

# From discourse to practice: Orientalism, western policy and the Arab uprisings

JASMINE K. GANI\*

How does discourse and knowledge production impact policy in the Middle East, and how is that knowledge dependent on colonial and racial underpinnings? Using the Arab uprisings as a lens through which to explore these questions, I argue that decades of Orientalist knowledge production, often by academics with close relationships to the policy world, helped to produce broader epistemic communities that shaped perceptions of and government reactions to protest in the Middle East.

The Arab uprisings constituted a critical juncture that helped to expose some of the flawed approaches to Middle East studies (even among Middle East scholars and those living in the region). First came the widespread shock at the ‘unprecedented’ nature of the protests; second came the predictions and even expectation that revolution would sweep across the region; and finally came a widespread pessimism, with a number of analysts revising the once popular label of the ‘Arab Spring’ to the Arab or Islamist ‘Winter’. The analysis was highly reactionary and increasingly turned ideological. Deep down beneath the surface of some of the discourse, the fundamental concern was not about Arab autonomy, but about the capacity of Arabs to follow the same path charted by the West, and to embrace its brand of liberal democracy. For the pessimists, the apparent success of Islamist groups simply confirmed the notion that Arabs cannot overcome their innate cultural resistance to democratic values; but for liberal optimists, who argued that Arabs can be just like ‘us’ in the West, the disappointment was far greater. While the latter position seemed more benign, reflective of a belief in universal potential and a positive desire to disprove Arab exceptionalism, this normative approach still stemmed from Orientalist perspectives. Thus, the moment the process of political change in the Middle East veered away from the liberal criteria used to judge the uprisings as worthy and progressive, the assessment changed even

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among optimists. This article urges caution against snap judgements that are either too pessimistic or too optimistic, as both approaches tend to reinforce ideological positions that seek to apply pressure on local agents to conform ideologically, stripping them of the time needed to enact changes in a process that is inevitably turbulent and messy.

But beyond the realm of perception, does such discourse have any bearing on reality? Borrowing from Edward Said's concepts of latent and manifest Orientalism,<sup>1</sup> I argue that the Arab uprisings present an example in which discourse did translate into practice. This relationship between the ideational (latent Orientalism) and policy (manifest Orientalism) is in part possible, indeed likely, because journalists, academics, producers of popular culture and policy-makers are participants in broad epistemic communities that have developed over time, where the barriers between categories of knowledge production and knowledge consumption are blurred.<sup>2</sup> But the conversion of discourse into practice is not inevitable, and it is possible to interrogate the relationship between the two, especially within the realm of 'expertise'. Thus, I consider the role of think tanks in the Arab uprisings as mediators of discourse, with the capacity either to reproduce and 'scientifically' latent Orientalism or to challenge it.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on the policies of the United Kingdom and the United States towards the Arab uprisings between 2011 and 2013 (prior to the refugee 'crisis' in Europe and the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIS), I argue there is a correlation between discourse put out by prominent think tanks, especially Chatham House in the UK and the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) in the US, and the policies of the Cameron and Obama governments. Thus, a more pluralist discourse that brought in Arab voices from multiple ideological positions at Chatham House was reflected in greater eagerness to support the demands of protesters and opposition groups (for longer) by the UK government; meanwhile, a US-centric agenda and a lack of regional input in the discourse of the CFR were similarly reflected in the hesitation of the US administration. Ultimately, in both cases, the strength of latent Orientalism in the broader discourse eventually became manifest in the two countries' policies.

<sup>1</sup> See E. W. Said, *Orientalism: western conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1978), esp. ch. 3. It should be noted that Said categorizes discourse under manifest Orientalism; I differ slightly in my usage of the terms, treating discourse as latent Orientalism, while manifest Orientalism is reserved for policy and actions.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'epistemic community' is widely attributed to Peter Haas, referring to a network of knowledge-based professionals: see Peter M. Haas, 'Introduction: epistemic communities and international policy coordination', *International Organization* 46: 1, 1992, pp. 1–35. However, my use of the term here is more expansive, including cultural producers and ideas that are inherited and shared across time and space.

<sup>3</sup> It is particularly apt to ask such questions in *International Affairs* 100 years after it was founded by Chatham House, a centenary that coincides with that of the legal ratification of European mandates in the Middle East in 1922. This combined anniversary is symbolic of the singular entanglement between scholars, think tanks and policy-makers when it comes to the Middle East. A glance through Chatham House's timeline of its most significant events (see <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/our-history>) shows how prominently the Middle East has featured in the making and renown of the institute. This is a theme also acknowledged by the *International Affairs* special issue on 'Contentious borders: the Middle East and North Africa post-2011' (93: 4, July 2017) and the 2018 virtual issue on 'The Middle East in International Affairs'. In the latter, a fascinating collection of articles by academics, journalists and diplomats published over the decades demonstrates both a reinforcement and a critique of Orientalist tropes. The collection exemplifies both *International Affairs* and Chatham House as the type of epistemic communities I am referring to in this article—where the nexus between academe and policy is consciously cultivated and where ideas and influence co-constitute. (Unless noted otherwise at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 16 Nov. 2021.)

After 2013, as the discourse on the uprisings became dominated by refugees and ISIS—developments that appeared emphatically to substantiate Orientalist fears—neither government had the will or popular support to openly endorse the demands of opposition groups.

The manifest Orientalism in this case shows that imperialist policy can be expressed via *non-intervention*,<sup>4</sup> to perpetuate a status quo that is favourable to neo-colonial interests, and not just via the interventionism that is normally associated with imperialism. The point here is not that western states should or even could have intervened more. Rather, I argue that the longstanding colonial and racial interpretations of Middle Eastern culture, society and politics that had buttressed European imperialism in the past in the region continued to shape the discourse and the parameters of what was considered 'rational' policy for western states in response to the uprisings, much to the frustration of the protesters, and often to the satisfaction of the incumbent authoritarians.

In the following sections I outline the shift in the discourse of the uprisings from optimism to pessimism. Switching from a discourse to a historical approach, I then go on to explore the long-term Orientalist architecture that provided the context in which that discourse emerged, delineating the difference between latent and manifest Orientalism. In the final two sections I apply that framework, first to the discourse on the Arab uprisings within the first year, and second to UK and US think tanks and government policies towards the uprisings that eventually manifested that Orientalism.

## **Predictions of sweeping revolutions and counter-revolutions**

Within just a few hours of Mohammed Bouazizi setting himself on fire on 17 December 2010, mass protests arose across Tunis and within a week had spread throughout the country. After three weeks of public outcry and intense pressure, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled Tunisia on 14 January 2011, ending his 23 years of dictatorship. Bouazizi's act of protest, which ultimately took his life, was seen by the Tunisian protesters not as an isolated event that concerned merely him and his family, but as an act of martyrdom. For them, his sacrifice epitomized the desperate socio-economic plight of millions in the country and the daily humiliations they faced at the hands of the authorities. It also articulated their longstanding anger at the impunity of the regime and its cronies, and the people's new-found defiance against their oppression. At first, few commentators expected these protests to spread to other countries. The domestic affairs of Tunisia, a relatively small state in terms of population and geopolitical significance, remained an unknown field for many in the West; but many activists in the Middle East *did* note the potential implications of events in Tunisia, and mobilized to build a region-wide momentum of awareness, shared grievance and action.

<sup>4</sup> I use this term here to refer to military and overt intervention. Of course, western governments did intervene in other ways, for example through foreign and diplomatic aid, but much of this was covert and all of it conditional—when those conditions (i.e. expectations of secular/liberal values) were not met, the aid was less forthcoming.

The sparse attention paid in the West to public activism in the Middle East changed just before 25 January, the day when nationwide protests took over the streets of Egypt's main cities. Demonstrators began to emerge in larger numbers, calling not merely for reform, but for the removal of President Hosni Mubarak from power. Notably, from 21 January onwards, as the unexpected and unlikely seemed to be taking shape in Egypt, journalists from major news outlets, including the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, Al Jazeera English and *Le Monde*,<sup>5</sup> started to analyse the Tunisian revolution retrospectively as the beginning of a wave of revolutions across the region.

Much of this predictive analysis, especially in Europe and the United States, stemmed from analogies with Europe's historical experiences of democratization. The 'velvet revolutions' in eastern Europe in 1989, which triggered the breakup of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, became the most popular reference point for the Arab uprisings.<sup>6</sup> The media were quick to highlight the similarities: the *Guardian* posed the challenge that 'if this is young Arabs' 1989, Europe must be ready with a bold response', taking it as a given that Tahrir Square in 2011 was the Arab version of Prague's Wenceslas Square in 1989.<sup>7</sup> As Coates Ulrichsen, Held and Brahimî put it in *Open Democracy*, the political transformation of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania were similarly 'sweeping, dramatic and unexpected' and, they argued, had commonality with the Arab uprisings in terms of causes and nature of unfolding events.<sup>8</sup> Noting mismatches arising from the comparisons between 1989 and 2011, analysts rushed to find alternative analogies rather than ditch the comparative framework altogether. The most common alternative was the 1848 revolutions, which turned out to be one phase in a much longer period of transition, and in some cases saw reversals back into tougher authoritarianism; while *Jadaliyya* opted for 1968 as a more pertinent comparison.<sup>9</sup> Usually the comparisons focused on similarities between the nature of the uprisings; but predictions were also made on the basis of the *outcomes* of revolutions in Europe, such as *Foreign Policy*'s description of the uprisings as an 'upheaval currently threatening to sweep away the Arab world's ruling regimes'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For example, Cara Parks asked in the *Huffington Post* in Feb. 2011: 'Is this the beginning of a trend?' ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/01/egypt-tunisia-arab-revolution\\_n\\_816695.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/01/egypt-tunisia-arab-revolution_n_816695.html)), while a *Guardian* editorial stated on 23 March 2011: 'The Arab revolution is an unstoppable force' and 'While the world's attention is focussed on Libya, people across the Middle East are rising up against dictators.' See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/23/arab-revolution-unstoppable-force>.

<sup>6</sup> See Jacqueline Head, 'The Arab world's 1989 revolution?', Al Jazeera, 2 Feb. 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/2011/02/201121165427186924.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, 'If this is young Arabs' 1989, Europe must be ready with a bold response', *Guardian*, 2 Feb. 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/02/egypt-young-arabs-1989-europe-bold>.

<sup>8</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, David Held and Alia Brahimî, 'The Arab 1989?', *Open Democracy*, 11 Feb. 2011, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/kristian-coates-ulrichsen-david-held-alia-brahimi/arab-1989>. In this article, the authors do identify important analytical differences between 1989 and 2011, importantly noting their differing relationships with the West, but the apparent domino effect in both cases is still cited as a common feature.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Applebaum, 'In the Arab world, it's 1848—not 1989', *Washington Post*, 21 Feb. 2011; Robert Springborg, 'Whither the Arab Spring? 1989 or 1848?', *International Spectator* 46: 3, 2011, pp. 5–12 at p. 8; Michael D. Kennedy, 'Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and historical frames: 2011, 1989, 1968', *Jadaliyya*, 11 Oct. 2011, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2853/arab-spring-occupy-wall-street-and-historical-frames>.

<sup>10</sup> See 'Revolution in the Arab world', *Foreign Policy*, 7 Feb. 2011, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/arab\\_revolution](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/arab_revolution).

These predictions not only came from western media and commentators, but were echoed by both Arab diasporas in the West and those within the region, demonstrating how embedded the concept of ‘revolutionary waves’ had become. Many Arabs felt they were a part of a broader phenomenon that united Arabs in a post-pan-Arab identity, one based on calls for justice and citizens’ rights rather than on anti-colonialism, as was the case in the past. As Maytha Alhassen and Ahmed Shihab El-Din stated in an edited book on collective stories from activists in the Arab world: ‘These stories of our fellow global citizens ... point to a vision of pan-Arab identity, expressed in their shared spirit and connected struggles.’<sup>11</sup> The organization of ‘twin protests’ in which simultaneous demonstrations were coordinated by activists in two countries, with shared slogans and chants, was not uncommon: Egyptian flags in Tunis, or Syrian flags in Sana’a, could often be seen in the early phases of the uprisings. While Arab nationalism as a unifying ideology might have long been in retreat, Arabism—a shared sense of culture *and* historical experience—was still very much prevalent. This notion of shared identity and experience arguably meant that the strength of the state, the separate evolution of internal structures and various other specificities were temporarily overlooked, contributing to predictions of sweeping revolutions.

The narrative of a domino effect throughout the region was strongly reinforced through imagery. Photographs and cartoons that conveyed the notion of diffused revolution were widely disseminated, particularly via social media. Some of the most prominent images that appeared in newspapers and blogs were commonly re-posted on Facebook; this imagery was in turn reinforced via the discourse on Twitter, in which multiple ‘hashtags’ were used at the end of a tweet, citing the various regional cities where uprisings were taking place.<sup>12</sup>

## From euphoria to disappointment

Just as commentators and activists had been quick to predict the spread of revolution across the region, similar eagerness to predict failure and counter-revolution soon followed. Less than a month after the uprisings in Egypt began, *Der Spiegel* asked in an interview with Egyptian presidential candidate Mohamed ElBaradei: ‘Is Egypt in danger of a civil war?’<sup>13</sup> By May the emphasis was on the role of Islamists in the aftermath of the uprisings, with a strong pessimistic undercurrent.<sup>14</sup> Within a year, the term Arab Spring had been all but dropped, except in retrospective reflections on events, and commentators predicted not

<sup>11</sup> Maytha Alhassen and Ahmed Shihab El-Din, ‘Introduction’, in Maytha Alhassen and Ahmed Shihab El-Din, eds, *Demanding dignity: young voices from the frontlines of the Arab revolutions* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 2013), p. xxvi.

<sup>12</sup> Some of these images are featured in my blogpost, ‘The Arab uprisings a decade on: recalling the discourse and imagery of optimism’, 15 Dec. 2021, <https://jaminekgani.wordpress.com/2021/12/15/the-arab-uprisings-a-decade-on-recalling-the-discourse-and-imagery-of-optimism/>.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Elbaradei on democracy’s chances in Egypt: “We could experience an Arab Spring”’, *Der Spiegel*, 6 Feb. 2011, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/elbaradei-on-democracy-s-chances-in-egypt-we-could-experience-an-arab-spring-a-743825.html>.

<sup>14</sup> ‘The Arab Spring loses momentum’, *Der Spiegel*, 18 May 2011, <https://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/photo-gallery-the-arab-spring-loses-momentum-fotostrecke-68102.html>.

merely a return to the way things were before, but in fact the onset of an Arab Winter,<sup>15</sup> a prominent example being the influential Washington DC think tank the Brookings Institution. The uprisings were ‘supposed to lead to democracy’, stated one of its op-eds, strongly suggesting that only a liberal outcome was the correct one, following this up with the question ‘What went wrong?’, strongly reminiscent of Orientalist Bernard Lewis’s book of the same title.<sup>16</sup> When identifying the possible future players in the Arab polities, the authors treated Islamists and would-be democrats as separate categories, clear in their implication that there could be no overlap.<sup>17</sup> So for example, though En-Nahda in Tunisia had the most recognizable democratic credentials in terms of its demands,<sup>18</sup> it was categorized among those opposition groups that could not be relied upon to be democratic. Despite recognizing the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt had adopted many tenets of pluralism and democracy,<sup>19</sup> the underlying position adopted by the article was a lack of trust that they would maintain that trajectory and not exploit democracy merely to attain power. Echoing George W. Bush’s association after 9/11 between Islamism and anti-Americanism, when he asked ‘Why do they hate us?’,<sup>20</sup> the article’s negative prognosis of Islamist subversion of a democratic outcome was closely tied to expectations of greater anti-Americanism and opposition to Israel—widely considered in the United States as the only democracy in the region. The article rounded off with predictions of an overspill of ‘chaos’, further cementing the idea that secular dictators, though undemocratic, were nevertheless safer than non-conforming Islamists voted in at the polls. Not coincidentally, the image accompanying the pessimistic article was not one of protesters or any of the major political actors, but one of Muslims in prayer. Failure and reversal were not associated merely with *Islamism* as a political movement, but with Islam itself.

One of the most assertively negative perspectives on the uprisings came from John Bradley’s book *After the Arab Spring*, which opened with the words ‘My heart sank when news broke that a popular uprising had erupted in Tunisia’ and went on to praise the liberal merits of the ousted Ben Ali regime.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> David Schenker, ‘Arab Spring or Islamist Winter?’, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 31 Jan. 2012, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/arab-spring-or-islamist-winter>; Peter Osborne, ‘The Arab Spring may yet turn to chilly winter’, *Daily Telegraph*, 22 Oct. 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8843214/Libya-The-Arab-Spring-may-yet-turn-to-chilly-winter.html>. The *Economist* asked ‘Is the Arab Spring turning into a bleak mid-winter?’: ‘Islamists, elections and the Arab Spring’, *The Economist*, 10 Dec. 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/21541404>.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard Lewis, *What went wrong?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Daniel L. Byman, *After the hope of the Arab Spring, the chill of an Arab Winter*, Brookings Institution, 4 Dec. 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/after-the-hope-of-the-arab-spring-the-chill-of-an-arab-winter/>.

<sup>18</sup> See Rasmus Alenius Boserup and Fabrizio Tassinari, ‘Tunisia: wasn’t this what we hoped for?’, *Open Democracy*, 14 Oct. 2011, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/tunisia-wasnt-this-what-we-hoped-for/>.

<sup>19</sup> See Fawaz A. Gerges, ‘The Islamist moment: from Islamic State to civil Islam?’, *Political Science Quarterly* 128: 3, 2013, pp. 389–426; M. M. Akif, ‘Mubadarat jama’at al-ikhawani al-muslimin lil-islam ad-dakhili fi msr’ [Reform initiative of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt], *Al Jazeera*, 16 May 2005, <http://www.aljazeera.net/specialfiles/pages/a7d9e130-of09-4b77-bbbo-ee07dd61afd3>; A. Bayat, *Post-Islamism: the changing faces of political Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> See Andrew Ross, ‘Why do they hate us?’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 39: 1, 2010, pp. 109–25.

<sup>21</sup> John Bradley, *After the Arab Spring: how Islamists hijacked the Middle East revolts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 1.



Such strength of pessimism was reflected in multiple academic articles.<sup>22</sup> In one such example, Michael Totten called the Arab Spring a misnomer (a year after the uprisings began), because of the low probability that any of the uprisings would emerge as *liberal* democracies. Again, optimism could only be equated with a mirror-image of western democracy. Most tellingly, Totten deemed Tunisia to be the most pro-democratic of the revolutionary Arab states of 2011, not because of state infrastructure, or military–civic relations, or open media, but because ‘most Tunisian women in the cities eschew the headscarf and dress like Europeans. Alcohol is widely available and consumed more by locals than by tourists.’<sup>23</sup> Apart from a brief mention of the economy, all the reasons given for a more optimistic prognosis in the case of Tunisia were based on its cultural proximity to Europe and how visibly less ‘Islamicized’ it was. Meanwhile, for Totten, Egypt’s prospects were ‘dark’ precisely because Islamists had fared better there, where (in contrast to Tunisia) almost ‘every woman who goes out in public wears a headscarf’, and observance of the daily prayers was more widespread among the general population. Totten went on to offer a diagnosis for Syria, where he predicted: ‘If and when the Assad regime falls, the Alawites, who make up only about twelve percent of the population, will again be exposed to death and annihilation ... God only knows what will happen to the nation’s Christian, Kurdish, and Druze.’<sup>24</sup> Such statements relatively early on in the time-scale of the uprisings, printed in reputable academic journals, were significant as they came to set the narrative for future events before they even happened. In the same article, Schenker was more nuanced, but similarly allowed little room for evolution among the so-called Islamists, while all their pro-democracy promises and changes were treated with scepticism. Unless their values matched exactly those of the West, in terms not only of foreign policy, but also of domestic social policy, they were deemed an equally or even more unfavourable outcome in comparison to dictatorship.

That particular article, as an example of wider trends, is especially useful as it allows us to compare three different perspectives on the Arab uprisings in immediate succession: starting with a highly pessimistic account, followed by a moderately pessimistic one, and finishing off with a more optimistic (though not unrealistic) account that focused more on contingency than on bold assertions about the future. It is interesting, therefore, that this one account, which did not reproduce historical tropes about fanatical Islamists seeking to hijack power, or the inevitability of sectarian bloodshed, was authored by Hussain Abdul-Hussain, an American analyst of Arab (Lebanese) background, and seemingly more conscious of and cautious about Orientalist predictions than his colleagues holding a western-rooted positionality. That is not to say that Arab scholars and analysts were immune to Orientalism and racist prejudices about their own region; but

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. Dimitar Mihaylov, ‘Why the Arab Spring turned into Arab Winter: understanding the Middle East crises through culture, religion, and literature’, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 11: 1, 2017, pp. 3–14; Bruce Thornton, ‘The Arab Winter approaches’, *Hoover Institution Journal*, 22 Nov. 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Totten, in Michael J. Totten, David Schenker and Hussain Abdul-Hussain, ‘Arab Spring or Islamist Winter? Three views’, *World Affairs* 174: 5, 2012, pp. 23–42 at p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> Totten, ‘Arab Spring or Islamist Winter?’, p. 28.

on evidence it would appear that such a positionality made those analysts less shackled to an automatically negative prognosis wrought by a deep Orientalist inheritance of the West.

Another thought-piece, by Aaron David Miller, was a lot more nuanced, recognizing that the uprisings would remain unpredictable for some time and that the United States could not expect to shape the outcome.<sup>25</sup> Even so, he identified a key disadvantage for the United States in a change to the status quo, arguing:

The growing influence of Arab public opinion on the actions of Arab governments and the absence of strong leaders will make it much tougher for the United States to pursue its traditional policies. For America, the Arab Spring may well prove to be more an Arab Winter.<sup>26</sup>

Miller pointed out the reality that with any new governments formed by either Islamists or secular nationalists, the system would be more open and foreign policy would drift away from the US agenda. Miller's analysis was one of the few that did not engage in scaremongering on the basis of Islamists taking power, but nevertheless posed the removal of 'acquiescent authoritarians' in the region as a potential loss for US interests—specifically in terms of access to naval and air facilities and counterterrorist cooperation.

All these predictions and generalizations reflected varying degrees of presumption and reaction, or reasserted western commitments to the status quo. Sweeping optimism paved the way for greater disappointment. Early expectations were found to have been unsubstantiated and excessive in the first place; while within just one year of the events, assessments were filled with doom.<sup>27</sup> Concerns regarding counter-revolutionary tactics and instability of course contained validity; any serious analyst should consider such outcomes. But often western discourse seemed to suggest that only a liberal democratic outcome to the uprisings could be seen as virtuous, supportable and worthy of hope.

## The ideological architecture of western discourse

To understand western reactions to the Arab uprisings, we need to consider them as a part of a long history of western representation of the Middle East. Here I turn to Edward Said's insights on discourse as a site of power; I will bring these together with scholarship on physical sites of knowledge (such as research think tanks) to identify the mediators of that Orientalist discourse.

The belief in the Arabs' apparent inability to define and envision their own progress can be traced back to what Said identified as both 'latent' and 'manifest'

<sup>25</sup> Aaron David Miller, 'For America, an Arab Winter', *Wilson Quarterly* 35: 3, 2011, pp. 36–42.

<sup>26</sup> Miller, 'For America, an Arab Winter', p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> While my article analyses the sharp shift in discourse in the early years of the uprisings, it is remarkable how in subsequent years this pessimistic narrative grew into predictions of state failure and the 'end of Sykes–Picot', as if to reinforce the notion that the Middle East was resistant to modernity altogether, but not for lack of trying by the West. See e.g. Ariel I. Ahram and Ellen Lust, 'The decline and fall of the Arab state', *Survival* 58: 2, 2016, pp. 7–34. For critique of the 'state failure' discourse, see Louise Fawcett, 'States and sovereignty in the Middle East: myths and realities', *International Affairs* 93: 4, 2017, esp. pp. 794, 804.



Orientalism. Latent Orientalism is ‘the archive of systematic statements and bodies of knowledge’ about the Orient,<sup>28</sup> which are powerful, lingering and effective precisely because they are ‘numbingly repetitive’,<sup>29</sup> helping to embed the stereotypes.<sup>30</sup> This latent Orientalism contains within it all the tropes that one saw renewed in the discourse on the Arab uprisings. These included a belief in the lack of Arab agency (due to insufficient rationality) required to break free from authoritarianism and other oppressions, so that the path of liberation had to be learned from the West. True to form, from an Orientalist point of view, the Middle East happened to be the last of the non-western regions to make that transition.

This belief in a lack of agency allowed even the Arab uprisings to be indirectly credited to the West, whence the waves of democratization were viewed as having benevolently and naturally spread.<sup>31</sup> This meant that much of the western commentariat identified a degree of ownership over the process: they—the West—were its progenitors after all. It also meant they could not help but centre western experiences in attempting to make sense of the uprisings (rather than turn to existing Middle Eastern examples of protest and revolution, of which there were many).

The latent Orientalism was also found in the prediction that if Arabs were left to their own agency, they could not be trusted to chart a safe, modern and correct path of progress, but rather would inevitably fall back on religion, specifically Islam—that irredeemable flaw in Arab nature. If reason was nourished and advocated by the European Enlightenment, allowing Europeans to be unshackled from religion, then Arabs’ lack of reason made them slower to grasp the benefits of the freedoms the Enlightenment had cultivated.

The role of Islam is particularly important in latent Orientalism as a container for all that is backward—it is associated with the failure to democratize, with the spectre of ‘shari’a law’ constantly threatening a return to the Middle Ages. The frequent reference to the Middle Ages in association with shari’a law is not, of course, a historical observation, but is used as a code to reflect the opposite of western reason. According to an Orientalist outlook, Islam is viewed as a danger to pluralism precisely because it apparently advocates superstition, dogma and a suspension of reason.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, this perceived danger is coupled with the memory (often constructed and embellished through popular culture) of the

<sup>28</sup> N. Abou El-Haj, ‘Edward Said and the political present’, *American Ethnologist* 32: 4, 2005, pp. 538–55.

<sup>29</sup> El-Haj, ‘Edward Said and the political present’, p. 542.

<sup>30</sup> Catherine Charrett’s work looks at the role of repetition of discourse and ritual in the EU’s securitization of Hamas in 2006. This offers a useful example of how repertoires of disavowal of democratically elected Islamist groups already existed prior to the Arab uprisings. See Catherine Charrett, ‘Ritualised securitisation: the European Union’s failed response to Hamas’s success’, *European Journal of International Relations* 25: 1, 2019, pp. 156–78.

<sup>31</sup> As Barkawi noted, this notion of western ownership and credit was sometimes subtly projected via an emphasis on the role of new social media and global technology, with globalization used as a code for western neo-liberalism. See Tarak Barkawi, ‘Ritual in the revolution? Chanting and dancing are more vital for political protest than information technologies and social media’, *Al Jazeera Opinion*, 6 Oct. 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2011/10/6/ritual-in-the-revolution>; Tarak Barkawi, ‘The globalisation of revolution’, *Al Jazeera Opinion*, 21 March 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2011/3/21/the-globalisation-of-revolution>.

<sup>32</sup> See Wendy Brown, *Regulating aversion: tolerance in the age of identity and empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), who argues tolerance is used as a code for excluding the barbaric other, i.e. Islam, for its incapacity to practise tolerance.

Ottoman empire's rivalry with and encroachment on Europe.<sup>33</sup> The competition from Islam has historically been seen therefore as both a military and also a spiritual one, given that it shares a proselytizing ethos with Christianity. This explains why Islam via the ballot box, demonstrating a capacity to persuade and not merely coerce, can ironically be more alarming to Orientalist sensibilities than the threat of Islam by imposition.

What is especially interesting in the case of western discourse on the Middle East is that, often, one does not particularly need to be a Middle East expert to comment on the region—as was obvious from the numerous non-expert contributions to media and political discourse on the Arab uprisings; indeed, many of the journalists cited above were not specialists in the region, though their articles were shared widely. But, as Kiran Phull argues in her research, western ignorance on the Middle East has long been used as an indication of objectivity in which the observer is detached enough to be trusted.<sup>34</sup> This perspective also explains why voices from the region or with Middle Eastern heritage seeking to offer a counter-discourse at the time were given less attention in the growing political and popular consensus on the uprisings.

Consequently, pessimism was, and is, closely associated with objectivity: an ability to read both past and future without being caught up in the hope of the present. Of course, it was not the case that Arabs were never trusted to have a reliable assessment of events in the region. During the initial phase when the Arab uprisings seemed to reflect liberal potential, Arab optimism was encouraged and validated by the West. As Alhaddad has noted, this response corresponded with a historical belief and policy in which only the West was deemed to have the capacity to 'define' and 'save' the Middle East via neo-liberal capitalism, which, packaged as democracy, was the 'only path to progress'.<sup>35</sup>

## History of Orientalist policy towards protest in the Middle East

In his works *Culture and imperialism* and *Covering Islam*, Said explored the way this latent Orientalism is reproduced routinely in the West via novels, films and (under a guise of objectivity) the media.<sup>36</sup> Said argued that this discourse (and accompanying imagery) is not confined to the realms of ideas but translates into, and is given new meaning via, 'manifest Orientalism', i.e. policy. In demonstration of this argument, Timothy Mitchell in *Colonizing Egypt* and Zachary Lockman in *Contending visions of the Middle East* charted the process by which Orientalist ideas

<sup>33</sup> Jasmine K. Gani, 'Racial militarism and civilizational anxiety at the imperial encounter: from metropole to the postcolonial state', *Security Dialogue* 52: 6, 2021, pp. 546–66.

<sup>34</sup> Kiran Phull, 'How opinion polls served the colonial project, and why it matters', *International Affairs* blog, 12 May 2021, <https://medium.com/international-affairs-blog/how-opinion-polls-served-the-colonial-project-and-why-it-matters-150fc22c51c4>.

<sup>35</sup> Farah Alhaddad, 'Revisiting Orientalist discourse since the start of the "Arab Spring": a conceptual overview of development initiatives in the Middle East and North Africa', *Arab World Geographer/Le Géographe du monde arabe* 15: 2, 2012, p. 3; see also J. Sharp, P. Campbell and E. Laurie, 'The violence of aid? Giving, power and active subjects in one world conservatism', *Third World Quarterly* 31: 7, 2010, pp. 1125–43.

<sup>36</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), and *Covering Islam* (London: Routledge, 1985).

were historically converted into policy in Europe (in the nineteenth century) and the United States (in the twentieth century), particularly through a mediation between academic ‘experts’, scholarly institutions and governments.<sup>37</sup> Thus there exists a deep historical precedent for channelling latent Orientalism into manifest Orientalism in western Middle East policy, with a symbiosis developing between the two in which policy—blatant colonialism in the past, rebranded more subtly as foreign policy and political economy in the present—validates and nourishes old Orientalist tropes with new ‘evidence’.

A prominent precedent on which we can draw for comparison in what I will go on to argue is the manifest Orientalism in western policies towards the Arab uprisings is the western reaction to protests in the Middle East during and after both world wars. Arab populations rose up *en masse* against their European colonizers in Egypt, and in what became Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. The movement across the region reflected deep anti-colonial and revolutionary spirit which the British and the French utterly failed to pacify or quash.

European fears of Arab ‘fanaticism’ that rendered Arabs as too unreliable and lacking the necessary maturity to self-govern resulted in the proposal of a mandate system in which British and French rule could continue even under the guise of ‘independence’. Rather than facilitate Arab agency to determine their own futures at a time when *anciens régimes* were collapsing in many parts of the world, European powers invested in a continuation of the status quo, notably one in which their own interests (such as easy access to colonies elsewhere) were not jeopardized. As Nayak and Malone state, ‘the more European colonialists *perceived* colonized territories as incapable of self-governing, the more Europeans *treated* the territories as in need of governing’,<sup>38</sup> demonstrating the connection between latent and manifest Orientalism, in which representations became concretized in reality.

However, at least Britain and France never claimed to care much for Arab agency. The United States, on the other hand, displayed a striking level of duality between its rhetoric and its practice, demonstrating a tension between its claims to exceptionalism (in contradistinction to Europe<sup>39</sup>) and support for Arab self-determination on the one hand,<sup>40</sup> and its adherence to latent Orientalism on the other. Thus, it proclaimed to shun empire, claiming the capacity to lead and influence through its benevolence and through the logic of its superior model of governance rather than through imperialism like its transatlantic allies. Woodrow Wilson issued his famous fourteen points proclaiming the right to self-rule among the former Ottoman territories, denouncing secret diplomacy and colonialism; and a few decades later, Dwight Eisenhower similarly chastised Britain and France for their imperial strategies during the Suez Crisis in 1956. And yet in both cases, this self-righteousness was followed by persistent adherence to the status quo: Wilson

<sup>37</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Zachary Lockman, *Contending visions of the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> Meghana V. Nayak and Christopher Malone, ‘American Orientalism and American exceptionalism: a critical rethinking of US hegemony’, *International Studies Review* 11: 2, 2009, pp. 253–7 at p. 256 (emphasis added).

<sup>39</sup> Nayak and Malone, ‘American Orientalism and American exceptionalism’.

<sup>40</sup> Jasmine K. Gani, *The role of ideology in Syrian–US relations: conflict and cooperation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

willingly ratified the European mandate system at the Treaty of Sèvres, in which Britain and France were allowed to continue ‘tutoring’ the Arabs in statecraft, while Eisenhower’s administration instigated failed coups in Syria in the hope of installing a pro-western puppet dictator to replace the socialist one.<sup>41</sup>

This pattern of defaulting to manifest Orientalism in any instance of unpredictability or transition was repeated on multiple occasions: in Algeria in 1991, where the West preferred military rulers to the ‘dangers’ of the democratically elected Front Islamique du Salut (FIS); after 11 September 2001, when the entire ‘war on terror’ coupled military intervention with a strategy of winning over the ‘hearts and minds’ of ‘misguided’ Arabs and Muslims in which the only form of democracy that could be trusted in the region was one that was imposed by the West; in the debilitating sanctions and withdrawal of aid placed on Gaza after Palestinians voted for Hamas in the 2006 legislative elections; and in the duality of the EU’s ‘neighbourhood policy’ to support democratization while simultaneously maintaining strong ties with authoritarian regimes in North Africa. In all these cases, Arab agency and the ‘will of the people’ were lauded as long as that will aligned with western ideology and interests.<sup>42</sup>

How, though, did latent Orientalism find its way so consistently into policy, and who or what were the mediators of those ideas? On the one hand, one could simply point to broad epistemic communities formed through the prevalence of Orientalist cultural output, which in turn shaped the subconscious and conscious understandings of the Middle East in the perceptions of journalists, the public and policy-makers. But there is a more concerted, structured and institutionalized means through which those ideas and discourse are channelled and reified as ‘science’. Here the role of universities and think tanks is particularly important as a bridge between cultural discourse and policy.

In his analysis of the relationship between think tanks and policy, Inderjeet Parmar gives particular focus to the CFR in the United States and Chatham House in the United Kingdom. The examples are especially relevant and related to the historical examples discussed above since they were both established in 1919 with the explicit purpose of aiding policy-making towards newly acquired colonies in a context of new-found hegemony after the First World War. Both think tanks were respected and influential, connecting ‘corporate wealth, universities, philan-

<sup>41</sup> See David W. Lesch, *Syria and the United States: Eisenhower’s Cold War in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992).

<sup>42</sup> Since I have mentioned ‘interests’ here, it is worth considering why western policy should be seen as a product of latent Orientalism (ideological) and not simply security/materialist interests (my thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this query). I have discussed this in more depth elsewhere in relation to Arab states’ security and ideology (see Gani, *The role of ideology*; Jasmine K. Gani, ‘The problem of ideology’, FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts, no. 22, May 2016, <http://journals.ed.ac.uk/forum/article/view/1471>; and Jasmine K. Gani, ‘Arab nationalism in Anglophone discourse: a conceptual and historical reassessment’, in Raymond Hinnebusch and J. K. Gani, eds, *The Routledge handbook to the Middle East and North African state and states system* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), where I argued that pragmatism (or state interest) is not incompatible with ideology. They can coexist and indeed inform and validate each other—as do the West’s strategic interests and latent/manifest Orientalism. Moreover, where the West has pursued such interests is not coincidental or dictated purely by ‘science’ or power, but rather has historically been informed by ideological assumptions about those places and the people living there. Interests are a valid, even necessary, explanation—but that is only one (surface) layer of explanation and is insufficient on its own.

thropic foundations, and official policy-makers'.<sup>43</sup> Notably, war helped to cement the think tanks' role in the state machinery, contributing to the generation and consolidation of the foreign policy 'thinking' that would underpin the postwar new world order. These think tanks mediated between academics and the policy world, operating (and lauded) on the basis that they could be bipartisan while still helping to retain authority among a network of elites.

While Parmar discusses the role of these particular think tanks during the Second World War, their roles and relationships with their respective states have since been replicated by other such establishments, including among others the Middle East Institute, the Brookings Institution, the Woodrow Wilson Center, the RAND (Research and Development) Corporation and the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). Moreover, the principle of using political upheaval as a site and opportunity for centring the role of think tanks in making sense of the world has persisted. As a result, the role of think tanks (and the academics who wrote in affiliated publications) as agenda-setters was strongly reasserted during the Arab uprisings.

### **Latent Orientalism in reactions to the Arab uprisings**

How then did the discourse on the Arab uprisings, highlighted earlier, reflect latent Orientalism? And how did this discourse manifest through western policies? In relation to the first query, it would be easy to argue that the discourse was merely a reflection of objective, empirical observations: the uprisings *did* mark hope at the start, and the Arab world did enter a period of instability and conflict not long after. But this assertion does not sufficiently historicize and contextualize the highly familiar and repetitive discourse used in commentary on the uprisings.

That familiarity was most clearly reflected in the tussle over the naming of the events of 2011. The most ubiquitous term used for the uprisings was the 'Arab Spring'. Marc Lynch, though himself sceptical of the potential for change, helped consolidate its use when on 6 January 2011 he asked whether the uprisings would be 'Obama's Arab Spring'.<sup>44</sup> The term itself was not new; it had been used briefly to describe other moments of democratic potential in the region in 2001 and 2005. But the first common use of the 'Spring' label had emerged much earlier, in 1968 with the 'Prague Spring', in which political reforms were introduced in Czechoslovakia before being crushed by the Soviet Union. Thus, by the time it was being applied to the Middle East, and given the historical context of the term's inception, the label had become synonymous with the notion of political liberalization and moves towards (in particular) *western liberal* democracy. It carried expectations that the trajectory would follow a western one, and suggested protest and democracy could only be modelled on the West. This interest in historical analogies is not unique to this case; and comparison across time is a legitimate mode of

<sup>43</sup> Inderjeet Parmar, *Think tanks and power in foreign policy: a comparative study of the role and influence of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1939–1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Marc Lynch, 'Obama's Arab Spring?', *Foreign Policy*, 6 Jan. 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/06/obamas-arab-spring/>.

intellectual enquiry. But the almost exclusive comparison of the uprisings with events in Europe exposed the scant significance afforded to more relevant comparative events within the Middle East region.<sup>45</sup>

At first glance any gripes about this terminology appear to be a case of theoretical semantics.<sup>46</sup> However, 'terminology is not chosen randomly or methodologically insignificant'.<sup>47</sup> To challenge such labels is not to engage in mere semantics, but rather to acknowledge the experiences of those directly affected by the uprisings, which were anything but neat and inevitable. In Egypt, for example, the peaceful protests turned into street battles as the protesters were fired upon, tear-gassed, beaten and imprisoned by the police. Even in the early days of optimism, the Arab Network for Human Rights Information recorded that 841 civilians were killed by the security forces,<sup>48</sup> and many more severely injured. After the fall of Hosni Mubarak's regime and the strategic disappearance of the police, the cities were threatened by looting and criminality as scores of prisoners were deliberately released by the outgoing authorities. Basic services such as rubbish collection had stopped, food prices shot up and the economy plummeted. These factors all had a major impact on people's lives and indicated an onset of economic hardship and political turmoil rather than a utopian spring. Similar difficulties were experienced by other countries in the early days: over 70 deaths were reported in Bahrain,<sup>49</sup> and over 2,000 in Yemen;<sup>50</sup> even in Tunisia 300 civilians were killed and nearly 1,000 injured.<sup>51</sup> An estimated 4,700 rebel supporters were killed in Libya,<sup>52</sup> while

<sup>45</sup> There were some academic attempts at restoring the balance in the initial years of the uprisings: for example, Lisa Anderson cited the region-wide and influential Arab revolts after 1919, Katerina Dalacoura considered the 1979 revolution and 2009 Green movement in Iran, and Marc Lynch recalled the revolutionary zeal of the 1950s and 1960s in the Middle East. Such comparative work helped to disrupt some of the problems highlighted above, in which the uprisings were posed as the start of an 'Arab Awakening' to democratic values spreading from the West. See Lisa Anderson, 'Demystifying the Arab Spring: parsing the differences between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya', *Foreign Affairs* 90: 3, 2011, pp. 2–8; Katerina Dalacoura, 'The 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East: political change and geopolitical implications', *International Affairs* 88: 1, 2012, pp. 63–79; Marc Lynch, *The Arab uprising: the unfinished revolutions of the new Middle East* (New York: Ingram, 2012). In subsequent years, more scholars have highlighted the need to explore repertoires of democracy and protest within the region. See e.g. Larbi Sadiki, 'Towards a "democratic knowledge" turn? Knowledge production in the age of the Arab Spring', *Journal of North African Studies* 20: 5, 2015, pp. 702–72; Larbi Sadiki and Layla Saleh, 'The Arab Spring is not lost: moral protest as the embodiment of a new politics', in Hinnebusch and Gani, eds, *Routledge handbook of Middle East and North African states and states system*, pp. 177–90.

<sup>46</sup> I remember my students having heated debates in class in 2011 about the merits of the term, a number of them arguing that since a label was needed in order to discuss the collective events in the Middle East, it was far better that it was a positive one rather than a pessimistic one. Tellingly, the Arab students in the class objected to its use.

<sup>47</sup> Billie Jeanne Brownlee and Maziyar Ghiabi, 'Passive, silent and revolutionary: the "Arab Spring" revisited', *Middle East Critique* 25: 3, 2016, pp. 299–316.

<sup>48</sup> 'Rights group documents 841 deaths in 2011 uprising', *Egypt Independent*, 15 May 2012, <https://egyptindependent.com/rights-group-documents-841-deaths-2011-uprising/>.

<sup>49</sup> Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni, Nigel Rodley, Badria Al-Awadhi, Philippe Kirsch and Mahnoush H. Arsanjani, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, <https://www.bici.org/bh/BICIREportEN.pdf> (Manama: Bahrain, 23 Nov. 2011).

<sup>50</sup> Figures according to the Yemeni Ministry of Human Rights reported in *The Scotsman*, see '2000 killed in Yemen's year of unrest', [https://www.scotsman.com/news/world/2000-killed-yemens-year-unrest-1638206\\_19\\_March\\_2012](https://www.scotsman.com/news/world/2000-killed-yemens-year-unrest-1638206_19_March_2012).

<sup>51</sup> Revised figure from the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Juan Mendez, May 2011, reported in Ben Smith and Modupe Oshikoya, 'Uprising in Tunisia', standard note: SN/IA/5825, International Affairs and Defence Section, UK Houses of Parliament, pp. 1–12 at p. 5, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05825/SN05825.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Libyan Ministry of Martyrs and Missing Persons, cited in Ian Black, 'Libyan revolution casualties lower than expected, says new government', *Guardian*, 8 Jan. 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/08/>



the numbers killed in Syria within the first two years rose to 70,000.<sup>53</sup> As Haas and Lesch have stated about the Arab Spring, ‘this term is a misnomer. Just ask the protesters in Syria ... if they feel like they are in an “Arab Spring”. You will likely get laughed at or punched in the mouth.’<sup>54</sup> It is notable that most Arabs in the region referred to the uprisings by the term *thawra* (revolution), which both historically and theoretically is far more reflective of a conflictual process.

So the term ‘Arab Spring’ did not reflect the reality of the upheavals and the conflict on the ground, and was in many ways a western imposition. The notion of a seasonal political change in the region, one which necessarily comes with the passing of time, undermined the agency of the Arab people and the fundamental role of their mobilization, activism and sacrifices in the protests. The apparent inevitability of success conjured up by this term took the focus away from the fraught life-and-death decisions taken by the populations to challenge decades-old autocratic regimes, knowing they faced a certain repressive backlash and overcoming the well-crafted barrier of fear imposed by the authorities. The human costs of the uprisings highlighted above, the creative ways in which activists used old networks and created new ones to mobilize fellow civilians, their methods of trial and error, and the counter-repression of the regimes could all be overlooked with the notion of blanket change sweeping through the region. Worse still, the erasure of such details also paved the way for a reactionary disappointment that did not account for nor allow for the messiness of revolutionary processes.

Second, aside from the erasure of protesters’ sacrifices, the concept of the democratic ‘spring’ had helped to exceptionalize the Middle East in academic discourse for decades. The term fits very neatly into the ‘waves’ of democratization thesis, predicting the gradual but sure dispersal of liberal progress throughout the globe, most prominently captured in Samuel Huntington’s *The third wave: democratization in the late twentieth century*.<sup>55</sup> Such literature reinforced the ideological narrative at the end of the Cold War, in which the world was supposed to be witnessing the ‘end of history’, the triumph of American-led capitalist, liberal and democratic values and the pinnacle of human progress. A large number of authors built on Huntington’s thesis and asked the perennial question why this wave had reached eastern Europe, Latin America, and east and south Asia, but missed the Arab world.<sup>56</sup> Since democratization was an inevitability, explanations were required as to why the Middle East seemed to be so impervious to it. Leaving aside the less than straightforward transitions to democracy in other parts of the world, many explanations built on Orientalist tropes about the role of culture and religion in holding the region back. Bernard Lewis, Elie Kedourie, Ernest Renan

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libyan-revolution-casualties-lower-expected-government.

<sup>53</sup> Michelle Nicholls, ‘Syria death toll likely near 70,000, says UN rights chief’, Reuters, 12 Feb. 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-un-idUSBRE9tB19C20130212>.

<sup>54</sup> Mark Haas and David Lesch, *The Arab Spring* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2013), p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The third wave: democratization in the late twentieth century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

<sup>56</sup> Eva Bellin asks: ‘Why have the Middle East and North Africa remained so singularly resistant to democratization?’, in ‘The robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East’, *Comparative Politics* 36: 2, 2004, pp. 139–57 at p. 139.

and Huntington again (with his clash of civilizations thesis) had argued in different ways that authoritarianism was an embedded characteristic of Arab politics—Arab leaders had a cultural proclivity to monopolize and abuse power, while Arab populations were inclined to enable them to do so and programmed to obedience, even to a despot.<sup>57</sup> If the ‘masses’ ever did rise up, this was depicted as an emotional, irrational response, usually in blind opposition to all things western—dubbed ‘Muslim rage’ by Lewis,<sup>58</sup> a term borrowed regularly by commentators in the media. These old tropes about Arab—for which read Muslim—political agency were clearly reignited in the exasperated commentary about the failures of the Arab uprisings, in which Arabs were chided for turning once again to religion in an apparent snub to a rare opportunity for freedom.

Finally, this desire to portray the uprisings in a neat and benevolent way, stripped of contingencies and complications, was not necessarily an act of generosity towards the Middle East. As Said argued, Orientalism has less to do with the Orient and more to do with the making of ‘our’ world and western self-identity.<sup>59</sup> In which case, even positive discourse on the uprisings could be seen as attempts to co-opt them as validation of western democratization efforts. Conversely, the force with which analysts and journalists turned to pessimistic accounts of the Arab uprisings, often in stark contrast to Arab or regional scholars and commentators, reflected the sense of shock, affront and indeed self-doubt produced by an apparent refusal to adopt the West’s example. That insecurity had then to be compensated for with disavowals of any alternatives Arabs might choose instead—in the past that was socialism or Arab nationalism, more recently it appeared to be Islamism. If the western model were declined, then the alternative needed to fail—otherwise there would be serious implications for western liberal belief in the superiority of its own model, and a cognitive dissonance caused by the Arabs’ apparent choice to return to the backwardness of Islam while the option of western liberal democracy was also available. Thus, the reproduction of Orientalist tropes in media and academic discourse outlined above—the impossibility of relying on Arabs to make the right choice owing to a deficiency in maturity or reason—was also a coping mechanism for western confusion. Notably, the apparent outcome of the uprisings and the turn towards Islamism hardly surprised those who proposed an inherent difference between Arab and western ‘civilizations’; but it caused greater dismay among liberals who had advocated patience in democracy promotion, with a belief that Arabs could be tutored eventually. Arab ‘failure’ in this regard was thus an embarrassment for liberal optimism too.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> It must be noted that many regionalist scholars had gone out of their way to distance themselves from essentialist arguments. However, hints of the old stereotypes could still be found, with the issue of civilian agency among Arabs dismissed. Jubin Goodarzi’s work on Syrian–Iranian relations, though eschewing any cultural explanations, still asserts that in Syria, public opinion was a ‘non-issue’: Jubin Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran* (London: Tauris, 2006). Eva Bellin stated: ‘Nowhere in the region do mammoth cross class coalitions mobilize on the streets to push for reform ... [consequently] the costs of repression are relatively low’: Bellin, ‘The robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East’, p. 150.

<sup>58</sup> Bernard Lewis, ‘The roots of Muslim rage’, *Atlantic Monthly*, Sept. 1990.

<sup>59</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 12.

<sup>60</sup> An example of this liberal self-praise masquerading as optimism for non-western progress is George W. Bush’s statement on Iraqis’ rejection of Al-Qaeda as a sign that ‘that ordinary people in the Middle East want the

## **Manifest Orientalism in western policy towards the Arab uprisings**

This leaves us with a fundamental question: how did this discourse translate into western policy, and produce in turn ‘manifest Orientalism’? Often for postcolonial scholars, such Orientalism is identified in western interventionism: for example, the coalition of anti-imperialist and Muslim voices condemning the Bush administration’s post-9/11 adventurism in Afghanistan and Iraq reflects that straightforward connection between Orientalism and disregard for non-western sovereignty and agency. Conversely, the Arab uprisings represent a case in which *non-intervention* can also be seen as, in part, the product of latent Orientalism. This is because the status quo in the Middle East, though non-democratic, was also entirely aligned with western strategic interests. Decades of western intervention, alliances, military bases, trade deals and foreign aid made it so. To disrupt that for the unknown was a huge risk for the West. At first glance this appears to be a straightforward realist position; but adding to that hesitation was a deep well of Orientalist perceptions, questioning Arab rationality and capacity for sensible self-rule.

If we take the examples of the two most prominent western actors during the Arab uprisings, Britain and the United States, this dilemma was reflected to differing degrees in their initial reactions. Unlike its neighbour France, which initially reacted unfavourably to the Tunisian revolution out of support for Ben Ali, only to switch its position to join the bandwagon of optimism, Britain waited and watched before coming out more assertively in support of the uprisings. Matching the growing celebratory discourse, the then prime minister David Cameron and foreign secretary William Hague drew on a mixture of self-interest and democratic principle to lobby for greater western support for the emerging opposition groups, particularly in Libya and Syria.<sup>61</sup>

The United States followed suit, but in more consequential and complicated fashion. US president Barack Obama’s initial hesitation in supporting the uprisings as unequivocally as Britain stemmed from multiple factors: US self-perception of decline and the need to now ‘lead from behind’; a loss of global legitimacy that undercut US confidence in further entanglement in the Middle East; and a relative reduction in economic capacity after the recession.<sup>62</sup> Added to this was Obama’s own cautious approach to foreign policy. But his earlier and very public pronouncements championing democracy and local agency in the Middle

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same things for their children that we want for ours’: for full transcript, see ‘Address by the President to the Nation on the way forward in Iraq’, Office of the Press Secretary, Oval Office, the White House, 13 Sept. 2007, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/09/text/20070913-2.html>. Other examples of liberal confidence in the power of their democratic and capitalist ideals are Joseph Nye’s concept of ‘soft power’: see Joseph S. Nye, Jr, ‘Soft power’, *Foreign Policy*, no. 80, 1990, pp. 153–71, and C. Kupchan’s ‘benign unipolarity’ in ‘After Pax Americana: benign power, regional integration, and the sources of a stable multipolarity’, *International Security* 23: 2, 1998, pp. 40–79.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Seize opportunity of Arab Spring, Cameron urges UN’, BBC News, 22 Sept. 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-15025599>.

<sup>62</sup> Jasmine K. Gani, ‘US foreign policy towards Syria under Obama: strategic patience and miscalculation’, in Raymond Hinnebusch and A. Saouli, eds, *The war for Syria: regional and international dimensions of the Syrian uprising* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 209–28.

East, both in his pre-election campaign and in his 2009 Cairo speech, exposed him to charges of duplicity if he did not offer greater support for the uprisings. The filtering of optimistic discourse at the time, as well as growing pressure from liberal advisers and Arab lobbyists, helped to sway Obama towards publicly calling for the authoritarian regimes to step aside. His rhetoric was supplemented by more strident calls for interventionist support from the likes of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and UN Ambassador Samantha Power.

Thus, both British and American government positions were aligned with the early western discourse that considered the 'Arab Spring' to be an extension of a wave of democratization emanating from the West; the power of that discourse was enough to push aside both pragmatic and latent Orientalist fears. But this response notably preceded the coalescence of the protests into clearer opposition groups, a process in which so-called Islamist parties—with their decades of experience in opposition—fared particularly well. Crucially, there was a time-lag between the shift in academic and media discourse, from optimism to pessimism, and an eventual change in government policies. In part this is due to the nature of foreign policy-making, which is typically a considered process and affected by bureaucratic delays. But the time-lag also reflects the process in which latent Orientalism travelled from discourse to practice, seemingly substantiated over time by the relative success of Islamist groups.

The twin threats emanating from Orientalist discourse predicting an Arab 'Winter' appeared to be coming to fruition. By the summer of 2012, En-Nahda and the Muslim Brotherhood had won the presidential elections in Tunisia and Egypt respectively, while the Syrian and Libyan National Councils contained strong Muslim Brotherhood contingents. Meanwhile the threat of sectarian chaos and local 'inability' to conclude differences peacefully was apparently borne out by conflict in Yemen and Bahrain. Between 2012 and 2013 the discourse became more and more polarized. Thus, there were those in the West who capitalized on old repertoires of Orientalism to foreshadow doom, and in turn criticized their governments for continuing to embolden Islamists at the expense of regional stability and western security. And then there were those analysts who, despite the complicated trajectory of the uprisings, argued that revolutions were always messy and contingent, and that the process (and its actors) needed time, patience and support to arrive at more settled conditions.

We can observe some of these polarized trends among the institutional mediators of discourse—the think tanks and universities, identified earlier as the connections between networks of elites and policy-makers. Moreover, some of those trends suggest an associated impact on government policies. Focusing in particular on the two think tanks highlighted by Parmar as especially influential—Chatham House in the UK and the CFR in the US—we can see a subtle but discernible difference in the discourse they generated throughout the decade since the Arab uprisings began. Of the nearly 200 research papers, round tables and expert opinion pieces issued by Chatham House,<sup>63</sup> most had at least one Arab

<sup>63</sup> I conducted a search of all events and publications listed on the Chatham House website between December

participant primarily based in the Middle East; were organized in partnership with a regionally based think tank such as the Al-Sharq Forum; invited participation from prominent players in the region's politics and media, such as En-Nahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi, Nobel Prize winner Tawakol Karman and former Al Jazeera director Wadah Khanfar; or included young, emerging Arab researchers such as Rana Khalaf, Haid Haid and Intissar Khreeji. This produced a diversity of opinion, and sufficient representation of viewpoints supportive of change. While the journal *International Affairs* is independent from Chatham House, it was nevertheless founded by the institute and both are shaped by a shared commitment to dialogue between policy-makers and academia. Therefore, given the affiliation, it is noteworthy that in the two most turbulent years from 2011 to 2013, in which there was a discernible intellectual tussle over the discourse on the Arab uprisings, *International Affairs* published five scholarly articles directly assessing the region's momentous events,<sup>64</sup> and one theoretically relevant article.<sup>65</sup> Those five articles pointed out the contingency of revolutions, refrained from Orientalist foreboding, or highlighted western responsibilities or failures to support the protesters, regardless of whether they were Islamist or secularist. Meanwhile Lawson's article, evoking the work of the late Fred Halliday, implicitly warned against snap judgements on the necessarily messy process of revolutions. In many ways, this capacity to incorporate global intellectual and activist perspectives was facilitated, ironically, by Britain's imperial past. This offers an example of how the experience of empire can be channelled in a historically congruent way towards a 'post-colonial politics',<sup>66</sup> in both knowledge production and practice.

In contrast, a survey of activities on the Arab uprisings organized by the CFR between 2011 and 2013 (despite a far higher output than Chatham House) shows that a vast majority of activities did not feature a participant from the Middle East, let alone someone who had been involved in the uprisings. In fact, there was a predominance of American experts or policy-makers, and in some cases events were chaired or led by notable partisan opponents of the threat of Islamism, such as Eliot Abrams, Ed Hussein and Fouad Ajami. Overwhelmingly, the focus was on the uprisings' impact on US interests rather than on regional progress. Interestingly, the CFR's affiliated journal, *Foreign Affairs*, did reflect a greater plurality of opinion and attention to complexity than the CFR's events and op-eds,<sup>67</sup> with roughly

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2010 and the end of 2012, using the terms 'Arab Spring', 'Arab uprisings' and 'Arab revolutions'. I noted titles (and implicit assumptions contained within them), invited speakers and authors. I replicated this process for the Council of Foreign Relations website.

<sup>64</sup> H. A. Hellyer, 'The chance for change in the Arab world: Egypt's uprising', *International Affairs* 87: 6, 2011, pp. 1313–22; Rosemary Hollis, 'No friend of democratization: Europe's role in the genesis of the "Arab Spring"', *International Affairs* 88: 1, 2012, pp. 81–94; Katerina Dalacoura, 'The 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East: political change and geopolitical implications', *International Affairs* 88: 1, 2012, pp. 63–79; Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Syria: from "authoritarian upgrading" to revolution?', *International Affairs* 88: 1, 2012, pp. 95–113; Fawaz Gerges, 'The Obama approach to the Middle East: the end of America's moment?', *International Affairs* 89: 2, 2013, pp. 299–323.

<sup>65</sup> George Lawson, 'Halliday's revenge: revolutions and International Relations', *International Affairs* 87: 5, 2011, pp. 1067–85.

<sup>66</sup> Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton, 'Brown Britain: post-colonial politics and grand strategy', *International Affairs* 89: 5, 2013, pp. 1109–23.

<sup>67</sup> See Asef Bayat, 'The post-Islamist revolutions: what the revolts in the Arab world mean', *Foreign Affairs*, 26

equal numbers of pessimistic and cautiously optimistic articles; but even so, some of the latter reflected liberal hopes for the uprisings that would dissipate a year later.

While it is impossible to determine the precise impact of these two particular think tanks on government policy, a correlation can arguably be drawn between (a) the more nuanced and pluralist discourse put out by Chatham House and the UK government's longer-lasting rhetorical support for the uprisings, which persisted until at least late 2013<sup>68</sup>—in contrast to the British parliament and public opinion—and (b) the western-dominated, US-centric discourse at the CFR (often matched by other think tanks in Washington DC, with the exception of the Middle East Institute) and the hesitation of the Obama administration,<sup>69</sup> culminating in its fateful decision not to intervene after the use of chemical weapons in Syria in August 2013. As Obama acknowledged in his memoirs, by that stage the scepticism from advisers and allies abroad, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia, warning against a Muslim Brotherhood regional takeover, loomed large on his radar, even if he personally challenged it at the start.<sup>70</sup>

What this demonstrates is that latent Orientalism does not inevitably translate into manifest Orientalism; but to break the chain between the two, think tanks, academics and policy-makers need actively to push back, interrogate and debunk the myths and stereotypes, especially by diversifying the voices brought into their discourse. But if that latent Orientalism is corroborated and reinforced, as was often reflected by the mediated discourse of US think tanks and academic pieces in the early years of the uprisings, it is likely to have a strong bearing, eventually, on policy-making.

Hence, when the Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi was ousted in a coup in Egypt in June 2013, followed by the massacre of over 1,150 protesters against the El-Sisi regime,<sup>71</sup> the concern and condemnation from western governments was notably muted. Instead, diplomatic relations with the new dictator were swiftly normalized. Meanwhile, US funding to Syrian opposition groups was slow to materialize precisely because of a stringent vetting programme that eliminated Islamist-inclined groups, contrasting with the enthusiastic rapidity with which military and financial support was provided to Kurdish secular groups.

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April 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-africa/2011-04-26/post-islamist-revolutions>; Lisa Anderson, 'Demystifying the Arab Spring: parsing the differences between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya', *Foreign Affairs* 90: 3, May/June 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2011-04-03/demystifying-arab-spring>; Michael Doran, 'The heirs of Nasser: who will benefit from the second Arab revolution?', *Foreign Affairs* 90: 3, May–June 2011, pp. 17–20, 21–5.

<sup>68</sup> 'David Cameron urges world to continue to support Arab Spring', ITV News, 26 Sept. 2012, <https://www.itv.com/news/2012-09-26/david-cameron-urges-world-to-continue-to-support-arab-spring>; 'David Cameron attacks UN for inaction on Syria', *Guardian*, 26 Sept. 2012; J. Ralph, J. Holland and K. Zhekova, 'Before the vote: UK foreign policy discourse on Syria 2011–13', *Review of International Studies* 43: 5, 2017, pp. 875–97. Note that the Libyan intervention (spearheaded by the UK and France) benefited from being earlier in the timeline, while American hesitation over Syrian intervention was affected by the fact it was later in the timeline.

<sup>69</sup> Daniel S. Morey, Clayton L. Thyne, Sarah L. Hayden and Michael B. Senters, 'Leader, follower, or spectator? The role of President Obama in the Arab Spring uprisings', *Social Science Quarterly* 93: 5, 2012, pp. 1185–201; Fawaz Gerges, *Obama and the Middle East* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>70</sup> Barack Obama, *A promised land* (London: Penguin, 2020), pp. 645–6.

<sup>71</sup> Human Rights Watch, *All according to plan: the Rab'a massacre and mass killings of protesters in Egypt*, 12 Aug. 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-to-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt>.



This pattern is borne out if we fast-forward to events much later, in summer 2021, when western governments demonstrated a notable lack of concern over reversals of democracy in Tunisia, an approach that was laced with indifference towards En-Nahda—still associated with Islamism despite their deliberate efforts to distance themselves from that label.<sup>72</sup> These lukewarm responses by western governments reflect a nonchalance towards authoritarianism that runs alongside latent Orientalist fears about Islam.

## Conclusion

Ten years on from the Arab uprisings, we are in a position to better understand not just the events themselves, but also the discourse about and reactions to them. Embedded Orientalist assumptions about the Middle East affected the analysis by downplaying the agency of the people in the region, with the inherent implication that the challenge to authoritarianism had now reached the Arab world as a matter of temporal inevitability, rather than resulting from long-term demands and activism of the Arab people themselves. This contributed in part to the widespread shock that the uprisings could occur at all, which then shifted to liberal optimism that the ‘Arab Spring’ marked an awakening to the same values and principles that had (first) emerged in the West. Such discourse reinforced an ideological narrative of progress emanating from Europe, belying long-term grassroots processes in the Middle East that had been preparing the ground for endogenous political change. The rapidity with which analysts tried to pronounce on the nature and outcomes of the uprisings reflected attempts at agenda-setting along ideological lines, through which analysts’ and politicians’ normative judgements painted a still evolving process as grounds for either hope or disappointment, as success or failure. For all the congratulatory sentiment that Arab people were finally able to determine their own futures, this judgementalism applied pressure on the people of the region to steer towards a western-approved course. The power to bestow a positive label such as the ‘Arab Spring’ on the uprisings, and indeed the power to withdraw that approval and replace it with terms such as ‘Arab Winter’, ‘chaos’ or ‘turmoil’, reflected a continued latent Orientalism towards the Middle East.

Moreover, as discussed in this article, that Orientalism did not stop at the discourse, but had the power to translate into practice as ‘manifest Orientalism’. The time-lag between the pessimistic turn in the discourse by 2012, and the faltering western support for the uprisings by mid-2013, reflect the time needed for discourse to percolate to practice. Crucially, however, this chain is not inevitable: knowledge-producing institutions and mediators have the potential to disrupt both latent and manifest Orientalism. By offering more rigorous and complex understandings of events via a diversity of voices across ideological, regional, ethnic, gender and age spectrums, they have a chance to at least expand the parameters and options of effective foreign policy-making.

<sup>72</sup> Sayida Ounissi, *Ennahda from within: Islamists or ‘Muslim democrats’?*, ‘Islamists on Islamism today’ series (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, Feb. 2016).