In the wake of the Arab Spring revolutions, the Middle East and North Africa are undergoing a profound process of political and social transformations, the results of which are yet unclear. They “will range between everything from stability and regional cooperation to disintegrative conflict.” Several reasons have been noted for the less than encouraging results so far of the Arab Spring. Some pointed to failed nation building processes in countries created in a top-down manner by colonial powers and post-colonial state-building elites, and the divisive effects of decades of oppressive rule. After the removal of ancien régimes, in this line of thought, some long repressed tensions and unresolved conflicts surfaced in these societies. Others have highlighted processes of state erosion and state failure as crucial for the politicization of ethnic and sectarian identities and the rise of actors like IS.

I would like to add a further factor to this list and argue that the destructive mode of the regional reconfiguration currently underway is at least to some degree an effect of neoliberal reforms introduced to varying degrees in most MENA countries for the last few decades.

Starting in the mid-1980s, many MENA states gave up their previous state-centered development policies in favor of large-scale privatizations, cutting of subsidies, incentives for direct investments from abroad etc. The abolishment of the old social contract by the ruling elites and the integration into the world market lead to the demise of local economies, the erosion of state infrastructure, the emergence of crony capitalism and the erosion of salaried middle classes, all of which increased socioeconomic cleavages within MENA societies. Far from fostering democratization, as was often presumed by Western proponents of market-oriented reforms in countries of the global south, they “helped rebuild coalitions of support during the reconfiguration of authoritarian rule in certain states of the Middle East and North Africa”. Unsurprisingly, popular discontent in view
of the effects of such ‘authoritarian upgrading’ was crucial in fueling the Arab Spring revolutions/uprisings.¹

⁴ Without claiming a linear comparability, the EU troika’s prescriptions for crisis ridden member states resemble the structural adjustment programs designed by the IMF/WB for countries of the global south for decades. Recent years have seen a decrease of the normative power of democratic procedures in EU member states and in the EU itself, as technocrats appear to be on the rise and able to enforce rules that follow the perceived necessities of the market. This erosion of democratic standards in the supposed heartlands of democracy appears to pave the way for the rise of “post-democratic technocracy”, i.e. a specific form of anonymous authoritarianism.⁴ The rapid pace of social change, the submission of all spheres of life to an economic rationale, and increased feelings of insecurity and loss of control in the era of neoliberal globalization have generated heightened levels of individual and social stress. Combined with a lack of democratic legitimacy of EU institutions and the erosion of democratic standards in EU member states, this has helped bring about a “democracy fatigue” not only in Eastern and Central Europe, but also a rising tide of Euro scepticism and a powerful ascend of populist right wing (e.g. UKIP, Front National, AFD) and neo-fascist (e.g. Golden Dawn, Jobbik) movements and parties.

⁵ The erosion of democracy and the rise of populist right wing movements in contemporary Europe inevitably raise memories of the rise of Fascist movements in 20th century Europe. Important ideological differences between classic fascist movements and today’s populist right and a different historical context notwithstanding, it seems still worthwhile to consider scholarship explaining the rise of fascism in 20th century Europe for understanding current developments, in particular a body of works subsumed under the label critical theory, which drew alike on Hegelian dialectics, Marxian theory, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Max Weber, and other trends of contemporary thought, later on including also postmodern thinkers.⁵

⁶ One central category in Hegelian-Marxist thought and in critical theory is the concept of alienation, which describes the destruction or deformation of relations between individuals, between individuals and their work, individuals and the products of their work as well as the estrangement of individuals from their own selves. In an influential recent work, Rahel Jaeggi has revived the concept by distancing it from a problematic conception of human essence underlying older works, while retaining its social-philosophical content. Although approaching the topic through individualized social pathologies such as feelings of isolation, helplessness and meaninglessness, her work provides resources for a renewed critique of alienation on a societal level, including its possible political manifestation in contemporary societies such as the current surge of populist right wing, identitarian and neo-fascist forces in Europe who all aim to restore the authenticity of social and individual life and the sense of meaning and belonging that has been lost.⁶ In order to understand this phenomenon and its persistence or re-emergence in contemporary societies of the global north, it is also highly instructive to re-read the works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Fromm et al concerning “authoritarian characters”, which they considered an expression of alienated societies and a pre-condition for the rise of fascist political systems.⁷

⁷ With all due caution as to the applicability of theories developed in western contexts to understand developments in the non-West, the concept of alienation and the notion of authoritarian characters seem highly relevant for a critical understanding of contemporary
MENA societies. The rise of neo-Salafi movements in the MENA-region and in particular Jihadi groups like IS can be understood as a reaction to and simultaneously an expression of the alienation of populations residing there.

Beyond a mere comparative approach, which tends to leave the notion of areas as more or less separate units intact, “post area studies” or “critical area studies” aim at “rethinking area studies epistemologically to avoid thinking in container entities such as ‘nation states’ or, for that matter, ‘regions’ and to focus instead on the mobility patterns and communicative processes of human interaction”. One crucial characteristic of the contemporary world relevant for any critical understanding of area studies is that “there is no longer a tight coherence between physical and cultural space”. As a consequence, scholars started to “move human action and interaction and its role in communicatively constructing space into the center of attention”. The relational dynamics between IS style jihadism and European Muslims clearly constitute such a case of entangled history between MENA countries and Europe. We are facing a multiplicity of partly interconnected cultural spaces existing alongside one another and sometimes in conflict with one another in various local environments across regions.

Yet, all this does not take place in an empty space or in an ideal setting of equality between all players involved. It is always embedded in and shaped by material and institutional structures, hierarchies, power relations. First, the sheer material destruction and the decreasing accessibility of the field might be a specific feature of the MENA region that is not as pronounced in other parts of the world. This situation impacts on levels of transregional human interaction and communication as well as on mobility patterns. In order to grasp such figurations, our analysis should incorporate a center-periphery perspective, which is conscious of power relations existing between various players. The fact that rigid border regimes are currently being (re-)installed between specific countries and whole regions in multiple parts of the world, calls into question the assumption of an increasingly integrated world system. Thus, there is ample need to investigate how the current transformations in MENA countries are part of a contradictory process of blurring and transcending boundaries, while at the same time reasserting them violently. Moreover, vast differences exist between different kinds of mobility within and beyond the MENA region. These different kinds of mobilities as well as the nexus of increasing mobility and the simultaneously intensifying immobility point to uneven and contradictory patterns of social, cultural and political change unleashed by the globalisation process, which need to be taken into account more systematically, if we want to arrive at something that might be adequately termed “critical area studies”.

NOTES


10. Ibid.


AUTHOR

ACHIM ROHDE

Philipps University, Marburg