How to Conceptualize Area Studies?

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The Arab uprisings have brought about a new wave of Middle East political science research that seeks to comparatively account for the different political trajectories in the region. In order to situate these diverse post-2011 scholarly studies, this paper introduces Comparative Area Studies (CAS) as an analytical perspective which combines the context sensitivity of area studies with the explicit and systematic use of comparisons. It finds that while intra-regional comparisons are the mainstay of political science studies of the

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Arab uprisings, there is also an emerging, very promising strand of cross-regional comparisons that draws on insights from, for example, the post-Soviet space or from European history. The paper concludes by evaluating the promises, risks and prospects of following a CAS perspective in the study of Middle East politics

Keywords: Comparative Area Studies; Arab Uprisings; Middle East Politics; Cross-regional Comparisons

The Impact of the Arab Uprisings

The Arab uprisings of 2011 have not only brought about the fall of the heads of state in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, all-out wars in Syria, Libya and, subsequently, in Yemen, but also the survival of all eight monarchies in the region.¹ In the academic field of Middle East studies and in particular in Middle East political science, the dramatic political processes during and since 2011 have contributed to a basic questioning of the mainstream theoretical assumptions and methodological approaches that guided research in the 1990s and the 2000s. While some pundits have renewed their earlier attacks against Middle East political science-first for not predicting the Islamist terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (9/11) and now for not grasping the Arab uprisings-most observers have actually been more cautious in arguing, for example, that the prominent perspective on authoritarian regime durability had failed to adequately address diverse, bottom-up social mobilization as well as the complexity of intra-regime politics (Hinnebusch; Lynch).

In a recently published article entitled "Reflections on Self-reflections," Morten Valbjørn combines these individual perspectives into an impressive meta-study of the different ways in which scholars of Middle East politics have debated the analytical





implications of the Arab uprisings over the course of the last three to four years. He identifies three different kinds of framings (5-14): First, the so-called "who-has-beenvindicated-and-made-obsolete framing" describes the tendency to pick winners and losers in the scholarly debate. Especially in the initial period of surprise and partly even euphoria in early-to-mid 2011, the dominant research strand of authoritarianism was deemed to have decisively lost in explanatory power. Early on, authoritarianism research indeed had difficulties in accounting for the ousting of Presidents Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, Saleh in Yemen as well as Colonel Gaddafi in Libya. With the authoritarian durability in the eight Arab monarchies, in Algeria and in particular with the military coup in Egypt in July 2013, however, these voices have subsided again. Second, the so-called "how-do-we-synthesize-and-upgrade framing" revises existing analytical frameworks and combines insights from different research perspectives in order to arrive at better understandings of the post-Arab uprisings' political trajectories in the Middle East. Revisiting older scholarly debates, such as those on civil societies, social movements or the relationship of religion and politics (8-9) helps to avoid repeating earlier mistakes and simplifications. Third, the so-called "how-do-we-

get-beyond-the-democratization/authoritarianism-paradogma framing" is more radical than the two other variants. It takes the Arab uprisings to be a fitting political and historical juncture to fundamentally reconsider the dominant analytical focus of mainstream Middle East political science on macro-structural questions of democratization and authoritarianism. Prominent scholars such as Lisa Anderson who argue within this framing have for a long time advocated for broadening the understanding of Middle East politics and more systematically tackling

[q]uestions relating to nation-building and identity formation, insurrection, sectarian and tribal politics, the resilience of monarchies, the dynamics of rentier-states, the role of the military in politics, the politics of informal economies, and transnational networks. (11; italics in the original)

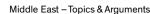
While cognizant of this interesting (meta-) debate within Middle East political science, this paper takes a somewhat different route: It introduces Comparative Area Studies (CAS) as a broad analytical perspective from beyond Middle East studies with the aim of locating important new research themes and preliminary findings on Middle East politics after the Arab uprisings. CAS' explicit and systematic use of comparative methods is explored here to

highlight some of the extant research along three ideal-typical forms of comparison: intra-regional, cross-regional and inter-regional. In particular, CAS' cross-regional and inter-regional foci deliberately connect to insights from beyond the Middle East. The paper concludes by evaluating the prospects of CAS vis-à-vis Middle East politics after the Arab uprisings and beyond.

Comparative Area Studies and the Three Forms of Comparison

In recent years, the analytical perspective of Comparative Area Studies has gained in prominence in the discipline of political science, both in its subfield of comparative politics (Basedau and Köllner; Berg-Schlosser) as well as in discussions about (mostly qualitative) research methods (Ahram, "The Theory"). Like traditional area studies, including Middle East studies, CAS is based on the strong context knowledge and detailed expertise of the histories, cultures, languages and spatiality of the respective "area" (Mehler and Hoffmann). Beyond traditional area studies, the CAS perspective explicitly and systematically employs different forms of comparative methodshence the capital "C." I follow the definition of CAS that was developed at my academic home institution, the GIGA





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Comparative Area Studies (CAS) (...) combines the context sensitivity and knowledge of area studies with the explicit use of comparative methods as the appropriate means to generate both contributions to broader disciplinary and theoretical debates, and better insights into the cases. ("Idea")²

Together, the interest of CAS encompasses both generalization and specification, i.e. the generalization of findings beyond the "classical," intra-regional area studies perspective and the better specification of single-case findings within it. It does so via three ideal-typical forms of comparison: intra-regional, cross-regional, and interregional.3 First, in intra-regional comparisons, "[a]spects or phenomena of different geographical entities within a given region are compared" (Basedau and Köllner). This means that even though the very notion might insinuate a comparison beyond a certain single area, CAS can actually be pursued within just one area. Intraregional comparisons usually have the analytical advantage that a number of background conditions pertaining to geography, history, culture and sometimes also socio-economic profiles or political structures are more frequently similar. Second, cross-regional comparisons "involve

the comparison of analytical units across different regions" (Basedau and Köllner). Cross-regional comparisons are often analytically more challenging because they simultaneously demand concrete field or context knowledge in different areas and strong methodological rigor, irrespective of the chosen method(s). In political science in general and in its subfield of comparative politics in particular, cross-regional comparisons have usually focused on the country level, but they can also be carried out on sectorial or sub-national levels or in terms of specific state institutions or social groups. Third, inter-regional comparisons take whole areas or regions as the units of analysis. They usually try to "identify regional patterns and to compare them to each other" (Basedau and Köllner). Inter-regional comparisons serve mainly to describe and analyze similarities and differences in the paths, sequences, relevant actor constellations and outcomes of important global political dynamics (e.g. processes of democratization or patterns of regional cooperation).

CAS and the Arab Uprisings

In this section, I employ the three CAS-related forms of comparison to situate current research on Middle East politics after the Arab uprisings. An important caveat is warranted here: My selection of the cur-

rent political science research is not allencompassing or representative. Rather, it is admittedly skewed towards my own research focus on the sub-field of comparative politics, with a view on state-society and regime-opposition relations in the Middle East.⁴

Beyond the many single-case studies, by far most of the current comparative political science research on the Arab uprisings after 2011 consists of intra-regional comparisons. This is not surprising, given that the comparison of different units within the same area has traditionally been the most common form of CAS-related comparisons—and the one closest to the "classical" area studies perspective. This has also been the case for studies belonging to comparative politics of the Middle East. What is new, however, is that the dynamics of the Arab uprisings have brought to the fore research fields that were previously peripheral or almost non-existent. Given the scale and diversity of social mobilization during the Arab uprisings within a rather short period of time in 2011, one research trend that has grown massively has been the study of social movements, in particular youth movements, and of societal activism writ large (Beinin and Vairel; Gertel and Ouaissa). Often drawing on concepts and methods from social movement studies, many researchers have ana-





lyzed the protest repertoires in different settings (Beinin and Vairel), thereby also regularly blurring disciplinary boundaries of political science, sociology, anthropology and Middle East studies. Relatedly, the relationship between secularists and Islamists as well as the differentiation between types of activists, e.g. labor organizations, political parties and the plethora of previously often overlooked "nonmovements" (Asef Bayat), have become mainstays of research after 2011. In addition, the role of new social media in mobilization, such as the Internet, Facebook or Twitter, has massively gained in influence (Lynch, The Arab Uprisings). Connected to both activism research and studies on social media are new studies that draw on insights from political geography and that focus on issues of the spatiality of protests as well as the role of implicit knowledge and changed identities (Schumann and Soudias; Schwedler and Kingas; Gertel and Ouaissa).

Intra-regional comparisons have not only increased with regard to societal dynamics. There is also a new trend of more regime- or state institution-centered analyses after the Arab uprisings employing different types of intra-regional comparisons. First, given the massively increased relevance of the Arab militaries since 2011 in either ousting authoritarian presidents

(Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt), violently putting down mass protests (e.g. Bahrain, Syria) or taking over power themselves (Egypt under al-Sisi), studies of the military, political-military or civil-military relations have clearly experienced a massive renaissance in Middle East political science (Albrecht; Lutterbeck; Makara). Second and related, there is also a new trend to study regime repression as a decisive tool to counter oppositional mobilization in its own right (Bellin). The most recent intra-regional comparisons differentiate between "constraining" and "incapacitating" forms of repression (Josua and Edel) and disentangle state security agencies such as the military, the secret services, the police, gendarmerie, etc. Third, another strand of regime-centered research focuses on the striking survival of all eight authoritarian monarchies during the Arab uprisings (Derichs and Demmelhuber). Extant studies understand this monarchical survival in configurational terms, i.e. as the differential interaction of factors including family rule, external support, material distribution and procedural or religious-nationalist legitimation (Bank, Richter, and Sunik; Yom and Gause). Fourth, an emerging strand of intra-regional comparative research has tackled the political dynamics of learning and adaptation of the authoritarian regimes,

comparing for example the lessons drawn by the Syrian regime from the failed counter-insurgency in Libya (Heydemann and Leenders) or, more broadly, regime learning in the cases of Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan and Syria (Bank and Edel). Taken together, intra-regional comparisons of the Arab uprisings have clearly diversified over the course of the last three years or so. We can observe a clear upsurge in the quantity and, arguably, also the quality of studies addressing previously rather marginalized topics-e.g. research on social movement dynamics or monarchical rule in the Middle East. In addition to this, some exciting new themes have emerged that had not been part and parcel of Middle East political science immediately prior to the Arab uprisings: One is the new focus on the role of the military and other state repressive organs, while another is the newly emerging interest in cross-border regime learning and adaptation.

Cross-regional comparisons pale in number with intra-regional comparisons of the Arab uprisings, but they have also increased quite markedly since 2011. A central field in this regard are comparative studies of diffusion processes in regional waves of contention (Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik) or, seen from a different angle, of "regime change cascades" (Hale). The popular uprisings that quickly spread





across many Arab countries in 2011 suggest that oppositional protest repertoires quickly diffused across national boundaries. Not only were slogans such as "the people demand the downfall of the regime" ("ash-sha'b yurīd isgāt an-nizām") actively taken up by activists across the region, but core protest practices such as the mass sit-ins in central squares could also be observed from Cairo to Manama, and from Dar'a and Homs to Sana'a. In their article "Diffusion and Demonstration," David Patel, Valerie Bunce, and Sharon Wolchik contrast these dynamics in specific Arab countries with similar ones in Eastern Europe post-1989 as well as during the so-called "Color Revolutions" (Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan) from 2000-2005. For this study, a Middle East political scientist (Patel) teamed up with two renowned comparativists specializing on the post-Soviet space (Bunce and Wolchik) to combine their different "area experiences" in a fruitful kind of cross-regional division of labor. In a similar vein, a number of prominent comparative politics scholars working on other areas have begun to view the Middle East in the context of the Arab uprisings as an interesting object of study that is able to inform broader disciplinary debates of regime transitions and the prospects for democratization (Way) or on anti-regime protest

dynamics (Weyland). Kurt Weyland, a comparativist specializing on Latin America and 19th and 20th-century Europe, has contrasted the "wave-like" nature of the spread of anti-regime protests in the Middle East in 2011 with Europe during the socalled 1848 revolution. Despite the obvious structural differences between, for example, the cases of Egypt in 2011 and Germany in 1848, he finds interesting similarities in the cognitive shortcuts that oppositional activists and "ordinary people" took to make sense of the surprising "forerunner"-France in 1848, Tunisia in 2011and to start engaging on a mass scale in high-risk anti-regime protests.

These examples of protest-related crossregional comparisons between cases from the Arab uprisings and those from other areas are indicative of a broader trend that emerged during and immediately after the initial phase of mass mobilization in the Middle East. "2011" became a symbolic denotation that could be contrasted to earlier symbolic years standing for emancipatory mass protests and regime breakdown but also regime re-stabilization in other regions: 1848, 1968, 1989.⁵ Against the backdrop of the CAS discussion in this paper, the previous observation reinforces the idea that findings from cross-regional comparisons can be generalized and thus transformed into inter-regional comparisons, thereby underlining the often blurry boundaries between cross-regional and inter-regional comparisons. However, "truly" inter-regional comparisons of the Arab uprisings taking the whole area of the Middle East or of the Arab states as the units of analysis in political science studies have continued to be almost non-existent. One exception in this regard is a fascinating working paper by Ariel Ahram, which combines all three CAS-inspired comparative perspectives to study cross-border diffusion during the Arab uprisings (Comparative Area Studies). To account for macro-structural background conditions prior to the beginning of the Arab uprisings, Ahram includes an inter-regional comparison of patterns of coup attempts and longitudinal development of quantitative "Polity2 democracy scores" between the Arab countries and data on Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America (9-10).

In sum, while most of the new comparative politics studies of the Middle East after the Arab uprisings can still be subsumed under the intra-regional form of comparison, there is also an emerging and very promising strand of cross-regional comparisons that draws on insights from, for example, the post-Soviet space or from European history. As with political science research on other regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia or Latin America,





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inter-regional comparisons have remained very rare.

Summary and Outlook

The Arab uprisings of 2011 represent the most massive social and political mobilization in the Middle East since the 1950s and 1960s. The different political trajectories of these uprisings-from the liberalization in Tunisia to the authoritarian-military rollback in Egypt, and from the all-out wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen to the continuation of the authoritarian status quo in Algeria and the Arab monarchies-have also brought about a new wave of scholarly research that seeks to account for dynamics of current Middle East politics post-2011. Importantly, the Arab uprisings have awakened the interest of political science scholars with different, non-Middle East area backgrounds, allowing "external" expertise to enrich debates about political dynamics in the Middle East. At the same time, the global emanation of the Arab uprisings-rendering 2011 a symbolic year similar to 1848, 1968 or 1989-has allowed Middle East-related research themes and findings to make inroads into broader theoretical debates in political science and other disciplines. This development constitutes one of the main scholarly promises connected to the analytical perspective of CAS, in particular when it comes to crossregional comparisons.

However, the increased interest of non-Middle East comparativists in the Arab uprisings and the widened representation of the Middle East area in broader political science debates is not without risks: CAS' cross-regional and inter-regional comparisons entail the danger that studies simplify often very complex contextual conditions in order to make strong general, usually causal claims that are relevant beyond the respective cases in one area. To address this challenge, scholars are strongly advised to put much effort into the process of selecting appropriate cases that are capable of answering the guiding research questions and into defining the scope conditions of their studies (Ahram, Comparative Area Studies 5-6).6 One way to find fitting cross-regional cases is to work together in research teams com-

posed of different area experts who share an interest in research questions, concepts and methods (Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik). While potentially yielding very interesting results, pursuing more collaborative team or cluster research is not without risks, especially for scholars at the beginning of their academic careers: In spite of the increased and mostly also commendable establishment of inter-, multi- or trans-disciplinary research centers, such as the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS) at Philipps University in Marburg, individual academic careers "are still [commonly] made in the disciplines," as the old dictum says. This potential contradiction will arguably not easily be solved, at least in the short- to medium-term.

To end on a somewhat positive note: Despite the "modest harvest" (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds) in terms of emancipatory, democratic politics and social justice in the years following the Arab uprisings, politics in the Middle East continues to be a fascinating area of study, and one that should be explored even more thoroughly and critically in the future.



Notes

¹I will use the notion of *Arab uprisings* here and refrain from engaging in a more detailed discussion about the pros and cons of alternative notions such as *Arab Spring*, *Arab revolt(s)* or *Arabellion*.

² giga-hamburg.de/en/idea.

³ giga-hamburg.de.

⁴ For more comprehensive studies on post-2011 developments in Middle East politics cf. the already mentioned contributions by Valbjørn, Hinnebusch and Lynch, "Introduction" as well as the recently published Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring and a number of edited volumes (Gerges; Gertel and Ouaissa; Jünemann and Zorob; Kamrava; Lynch, The Arab Uprisings). This list is of course also far from exhaustive.

⁵ I will refrain here from a long discussion of the kinds of comparisons that have been drawn between 2011 and the other symbolic years. If one were to engage in this debate further, I think that one important differentiation would need to be made between the different meanings of, for example, 1968 or 1989: Does 1968 refer to the kind of emancipatory social movements in different parts of the globe or rather to the "Prague Spring" with its ensuing repressive clampdown by Soviet troops? Or does 1989 signify the fall of the Berlin Wall or Peking's Tiananmen Square? Or both in both cases?

⁶ Weyland's 1848-2011 comparison is a positive example in this regard.

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