Paul Ricoeur.<sup>3</sup> This study will rely on the ability to manage the open dialectical relationship between the historical and the epistemological, aspiring in this regard to examine how different analysts have studied the event, what mechanisms they have used in their analysis, and the stated and implied goals motivating their consideration of the issue. Perhaps with this approach we can address the following problem: how can the Arab intellectual overcome the *atrophy of the sense of history*? When considering this question, it must be remembered that the idea of revolution was posited by Arab intellectuals decades ago, without an actual revolution having taken place in any Arab country, and that the revolution has now occurred and is expected to spread to other Arab countries. Accordingly, the intellectual or theorist must now grapple with the reality of the revolution, despite having previously abandoned hope of it ever taking place at all.<sup>4</sup>

### First: Revolution or Intifada?

Coinciding with the events that led Tunisia into January 14, 2011 and its aftermath was the eruption of a gushing river of terms previously relegated to obsolescence in the Arab intellectual and political lexicon; this applies particularly to vocabulary derived from the root for the term *revolt*. This remarkable surge of terms like *revolution*, *intifada*, *protest*, *social uprising*, *social*

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<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that journalistic writing differs from the rules of academic writing, but what we observe in recent years shows that many prominent intellectuals and academics have sought to contribute to newspapers with broad readerships in the intellectual circles of the Arab, and even Western, sphere. Mohammad al-Haddad sees this as a healthy sign as it takes the academic out of his haughty space and engages him in the public sphere on matters of public concern, rendering him a social agent. Writing in the press "is the academic's way of contributing in building public opinion and the enhancing the social sphere for dialogue as the basis of citizenship." See: Mohammad al-Haddad, *Positions for the Purposes of Enlightenment*, First edition, (Beirut: Dar al-Talia for Printing and Publishing, 2005), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> These include, for example, the site of the Association of Arab Rationalists (al-Awan); and the *Hewar Mutamaddin* (civilized dialogue) site which was established by a civil society organization concerned with issues of culture, media and the development of political, social, cultural, humanitarian and modern progressive consciousness; as well as the site of the al-Jazeera Centre for Studies.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Histoire et vérité*, (Paris: Edition du Seuil, Tunis: Cèrès Editions, 1995), p.26.

<sup>4</sup>

*movement*, and others highlights the differences between various commentators and how they have formulated their descriptions. This leads us to question the reasons underlying these differences and their significance. Are they due to the complexity of the event and its defiance of description, or rather to the ambiguity of these concepts or their semantic flexibility and complexity of meaning (particularly in relation to concepts of revolution and *intifada*)?

Perhaps the questioning of the nature of events in Tunisia (i.e., whether they constitute a revolution or an *intifada*) should lead to acknowledgment of the need for a clearly defined conception of revolution and *intifada*. This would entail the recognition of the concept of revolution as one with a clear basis and coherent logic identifying it as a repeatedly occurring phenomenon throughout history, and a frequent subject of examination in the study of the history of peoples. Such an approach, however, may encourage a mechanistic view of historical events and the eruption of revolutions, limiting the scholar to a juxtaposition of the ready-made concept (revolution) and the malleable event. This will affect the attempt to reach a final conclusion on whether what is observed in the realm of reality is indeed a revolution, an *intifada*, or something else entirely.

If, however, we question the merits of such clear-cut definitions, then we must state that revolutions differ in their forms and causes, thereby defying our ability to specifically define them. It would follow that perspectives on revolution differ, and that no conceptual rigidity can be imposed upon the term. The question, then, is: what purpose is served in discussing the definition of revolution and seeking to differentiate it from the concepts of *intifada*, protest movement, mutiny, disobedience and others?

This is neither an intellectual luxury nor an attempt to outshine other attempts to intellectually engage the Tunisian events, for such questions facilitate a more coherent rationalization of the events themselves. Furthermore, they help to sharpen the focus of the observer's lens, whether through description, explanation, consideration of prospects, or interpretation of implications and dimensions.

### **1 – Revolution and Intifada: A Conceptual Approach**

Conceptual definition is both desirable and necessary, in as much as it allows us to mitigate the potential ambiguity associated with the flexibility of meaning inherent in expressions such as “revolution”. This and related terms have enjoyed widespread circulation since the events of Tunisia and those subsequent in Egypt, Yemen, Libya and other Arab countries. The concept of revolution is drawn from history, and can also refer to an idea or a project that precedes the appearance of the actual revolution. It is thus the outcome of a dialectical interaction between intellectual reflections on the one hand, and practice on the other. The concept of revolution has witnessed many changes, endowing it with various meanings: these range from the signification of the return of a thing to its origin, to that of a sudden shift, to that of rupture and re-establishment. In its liberal form, revolution means the establishment of the political system that ensures individual rights and public freedoms; in its Marxist variant, it entails the takeover by the

working class of the organs of government as a prelude to the abolition of the institution of the state. The notion of rupture dominates the signification of the concept, as expressed by François Châtelet in his statement that “the historical use of the word revolution implies rupture, and this is the common understanding of the term now . . . and it is on the basis of this conception that the idea of revolution has been constructed from Plato to Mao Tse Tung through Robespierre, Marx and Trotsky.”<sup>5</sup>

Based on examination of events described as revolutions and the ideas associated with them, Jules Monnerot has developed a genealogy of the concept of revolution that includes what he calls *les trois phases de la révolution* (the three phases of revolution). The first phase represents the stage in which there is a collapse of the existing system and the attempt to sever relations with it. This existing system may be a political regime as manifested by the institutions of the governing body in the state, a socio-economic system manifesting itself in the methods of wealth distribution and the regulation of the relations of production, a value system embodied in a set of rules of conduct that guide the behavior of individuals within a group, or finally, an epistemological system expressing perceptions that determine man’s understanding of things, nature and the universe and his relationship to each of these within a particular scientific or philosophical framework. Of these, many would consider the political system to be the one that most clearly expresses corruption in the social, economic and value systems. In the event of heightened crisis, a decaying system may seek to make some adjustments under the banner of reform, perhaps only serving to fuel the forces of its opposition. This paves the way for revolution as an event through which to correct that which its agents and advocates see as the structural defects of the system. Jacques Jullard confirms that any failing system “reaches a point at which it loses the flexibility necessary for any political grouping, ultimately rejecting what appear to be inevitable reforms, so that revolution, then, becomes the only way out.”<sup>6</sup>

The main characteristics of the second phase are revolutionary fervor and the will for change, which tend to intersect. The most important attribute of this phase is that the revolutionary act is a fundamental and radical change that pushes to undermine what exists — whether on a political, social or economic level — seeking to destroy it completely. Alexis de Tocqueville describes the achievements of the French Revolution of 1789 with regard to what he calls the *ancien* (old) *regime* as follows: “when we see the revolution simultaneously overturning all the institutions that, until then, worked to preserve a certain hierarchy in society, drawing people to the regime, we can consider that the result is related not to the demolition of a particular system of society but to every system, not to a specific government but to the social force itself.”<sup>7</sup>

This demolition renders inevitable the process of change in the existing legitimate authority, as confirmed by Thomas Greene’s statement that “revolution entails a change in the structures, myths and support functions of the administrative apparatus of government in ways not

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<sup>5</sup> François Chatlet, Encyclopaedia UNIVERSALIS, (Révolution), corpus 19, France SA 1996, p.1075.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Jullard, Encyclopaedia UNIVERSALIS, (Réformisme), corpus 19, (France SA 1996), p.679.

<sup>7</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, L’ancien Régime et la Révolution, (Paris: édition Gallimard, 1967), p.65.

permitted under the existing constitution.”<sup>8</sup> Revolutionary fervor is characterized by an all-encompassing movement in society. Scholars have stressed that this popular character of the movement is what earns the revolution its “revolutionary” character. Jules Monnerot commented that “the masses are the ones that give the revolutionary character to a revolution, without them the revolution is not a revolution.”<sup>9</sup>

Among the implications of the above-mentioned fervor is that revolutionary change is necessarily of a violent and chaotic nature. Thomas Greene considers violence to be “a general characteristic of all revolutionary movements, whatever their scope and severity.”<sup>10</sup> Revolution is also characterized by sudden and accelerating change; at its core, it is a breach in the pattern of natural development on a particular path. Revolution, in this sense, may not be a radical change in the structures of society as much as it is a change in the temporal patterns of the developmental trajectory of political, social and even cognitive structures. In this regard, Alexis de Tocqueville evaluates the French Revolution by stating: “it was accomplished in a sudden, aggravated and painful manner, without stages, caution or care. Nothing would have been accomplished step by step on its own over a long period of time.”<sup>11</sup>

The third phase of the revolution is the stage of establishment and reconstruction. The revolution always seeks to build a new way of life, which parts ways completely with the previously prevailing one. François Furet confirms this: “From the day of its eruption, the revolutionary act overturns that which preceded it from the very top to the very bottom. It establishes a new means of historical action, one not included on the preceding agenda.”<sup>12</sup> Some of the features of this “new means” appear in the slogans adopted by the masses in the period of revolutionary fervor. What we can notice is that the re-establishment phase is often drawn in the direction of utopian projects; it is characterized by improvisation, and subject to new forms of domination. The resulting situation thus bears the germ of its own opposition and rejection, which may foster the revolution that ultimately overturns it. This is generally brought about by those who did not find their fortunes in the new arrangement. Despite this, however, the achievements of the great revolutions in human history have been accompanied by attempts to improve the conditions of broad social categories, usually those most distanced from a decent livelihood and its minimum conditions. Thus, the revolution has represented a milestone in the direction of history.

Turning to the concept of intifada, the endeavor of arriving at a precise definition is even more difficult. The definition of this term is still being negotiated, due to its close association with a particular historical event; namely, the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli occupation, and, more specifically, the uprisings against this occupation that erupted in 1987 (known as the first

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Greene, *Revolutionary Movements: A Comparison*, translated to Arabic by Turki al-Hamad, first edition, (Beirut: Dar al-Talia for printing and publishing, 1986), p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 153.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 122.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 81.

<sup>12</sup> François Furet, *Penser la révolution française*, (Paris: édition Gallimard, 1978), p.73.



intifada) and 2000 (the second intifada). How, then, can a general meaning be extrapolated, as required for the process of understanding, from the specific context?

The effect of the word intifada on the imagination is more evocative when one understands its Arabic root (n – f – d). The root, according to *Lisan al-Arab* (literally, “The Arab Tongue,” one of the most comprehensive Arabic language dictionaries), indicates motion or movement. The verb form of the word (*in-ta-fa-da*) connotes motion in response to an action or stimulus, and also refers to the transformation of something from its habitual state.<sup>13</sup> The author of *al-Qamus al-Muhit* (another comprehensive Arabic language dictionary) expands on these definitions of the term, stating that the connotations of the verb form are of two kinds: the first is one of beauty and fertility (in the sense that an olive grove, for example, can rise up and strike you with its beauty); in its second sense, it denotes the shaking off or getting rid of that which is unwanted and abhorrent.<sup>14</sup>

The general semantic sense of the term can be summed up as follows: motion or movement that is in response to an internal stimulus for the purpose of getting rid of something unwanted and detestable, in the hope of arriving at a new and more desirable situation. In this sense, the Palestinian intifada was a massive protest movement in which the *muntafidun* (those rising up) armed themselves with will and stones (before it became an organized struggle<sup>15</sup>) to break the state of stagnation marking the Palestinian situation in the occupied territories. The intifada set out to sensitize international public opinion to the plight of the Palestinians suffering occupation and marginalization, in the absence of a means to improve the reality of the Palestinian experience.

## 2 –The Place of the Tunisian Event - between Revolution and Intifada - from the Perspective of the Commentators

With regards to the relevance of the two concepts (revolution and intifada) to the Tunisian event, many of the studies under consideration did not bring up the question of which of the two terms was more apt.<sup>16</sup> These studies dealt with the event either as a revolution or as an uprising, as if the respective meanings were immediately evident; little thought has been given to the issue of which of the concepts more legitimately applies. Indeed, some writers have used the terms interchangeably, as if their connotations were identical. Some authors, however, have posited the issue of terminology as one deserving of research and reflection. This begs the question of

<sup>13</sup> Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab* (The Tongue of the Arabs), Part VII, (Beirut: Dar Sadir, n. d.).

<sup>14</sup> Al-Tahir Ahmed al-Zawi, *Tartib al-Qamus al-Muhit* (Ordering the *Muhit* Dictionary), part IV, third edition, (Tripoli: al-Dar al-Arabiya for Books, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> For more on the various events that constituted the first Palestinian intifada, see the special coverage in the *al-Wihda* (Unity) journal, No. 63/64, Year 6, November / December 1989 to January 1990.

<sup>16</sup> In this article I have relied on a dossier that includes a number of studies and press articles (more than twenty works) that explicitly pertain to the events of Tunisia, in addition to consideration of a number of other works that examine the events of Tunisia and Egypt together. All were published between January 15, 2011 and March 24, 2011.

whether the event is considered a revolution because of its own inherent features, or rather, because it generally conforms to the requirements and expected outcomes of a revolution. Conversely, do those who describe the event as an *intifada* do so in order to downplay its significance? Or is this description based on an active evaluation of the event's specificity and uniqueness? Will the Tunisian event remain in the liminal space between the two characterizations?

### **A – A Deserved Revolution : Between Abundance and Lack**

Yassin Haj Saleh confirms that what happened in Tunisia was a “deserved” revolution, not one that was beholden. This assessment of the revolution stems from its intrinsic characteristics; given that revolutions have specific features and indicators, and that what happened in Tunisia demonstrated the requisite attributes of inclusiveness, popular support, steadfastness and success, it thus merits the revolutionary label. As expressed by Haj Saleh: “the deserved revolutionary label of the Tunisian uprising is not due to this uprising’s success in overthrowing the regime of President Ben Ali, but to its wide social and national scope, its popular and non-elite means of public protest (its being non-violent and not religion or ideology specific), and in the courageous perseverance for an entire month until the overthrow of Ben Ali; and more than that, in its construction of a new political, social and psychological reality that was unimaginable only two weeks before.”<sup>17</sup>

Among the features which qualified the event to be described as a revolution was its sudden nature; no one had expected what took place, “neither Mohammed Bouazizi, the spark and symbol of the revolution, nor the masses proffering their demands, nor the elites falling in with the masses, nor the analysts content with their offerings of superficial interpretations of what was taking place whether out of inability or fear” (Taher Labib).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the revolution appears to have surprised the intellectual elite more than any other group. According to Fathi ben Salamah “the Tunisian revolution broke out at a time in which the concept of revolution had withdrawn from the possibilities of our thought, a withdrawal that had taken place since the fall of the Berlin Wall at least.”<sup>19</sup> Also supporting the characterization of the event as a revolution is that it was unprecedented in recent (and even less recent) Arab history; as such, it has illuminated unexpected paths for change in the Arab situation. Mohammad al-Haddad highlights the uniqueness of the event by saying that “it was the first time in the Arab world that the people had overthrown their ruler without the means of the abhorrent trinity of military coups, foreign interference or religious extremism.”<sup>20</sup>

Among the characteristics of the Tunisian events upon which scholars have unanimously agreed is that it was a comprehensive popular movement. What took place between December 17, 2010

<sup>17</sup> Yassin Haj Saleh, “In Tunisia a Revolution... and Open Horizons,” *al-Hayat*, January 23, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Taher Labib, “So the Revolution does not Prematurely Devour her own Offspring,” *al-Adab*, Issues 1-3, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Fathi Ben Salama, “And Suddenly there was the Revolution,” translated by Mukhtar Khalafawy, *al-Awan*, February 12, 2011. The author had sent this article to *al-Awan* under the title “Soudain la révolution!” before it was published in the French journal *libération* under the title “Soudain l'immolation.”

<sup>20</sup> Mohammad al-Haddad, “A Preliminary reading of the Tunisian Event,” *Al-Hayat*, January 19, 2011.

and January 14, 2011, as well as what followed, was a far-reaching mobilization both temporally and spatially. The wide inclusion of social and political groups legitimizes reference to it as a popular revolution. Indeed, many of the studies and journalistic writings on the Tunisian events tended toward narrative description of the events: starting with the first spark from the country's interior, continuing to the masses assembled in the capital the day the "tyrant" was toppled, passing throughout the different regions of the country and attracting the various social and age groups, bringing in the trade unions and political formations, and developing into an unstoppable wave that toppled the head of the regime. Such narratives are replete with flattery and praise for the heroism of the people. Other characteristics of the uprising were also highlighted in the writings under examination, among them the spontaneity of the uprising. Mohammad al-Haddad explains this feature as a manifestation of the youth's liberation from the weight of ideology and its restrictions. These young people, he states, "did not burden themselves with ideologies; their demands were clear and they moved directly into the application of these demands without theorizing them when they felt that there was an opportunity to have their voices heard."<sup>21</sup> Despite this, however, the possibility was raised that this very spontaneity could prove damaging to the revolution. This would happen if it came to dominate the revolution's course in the place of conscious, responsible and organized administration (administration which would, by definition, depend on the participation of the elite).

In a similar analysis of the Tunisian event, some commentators have argued that the revolution in Tunisia erupted to meet its own conditions. One of these analysts is Dr. Azmi Bishara, whose analysis of the event follows two prominent conditions: accumulation and extension in time. These two conditions, he argues, enabled the event to rise from the level of an intifada to that of a revolution: "the glorious revolution in Tunisia began with a series of popular intifadas for bread and basic needs in the interior of the country over the past two years."<sup>22</sup> The catalyst that enabled the event to rise from the level of an intifada to that of a revolution was, according to Bishara, the combined result of three factors: the violent reaction of the regime to the continuous protest actions, the society's rejection of this regime at all levels, and the growing level of consciousness among the protestors, itself a fruit of the high standard of education in Tunisia. The revolution, then, is a composite event, preceded by an accumulation of other events and experiences, and ultimately unleashed by a catalyst event. Michel Kilo, on the other hand, believes that what has been achieved was a revolution carried out by the people after its condition had been met, this condition being the work done by the intellectual elite. The revolution in Tunisia, according to Kilo, took place because it was preceded by the intellectual framework that paved the way for it, thereby allowing it to develop from obscure to obvious, from latent to evident. His conception of the revolution implies a relationship of attachment and complementarity: "the revolution is the joint mission of the intellectual elite who carry out the intellectual tasks related to knowledge and understanding, and the popular forces upon whose shoulders lie the social tasks."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mohammad al-Haddad, "A Preliminary reading of the Tunisian Event," *Al-Hayat*, January 19, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Azmi Bishara, "The Glorious Popular Revolution of Tunisia," *Al-Jazeera Net*, January 17, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Kilo, "On the Margins of the Tunisian Narrative," *al-Adab*, March 1, 2011.

The assessment of whether or not the Tunisian events constituted a revolution on the basis of the events' outcomes and achievements is fraught with obstacles. The prevailing opinion is that the revolution toppled the head of the tyrannical regime, yet without compromising its structures or dismantling its apparatus of repression. What happened in Tunisia was a the beginning of a journey, yet incomplete, toward the goals expressed by the crowds of demonstrators on more than one occasion in Tunisia. The slogan representative of these goals has echoed in many squares throughout the Arab world: "the people demand the overthrow of the regime." Despite the ambiguity that surrounds this slogan or the misleading conclusions that can be drawn from it, the most likely interpretation is as a demand for the elimination of the authoritarian structure of the regime, the head of which had already fallen. This is the view shared by most analysts of the event. One of these, for example, is Tarek Kahlaoui, who evaluates the revolution on the basis of its objectives, arguing that a revolution that does not achieve its objectives may not be considered a revolution at all. He elaborates that "one cannot speak about the completion of a revolution in the context of Tunisia, for authoritarianism cannot be said to have been ended in its three dimensions, the first of which is 'competitive clientelism' that obstructs any serious meaning for elections; followed by 'kleptocracy' that renders power a vehicle for wealth and self-enrichment, and thirdly 'police state-ism' that turns the state's monopoly over the means of violence into an opportunity to entrench the first and second dimensions through the viciousness of security apparatuses."<sup>24</sup>

## **B - An Intifada or a Revolution in the Making**

The usage of the term "intifada" in most studies on the events in Tunisia, even those emphasizing that what happened was a revolution, has been frequent. There is no debate about the fact that, historically, this term been applied exclusively to the particular experience of the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation. It may thus not be surprising that the Palestinian writer Majid al-Kayali is among those who have stressed that what took place in Tunis was an *intifada*. al-Kayali describes the Tunisian event in laudatory fashion, stating that "perhaps the historical importance of this popular *intifada* is that it is unprecedented in its form and content; for it is the first popular movement that has operated on the level of changing the political regimes that have ruled the Arab world in the post-independence era."<sup>25</sup>

In terms of critical treatment and philosophical questioning, Fathi al-Miskiny poses the question of the theoretical categorization of the events in Tunisia to the conceptual fields of the terms revolution and *intifada*, as well as their relationship to the idea of identity. In a diagnostic approach to the events, al-Miskiny's analysis finds that the Tunisian protesters did not express a particular identity, nor did they raise any ideological banner or assert adherence to a national commonwealth or ideological system. Rather, the protesters were more akin to "a wave of liberated disaffected people who led themselves in a fashion that we cannot call 'collective': for

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<sup>24</sup> Tariq Kahlaoui, "A Revolution in the Making," *al-Adab*, March 1, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Majid al-Kayali, "Initial Questions on the Popular Intifada of Tunisia," Al-Jazeera Net, January 19, 2011.

this was not a “collectivity” in the strict sense. It was a cooperating and free mass, but there was no national, moral or doctrinal group leading the struggle. Borne from this mass was a temporary leadership, one that operated outside the traditional notion of leadership.”<sup>26</sup> These factors, in al-Miskiny’s view, warrant a characterization of the events in Tunisia as an intifada stemming from the emotional and angry nature of youth seeking to rebel against every pre-existing construction linked to identity - not a revolution in the sense that has come to be agreed upon over the past two centuries. al-Miskiny explains that “the intifada is not a professional revolution, one characterized by stable features that can be defended, enforced or interpreted.”<sup>27</sup> It is also notable that his characterization of the Tunisian event as an intifada is not intended to diminish its value and significance; rather, his interpretation thus is in fact a sign of the event’s uniqueness. An intifada, in his estimation, is a purely Arab innovation, and its logic differs from that of the various revolutions of the West. He expresses this sentiment by stating that “intifadas do not repeat themselves. They are freely borne of generations with no ready-made political identity.”<sup>28</sup>

Conversely, Farid al-Ulaiby depends on the categories of Marxist analysis in his assessment that what took place in Tunisia was an intifada that did not live up to the level of a revolution, thereby designating the intifada as an imperfect form of revolution, or perhaps a potentially abortive stage of the journey in the direction of revolution. The parties that pose the greatest danger of provoking the Tunisian revolution’s abortion are, in al-Ulaiby’s view, the media (dominated by the bourgeoisie and opportunistic politicians), trade unionists and lawyers (the self-appointed internal leaders of the revolution), and political leaders of powerful countries abroad. One example of an attempt to abort the revolution is the media’s mischaracterization both of the true goals of the intifada and of the identity of its actual agents. According to al-Ulaiby, what took place was not a youth revolution in which the tool was Facebook and the goal was dignity; rather, it was a revolution of the oppressed, marginalized and disadvantaged classes in the country’s interior, whose goals were food, decent treatment and the minimum accepted standards of living. In his words, “the labeling of what took place as a revolution or an intifada is not only a theoretical problem; it is a practical problem as well. In the event that there is a revolution, this would — in practice — mean that the people have triumphed, and that what remains for the people to do after the escape of the ‘deposed’ president and the extinguishment of his ‘defunct’ regime is to return to work and production. By promoting this thesis among the ranks of the people, what is broadcast to them is an illusion that only serves to perpetuate the status quo.”<sup>29</sup>

In light of this complicity, al-Ulaiby argues that what has taken place remains an intifada, one that could turn into a revolution if particular conditions obtain: “when the intifada offers its

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<sup>26</sup> Fathi al-Miskina, “The Revolution and Identity, or the Vital before the Identity-related,” *al-Hewar al-Mutamaddin*, No. 3274, February 11, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Farid al-Ulaiby, “Tunisia: From Intifada to Revolution,” *al-Awan*: Website of the Arab Association of Rationalists, March 24, 2011.

vision of an alternative and its leadership and when the masses succeed in reaching a true consciousness of their situation on the basis of which they fulfill their task, shelving the old faces of the economy, politics and culture and adopt the new. Only then does the event cease to be an intifada and become a revolution.”<sup>30</sup> These are conditions that can be met with revolutionary consciousness, revolutionary action, revolutionary leadership and the revolutionary alternative – indeed, precisely what we have come to expect from the Marxist perspective on revolution.

Clearly, the prevailing understanding of revolution tends toward the conception of a conscious and organized action subject to a leadership that directs it, and a clearly defined political program that determines its ultimate direction. An intifada, on the other hand, is characterized by spontaneity, lacking a clear organizational and ideological premise. Furthermore, a revolution can only be said to have taken place when success is complete, while an intifada is inherently incomplete, its success delayed or prevented. Revolution is complex in the structure of action and effectiveness of struggle, while the intifada is more simple. However, are these definitions stable?

### 3 – An Attempt at Characterizing the Event

Looking closely at what happened in Tunisia and the subsequent events in Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria, it becomes clear that these are indeed revolutions and not intifadas of limited scope and effect. Manifest in each of these cases are the conditions of revolution in its three stages, where each stage is colored by the society in which it is taking place, without becoming duplicates of the *images of the revolutionary scene* witnessed in the great revolutions of history.

Close examination of the Tunisian event reveals the regime’s collapse in the first phase of the revolution, illustrated in the erosion of its once solid foundation. Ben Ali’s regime strove to endow him with enduring legitimacy, a legitimacy that was essentially a form of political barter. Thus, the continuation of the regime of governance and acclamation of its leader came in exchange for certain achievements, the image of which was tarnished by rampant unemployment and a ferociously corrupt mechanism of government. The regime’s legitimacy also came in return for its twin pillars of security and stability, the cracks in which began to appear in the moments of bloody confrontation between angry, impoverished and oppressed crowds on the one hand, and hordes of security forces in the Tunisian interior and the urban slums surrounding the capital on the other. Paralleling this was the growth and development of a political culture hungrily seeking rights that would preserve the sanctity and dignity of the citizen, as well as a set of institutions that could provide equality, freedom and equal opportunities for all. Ironically, many of these terms were already common parlance in Tunisia, though they had been deprived of all meaning, content and value by the propaganda machine of the state.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

The boiling point, having been triggered by the “first spark” (in the words of Fathi ben Salama<sup>31</sup>), was in what came after the self-immolation of Buazizi. These protests evidenced the revolutionary fervor that had been long festering in the hearts of the populace, in which spontaneity co-existed with organization. Its path fluctuated between periods of calm and of escalation. The movement that struck in so many directions was augmented by labor organization and the systematic sharing of information at record speed across social networks. Also influential was the close coverage on satellite news channels (while the state media intentionally omitted any mention of the events, resulting in further popular discontent and indignation toward the regime and its organs). The gathering momentum of this mobilization facilitated the movement’s continuing expansion, to the surprise of internal and international leaders alike. The moment of climax, or the symbolic act (without which there can be no revolutionary action), was reached at the moment when the head of the regime was toppled following the infamous day of protest, January 14, 2011.

From this moment, the completion of the revolutionary scenario in the more critical and difficult phase, that of reconstruction, became inevitable. It should be no surprise that this latest phase has accounted for most of the analytical attention given to the events of Tunisia; it is viewed as the main determinant for the revolution’s success or failure. The question now is whether the revolution will be able to follow through on the promises described in the slogans of the masses; slogans that combined the urgent and immediate (such as the entitlement of degree holders to employment, equity in the regional distribution of development projects, and the rooting out of corruption and its figureheads) with broader humanistic demands (such as freedom, justice and equality). Together, these slogans embodied the utopian dream of a promised paradise constructed in the collective imaginary, in which the protesting citizens would enjoy social stability and material well-being. The reality, however, is far from meeting the conditions necessary to make this dream a reality in the near (or even distant) future. This leads to the intermingling of expressions of optimism with those of pessimism, grounded primarily on the notion of *counter-revolution*.

The fate of this latest phase is to be one of complex power struggles, which explains commentators’ apprehension at attempting to extrapolate the features of the post-revolutionary period. In my estimation, the truth about revolution is that it does not replace the reality of tyranny and decay with a society of freedom and prosperity with one silver bullet. Rather, revolution enables freedom to sweep into new positions at the expense of the forces of tyranny, unveiling capabilities of society-building in all fields of life. Tyranny does not disappear; it simply changes form and location. Should the possibility of a tyranny that acts in the name of the people’s will not be considered? The success of the Tunisian revolution today is hostage to the guarantee to protect freedom in all its new guises, in light of the post-revolution return of supporters of “Bourguiba’s legacy” at the top of the Tunisian political landscape. This group derives its ideology from a tradition of guardianship, and their political behavior is markedly class-oriented in nature (as in their attempt to limit diversity of opinion); all of these features are

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<sup>31</sup> Fathi Ben Salama, *op cit*.

exemplified in their vision of political party pluralism and their performance within such a pluralist system.

It is not the aim here to reiterate the narratives of the Tunisian revolution that are cited in most studies, but rather to prove the merits of a clear-cut conceptual characterization of the events as a revolution. What took place in Tunisia was a revolution that inherited much from the great revolutions of history, the chapters of which changed the course of history by detailing what was specific to Tunisia, common to the Arab world, and what is general to humanity. Perhaps it can be expected, then, that the revolution in Tunisia will help bring about a more complete conceptualization on the basis of documented facts and accurate information, thereby also bridging many gaps in the history of Tunisia. Historians can then reconstruct the different aspects of the event as they see fit.

## **Second: Reading the Tunisian Revolution and the Quest for Meaning**

What dimensions are revealed by the analyses of scholars of the Tunisian events? More precisely, what stated objectives prompted these scholars to engage with these events? What hidden concerns or unspoken expectations have these researchers alluded to in focusing their energies on attempts to explain, evaluate and foretell the future of the Tunisian revolution?

Different dimensions of the revolution have drawn the attention of commentators, and can be grouped into four main categories as described below.

### **1 – The Historical Dimension in the Reading of the Event**

At first, the tendency of scholars is to re-write history in light of the developments of the events in Tunisia. This, as I see it, expresses the genuine desire to change the course of history and move it onto a new path that responds to the aspirations of the intellectual elite; also, the tendency is to perceive signs of hope toward overcoming the state of stagnation and decay that has resulted from the despair of real change occurring in the Arab world. In this context, opinions have varied on how to formulate the historical scene in the light of multiple frameworks within which scholars have sought to understand the Tunisian revolution. Some have tried to dig deep into the modern history of the Arab world to place the revolution in a historical progression that they see as appropriate, while others have found that contextualization of the event can only be properly effected within a wider framework.

Larbi Sadiki<sup>32</sup> and Farid al-Ulaiby,<sup>33</sup> for example, have considered what happened on January 14, 2011 as falling within the context of a series of uprisings in modern post-independence Tunisian history, known as the “bread intifadas”, serving to emphasize their popular and

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<sup>32</sup> Larbi Sidiki, “Tunisia... A Road Map to Democracy,” al-Jazeera Net, January 20, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Farid al-Ulaiby, *op cit*.



quotidian nature, as well as the role of the vulnerable and oppressed class in carrying them out. Majid al-Kayali, on the other hand, has tended to connect the event to a broader political context and the modernization strategies of the post-independence state under the leadership of Habib Bourguiba. He thus sees the Tunisian intifada as a corrective movement to what he calls the “Bourguibian revolution” that caused a real and qualitative change in the Arab reality when compared to other experiences, particularly those under Nasserism: “compared with Nasserism — and this is perhaps part of the deceitfulness of history — Bourguibism in Tunisia appeared ignominious in the Arab world because of its pragmatism and its rejection of grandiose slogans, yet it was able to have a far reaching effect on Tunisian society... to the point that the (deposed) Ben Ali regime could not overcome it.”<sup>34</sup> Based on this diagnosis, al-Kayali finds it unlikely that the experience of the Tunisian revolution will be repeated in the rest of the Arab countries given the absence of the foundation of modernization that Tunisia society enjoyed under Bourguiba. It appears, however, that developments subsequent to al-Kayali’s writing in more than one Arab country have refuted his prediction.

Mohammed al-Haddad goes further and deeper than al-Kayali in placing the events in the broader context of Tunisia’s modern and contemporary history. al-Haddad seeks to connect the Tunisian revolution to the path of reforms adopted since the *Nahda* (the Arab cultural renaissance of the nineteenth century), starting with the reformist ideas of Khairiddine in particular. The revolution of Tunisia is, in his opinion, both an extension of the reform movement and a surpassing of it. Although the revolution was essentially an attempt to be free of tyranny, it was above all a reformist movement. It ultimately went beyond the elitist character of the reform movement that had preceded it by embodying a democratic ethos (in seeking to depose the tyrannical regime) that was shared by the broader social forces in the country. From this construction of the situation, al-Haddad stresses that the major historical tasks assigned to this revolution are: to continue along the entrenched path of modernization and reformism in Tunisia that started with Khairiddine and continued with the achievements of the post-independence state under Bourguiba, and to remedy the deliberate sidelining of the fundamental bases for freedom and dignity along this path. This places the revolution in a position whereby it has the potential to offer Tunisian society a project of modernization in the truest sense. al-Haddad’s argument is that “we should take the modernization vision as our starting point as of today, because the revolution originally erupted on the foundations of the principles of freedom and dignity on the condition that we would transform it from an elite project to one that would become the object of popular and total aspiration, and upon which a new culture of citizenship would be built. . . one that would preclude the use of modernity as a slogan devoid of substance in the future.”<sup>35</sup>

Scholars who have looked at the event from a broader perspective have worked to situate it within the Arab context, assessing its proportions, impact and implications for the present and

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<sup>34</sup> Majid al-Kayali, “On that which Relates to the Extension of the Tunisian Condition to the Arab Level,” *al-Hayat*, January 28, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Mohammad al-Haddad, “On the Meaning of ‘Overthrowing the Regime,’” *al-Hayat*, February 27, 2011.

future. This is reflected in Khaled Hroub's analysis of the events of Tunisia and those of Egypt that followed. Hroub considers the Tunisian revolution to be a rebirth of Arab history; an opportunity for the creation and establishment of a new history, the first chapters of which have already been written by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions: "the two revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt and their deep and rapid implications are sufficient to open up a new chapter in the history of this region. January 2011 will be one of the most important months of the twentieth century as far as the Arabs are concerned . . . for this month was witness to the beginnings of their rebirth, one that enables the emergence of the 'the new Arabs.'" <sup>36</sup> Such has been the perspective of Samir Atallah in his approach to the analysis of the event. Atallah considers the revolution in Tunisia to have been a rare opportunity that enabled the Arabs to enter the threshold of history: "we cannot remain outside the history that is being created these days by anonymous students, the unemployed, and women — whether they are unveiled as in Tunisia, or veiled as in Egypt." <sup>37</sup>

It may be the effect of the ecstatic engagement with the achievements of the Tunisian revolution that led Saif Daana to append it to the chain of great revolutions and pivotal human events of history. The implications of the Tunisian revolution, in his opinion, cannot remain limited to the local or regional level; the event should be seen in its broader human context as with the great revolutions of the past, such as the Bolshevik and Iranian revolutions. "The Tunisian revolution was a human event *par excellence*, not a Tunisian, or even Arab, event alone. For this reason, its implications and effects will be greater than the geographical borders of small Tunisia or the larger Arab homeland." <sup>38</sup>

The differences in the historical contextualizing of the event may not be of great importance in terms of compatibility with the correct historical view. The value, rather, is in the significance of these differences. The concern of commentators to precisely situate the event in the particular or general context is an expression of their enthusiasm to move beyond the historical inertia that is perceived to have marked the past few decades of Arab history.

## 2 – The Intellectual Dimension in the Reading of the Event

The intellectual dimension refers to what the Tunisian revolution has instigated in terms of issues and concerns that have consequently been brought into the circle of intellectual debate, as well as the resulting reconsideration and resumption of inquiry (through revision, modification or refutation) into issues that had come to be taken for granted. Perhaps one of the most important scholarly preoccupations in this regard has been the discussion of the concept of the "Arab exception", one that is regarded to be sound by commentators both at home and abroad. The Arab exception argument refers to the idea that the situation of the Arabs is unlikely to change

<sup>36</sup> Khaled Hroub, "'The New Arabs' and the Features of the Coming Period," *al-Hayat*, February 13, 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Samir Atallah, "The Ripening / Equalization of the Nation," *al-Nahar* – Beirut, February 9, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Saif Daana, "On the Genius of the People of Tunisia... the Optimism of the Will," *al-Jazeera Net*, January 18, 2011.

and actually move towards democracy, through revolution or otherwise, in contrast to many other countries that have experienced authoritarian or totalitarian regimes similar to those of the Arab world. The Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions have provided commentators with a definitive refutation for the exceptionalism thesis that has puzzled many for so long. Khaled Hroub states that “on the level of academics, elites and researchers, we have been exhausted over the past decades by the big question surrounding the Arab failure to revolt against injustice and tyranny.”<sup>39</sup> The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have broken the rule of Arab exception, or more precisely, they have replaced the exception with a rule, one which recognizes the inevitability of a people’s reclamation of their free nature, regardless of how long tyranny has reigned. Yassin Haj Saleh expresses this decisive shift by stating that “there is no doubt that the Arab countries, politically speaking, are among those with the greatest deficits of justice; to the point that in the last two decades, it has become commonplace to speak of the notion that the Arabs are the exception to democracy. What is heard today, however, is that the Tunisian and Egyptian intifadas have completely undermined this notion.”<sup>40</sup>

This response to the Arab exceptionalism argument thwarts the premise that the Arab condition is incapable of breeding opportunities for self-change. It similarly refutes the thesis of change from abroad which has been used historically to justify occupation under the pretext of regime change and forcible transformation of society into democracy — as was the case with the U.S. rationale for the occupation of Iraq. Yassin Haj Saleh considers the events in Tunisia and Egypt to have clearly revealed the absurdity of the logic of change from the outside, which tended to prevail in the post-911 era: “the two revolutions offer a clear response to the idea of change from the outside, and to the overall culture that prevailed after September 11, including the Islamic nihilism that manifested in the form of al-Qaeda, or Salafism and Jihadism in general.”<sup>41</sup>

The issue of democratic transition and its problems as they pertain to the Arab world have attracted considerable analytic attention. Tunisia’s event led many to give their attention to the necessity of persevering toward democratic transition and to think of the factors that would help in ensuring the success of such a transition. According to Shams al-Din al-Kilani, hope for such success is a function of the extent to which the Tunisian revolution encourages the idea of democracy to become ingrained in the behavior of members of society, liberating it from the narrow confines of elite circles and enabling its development into an active ideology able to respond to the dominant Islamic ideologies. “The success of the Tunisian and Egyptian intifadas may lead to a trend towards democracy, changing the idea of democracy in the Arab sphere from an elite concept to the ideology that dominates Arab consciousness, making it difficult to resist democracy’s influence in the Arab countries, to the extent that it will lead to the circumscription of Islamists’ utopian visions of the state.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Khaled Hroub, “The Arab Exception Argument,” *al-Hayat*, January 30, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Yassin Haj Saleh, “We are Not Beyond the Issue,” *al-Hayat*, February 13, 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Yassin Haj Saleh, “After the Two Revolutions: the End of the post-September World,” *al-Hayat*, February 20, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Shams al-Din al-Kilani, “The Arab Transition to Democracy: Between Inability and Opportunity,” *al-Hayat*, February 7, 2011.

Mohammad al-Haddad looks approvingly upon civil society, assigning it the responsibility of ensuring the success of the democratic process in Tunisia after the revolution. He sees civil society as the sector with the means to uphold principles of equal citizenship, establish the separation of religion and state, and benefit from the cumulative achievements and successes of the reform movement in Tunisia (with a view to laying the foundations of the modern democratic project). “The road to the entrenchment of modernity on the one hand, and democratization on the other, is a long and arduous path; movement along this path should be fostered by civil society who should move it beyond direct political performance, which by necessity is disappointing in the early stages of the experiment of democracy because the culture of democracy still in its infancy.”<sup>43</sup>

Revolution has been posited as the long-awaited way for the Arab world to overcome the obstacles to democracy, and democratic transition has become a subject of prominent concern among scholars and commentators.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, we have to ask: how can the concepts of revolution and democracy be reconciled after so many writers in the early years of the third millennium have assumed a complete contradiction between the two?

### 3 – The Ideological Dimension in the Reading of the Event

With this dimension, the examination is of the impact of ideological reference in guiding the analyses of commentators regarding the event in Tunisia. It is true that every analysis is colored and informed by ideology in the broadest sense. As a view of the world, it acts as a filter framing the effectiveness of perception, providing the tools for analysis and reasoning, and constituting the general framework within which a personal position and attitude can determine the direction of the individual conscience. The effect of ideology, however, becomes blatant when it is disclosed within a text as a political line or doctrinal allegiance that must be followed, or when openly combined with the negation of personal inclination. In this sense, the Tunisian revolution has taken on various guises in the writings of its analysts, ranging from a revolution of an Islamist character, to a nationalist revolution, to a workers’ uprising, to a civil libertarian revolution all at once.

Dr. Azmi Bishara stresses that the Tunisian revolution was a nationalist revolution, because it was closely bound to Tunisia’s Arab context (in contrast to those who have tried to emphasize the specificities of Tunisia that arise out of the country’s geographic proximity to Europe). Bishara believes that the definitive evidence for the Tunisian revolution’s inextricable ties to the Arab world was the lightning speed with which events in Tunisia reacted with those of its Arab surroundings. “Upon examination, the whole world can see that a coherent Arab view is espoused by the Tunisian intellectuals and activists who fill the television screens, as is the case with Tunisian people more generally who speak a cultured Arabic language. Indeed, they

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<sup>43</sup> Mohammad al-Haddad, “On the Meaning of Toppling the Regime,” *al-Hayat*, February 27, 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Among them we mention, for example, George Tarabishi in his: *Democracy and Political Parties in the Arab Countries*, Chapter 2, second edition, (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2001).

evidence years of opposition and politicization, not the manifestations of a contradiction between Tunisian specificities and Arab concerns.”<sup>45</sup> This same victorious euphoria seems to surround the Tunisian revolution as an Arab achievement (rather than a local one) in the writings of other scholars like Khaled Hroub, Majid al-Kayali and others.

As for Yasser Zaatrah, who at an earlier time saw what took place in Tunisia as “the opening volley of revolution throughout the Arab world,”<sup>46</sup> eventually predicted that subsequent Arab revolutions would necessarily take on an Islamic character if they were to truly express the will of the peoples. In a tone imbued with certainty, he states that “we are certain that the nation when it regains its freedom will choose nothing but Islam as a reference for all of their affairs.”<sup>47</sup> The analysis of Fahmi Howeidi attempts to connect the Islamic movement in Tunisia to the general Islamist context within a comparative framework, and does not disguise his simultaneous sense of satisfaction and apprehension. The Tunisian revolution, in his view, opened up prospects for legitimate political action by the (Islamist) Nahda movement, though with the specter of exclusion continuing to haunt its progress. His discourse is one of reassurance, invoking the need to involve the movement in the political process after the revolution while deflecting the attempts of forces seeking to exclude its participation (whether they be external parties, communists, or secular extremists). Within this framework, Howeidi strives to depict the Islamic movement in Tunisia that would be most likely to enjoy popular acceptance, in the tradition of the Turkish Justice and Development Party as opposed to that of the Taliban or the Iranian regime. For example, “what beckons our attention is that various parties have resorted to fear mongering, warning of a transformation of the Nahda movement into one that follows the Taliban model or seeks to reproduce the experience of the Iranian regime. No one has thought to look at this movement’s record to realize that it is indeed closer in its political orientation to the Justice and Development Party in Turkey.”<sup>48</sup>

In contrast to this euphoria that finds hope in Islamist rhetoric, Yassin Haj Saleh directs his reassurance to the secular forces. He emphasizes that the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt have challenged the Islamic forces to display their true strength on the ground, after decades of the threat posed by the Islamists’ being exaggerated by regimes seeking to legitimize their own limitations on political freedoms. He argues that such exaggeration ultimately served to benefit the Islamic movements rather than to harm them. According to Haj Saleh, the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions have shown that “the Islamists are a partial power in our societies, and they are more likely to lose out as a result of the fall of the regimes rather than gain from this.”<sup>49</sup>

Farid al-Ulaiby’s analysis is unique in its attempt to posit a class character to the revolution. The revolution, in his view, was an intifada of the oppressed classes and marginalized groups. He

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<sup>45</sup> Azmi Bishara, “The Age of Revolutions, the Speed of Light, and the Tunisianization of the Arabs,” al-Jazeera Net, January 24, 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Yasser Zaatrah, “When the Anger of the Street Topples the First Tyrant,” al-Jazeera Net, January 15, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Fahmi Howeidi, “The Controversy over the Tunisian Event,” al-Jazeera Net, January 25, 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Yassin Haj Saleh, “After the Two Revolutions: the End of the post-September World,” *op cit.*

does not hesitate in directing sharp criticism toward analyses that characterize Tunisia's event as a revolution for dignity, a youth revolution, a Facebook revolution, or a revolution whose agents had no specific identity. Such descriptions, he argues, spring from a liberal view that has been unduly influenced by globalization and its propagandistic discourse, a discourse that overemphasizes the role of technological achievement in bringing about the event. al-Ulaiby's condemnation reaches its peak when he accuses such analyses of banditry, declaring that the purpose of such analyses is to "offer the oppressed features of the answer to the question that poses itself: what is to be done?"<sup>50</sup>

In contrast to that of al-Ulaiby, most analyses of the event emphasize its civic and peaceful nature, as well as the centrality of its political and social demands, by calling it a revolution for both bread and dignity. This reflects the liberal tendency of seeking to achieve the desired democratic transition, one reminiscent of the liberal conception of democracy, even as some express their reservations about that prospect.

It is worth mentioning here that most ideological currents saw a means of revival in their interaction with the Tunisian event. This came at a time in which it had become common to assume the end of the age of ideology, with most analyses detaching the revolution from any ideological framework. Is this not, in itself, an irony of history?

#### **4 – The Psychological Dimension in the Reading of the Event**

Notable in the analytic discourse related to the Tunisian event are the expressions of emotion that can be found scattered throughout the academic analyses; commentators clearly found themselves overwhelmed at times by a strong personal response to this momentous occurrence. These emotional expressions were largely of elation and satisfaction, although the motivations for them varied. Among the factors eliciting a feeling of satisfaction was the Arab intellectual's sense of having won a victory against the ruling juntas of the Arab world, of having pierced these dictators' high and mighty bubble of arrogance. For example, Lebanese novelist Samir Attallah heralds the launching of a new era in which Arab rulers will be obliged to modify the path of their leadership; his words display a sense of pride at the humbling of haughty Arab rulers whose legitimacy has been secured through tyranny rather than the logic of politics. "After what took place in Tunisia and Egypt, the Arab leaders have learned that there is a new language that they will have to use to speak with the people. What came before Tunisia was one age, what has followed is another; let us call it the age of humility."<sup>51</sup> Shams al-Din al-Kilani's writing indicates a sense of vindication that his generation's long-deferred aspirations have finally been fulfilled, compensating for what he calls "the years of hot coal." The youthful demographic that prompted the revolution through modern communications technology "has not had much experience with the blood drenched dark cellars or the lashes of the executioners that had

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<sup>50</sup> Farid al-Ulaiby, *op cit.*

<sup>51</sup> Samir Atallah, *op cit.*

defeated the will and dreams of the older generations... unlike our generation whose ribs, wills and dreams were broken under the batons of the torturers.”<sup>52</sup>

Other expressions of positive sentiment stem from the perception that the intellectual has played a role in the revolution, if only a marginal one. Writers expressing this sentiment feel themselves to be the partial owners of the Tunisian revolution, party both to its outbreak and its success (regardless of the degree of prominence of their participation). In this vein, Dr. Azmi Bishara’s analysis implies a sense of satisfaction at the revolution’s fulfillment of his predictions: “these factors combined, that led me to expect—on the basis of scientific analysis, not a discourse of aspirations, more than ten years ago in my book on *Civil Society*, and three years ago in my book on the *Arab Question*—that Tunisia was on its way to democratic transformation.”<sup>53</sup>

Tahir Labib goes beyond prediction to confirm the active role of the Tunisian intellectual elite’s participation in the revolution. In a critique of the argument that the revolution occurred spontaneously and without leaders, Labib recalls the role played by certain civil organizations and the intellectual elite in the formation of the popular revolutionary consciousness. In one example, Labib effectively reclaims some of the rights to recognition owed his generation of University of Tunisia professors for their contribution to the revolution. “There is no need to recall here the struggle of parties, movements, organizations, unions and classes of intellectuals and artists, for this—in Tunisia — is old, familiar and well known. One example: the University of Tunisia maintained some—relative — space of immunity, allowing some teachers to contribute their lessons in the deepening of students’ visions and awareness of history and phenomena, students who are the revolutionaries of today. This, too, was an act that was part of the event, whether or not the professor knows it to be so.”<sup>54</sup>

For expatriate intellectuals, Tunisia’s revolution has provided a validation of their sense of belonging to the Arab-Islamic civilization, at a time in which expression of such feelings had become uncommon. As expressed by Bara Michael, “the Tunisian intifada has confirmed that the Arab peoples are no less intelligent or feeling than others. They are - on the contrary - able to lift the arbitrary and repressive restrictions that foreign countries have long contributed to imposing upon the peoples of the region.”<sup>55</sup>

The tendency that emerges in the various analyses of the Tunisian revolution is, rather than simply offering commentary on the event itself, to allow a glimpse (sometimes unintentional) of role the author feels himself to have played in his reading of the event. Several such roles have been posited, including those of the *engaged intellectual* (who stayed actively aware of events and their development), and the *witness* to the event (the trustworthy conveyor of news from the

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<sup>52</sup> Shams al-Din al-Kilani, *op cit.*

<sup>53</sup> Azmi Bishara, “On the Glorious Popular Revolution of Tunisia,” *op cit.*

<sup>54</sup> Tahir Labib, *op cit.*

<sup>55</sup> Bara Michael (Director of Research at the Institute of International Relations and External Dialogue in Spain), External Responses to the Tunisian Intifada: Positions and Strategies. Source: al-Jazeera Centre for Studies, al-Jazeera Net, July 2, 2011.

depths of the country's interior, protecting the revolution from the potential hijacking of its real meaning and objectives). The role of the *revolutionary agent* is assumed when the commentator seeks to demonstrate his own direct or indirect contribution to the event. Also recurrent are the roles of the *strategic expert*, as when the commentator describes potential or advisable scenarios for the post-revolutionary period; and the *guardian* whereby the rhetoric is replete with expressions of advice and guidance. Similarly, the role of the *paternal figure* is evident in writing with frequent instances of the imperative tense, reflecting the author's acknowledgment of the extreme confusion at this critical turning point in history.

Combined, do these roles go beyond those that prevailed before the revolution in the cultural and intellectual arena (such as the *committed intellectual*, the *organic intellectual*, and the *mobilizing intellectual*, among others)? Or are they simply a reproduction of the same categories, reflecting an attempt at functional and conceptual reformulation in the context of the transformations taking place in the Arab arena and at the human level in general?

## Conclusion

The eruption of Tunisia's revolution has been rich with implications for, and undoubtedly influenced its Arab regional surroundings. The continuing reverberations of this event are unlikely to dissipate in the near future. It displayed many forms of revolutionary activity, leaving a powerful authoritarian regime with only one option: to relinquish its hold on power. The revolution thus opened a new horizon for people, regardless of their political maturity, to express their will.

Imagine crowds of citizens in any state with a tradition of democratic practice, coordinating their movements through the channels of modern social networking and filling a huge square in one of their major cities. All eyes are upon them as they immobilize all activity in the city. Would such a move not create confusion in the apparatus of government as officials scrambled to deal with the protesters? Would it not prompt the government to listen seriously to the crowds and perhaps even to give in to their demands? Is this not a way to revive the concept of the will of the people, the expression of a spontaneous referendum on the real concerns of the citizenry (or at least one of its constituent groups) that may fail to register in more conventional surveys of public opinion? As such, it may not be far from the truth to say that the revolution of Tunisia heralds deep changes in the regional and international balances, and that the event has undoubtedly enriched the concept of revolution, bringing it into harmony with the rhythm and development of history.

The Tunisian revolution and those that succeeded it, in what has come to be known as the Arab Spring, have inspired a state of psychological euphoria among elites. The general intellectual and cultural scene, as manifested in the writings of many thinkers, intellectuals, academics, journalists and artists since the beginning of 2011, confirms that we are on the threshold of a phase that could be described as the *stage of consciousness revival and intellectual revision*. Hopes are strong that this effort by the intellectual elite to correct their path will lead to the



extinction of two models of behavior that have marked Arab intellectuals in the past. The first of these is the tendency toward complicity with the regimes of oppression, whereby money and prestige are exchanged for attempts at internal reform and the whole process justified by cunning sense of pragmatism. The second is the attitude of resignation and indifference that, in the quest for self-preservation, reduces all intellectual activity or production of knowledge to little more than a professional specialization detached from the immediate concerns of real people and their legitimate aspirations.

The Tunisian revolution, and those that followed, have returned to the Arab people some sense of their value and dignity. Awaited now is the inspiration of continuing behavior informed by the dual logic of construction and demolition. This logic is immediately relevant to the nature of revolutionary action and its requirements: the destruction of the abhorrent in all its manifestations (particularly the unethical ones), the active development of the capacity for self-determination, and, ultimately, the resulting ability to make history and act within it.