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RIOT AND REBELLION FROM MAGHREB TO EGYPT

What do Arab Streets want from the Palaces?

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Riot and Rebellion from Maghreb to Egypt:

What do Arab Streets want from the Palaces?

The wave of riot and rebellion that originated in Maghreb moved to Egypt and spread to the entire Middle East has been shaking the decades –long rule of the authoritarian leaders of the Arab palaces. Nowadays, we all are trying to understand why the Arab streets that had been obedient for decades began to rebel. We believe that the relative deprivation theory of the mass movement literature offers a guiding framework for the riots and rebellion on Arab streets. This evaluation note aims to make a humble analytic contribution by explaining why the mass movement the Arab streets carry on in form of riots and rebellion against the palaces have started at this exact time and why it proved relatively successful, based on economic and social data. We would like to warn you in advance to avoid disappointment: This evaluation note does not involve a realist perspective and an assertive long-range analysis on the policies of dominant actors in the Middle East. Similarly, the note will not locate Turkey at the center of the universe to assert that the main motivation of this wave of rebellion is to create ‘model Turkey’s.

Mass Movement, Riot and Rebellion in the Context of Relative Deprivation

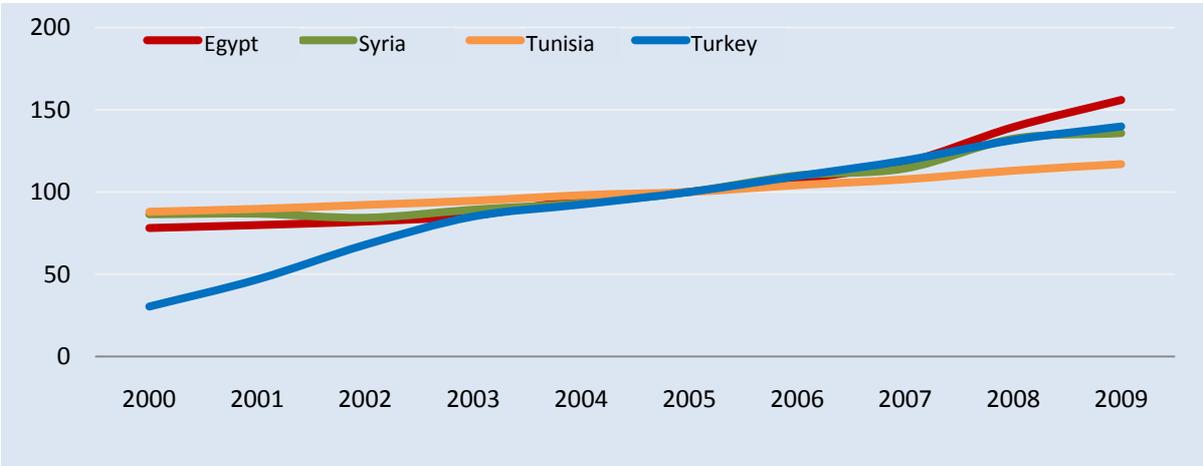
The wave of riot and rebellion that originated in Maghreb and spread to Egypt can be categorized as a relative deprivation oriented mass movement. Relative deprivation theory that explains mass movements with a perspective based on social psychology refers to the perception of individuals and groups of the deprivation from achievements that relevant for the imagination of the future in relation to other individuals or groups rather than in absolute terms. According to relative deprivation theoretician Gurr, the feeling of deprivation develops as one realizes the gap between his/her expectation and capabilities.¹ It appears that unemployed and unhappy Arab streets from Maghreb to Egypt see the Arab palaces as an impediment to accessing the set of life opportunities of the time.

¹ Gurr, Ted, *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970

Economic Causes of the Rebel on Arab Streets

The literature on the causes of the ongoing rebel on Arab streets talks about a number of social and economic indicators including unemployment, high inflation and demographic factors. This evaluation note will make some assessments on the strength of usual suspects among the determinant factors in explaining the wave of rebellion. In order to explain the chain of this effective mass movement, we also analyzed the data on consumer prices and unemployment, i.e. the usual suspects.

Figure 1. Consumer Prices Index, 2005 = 100

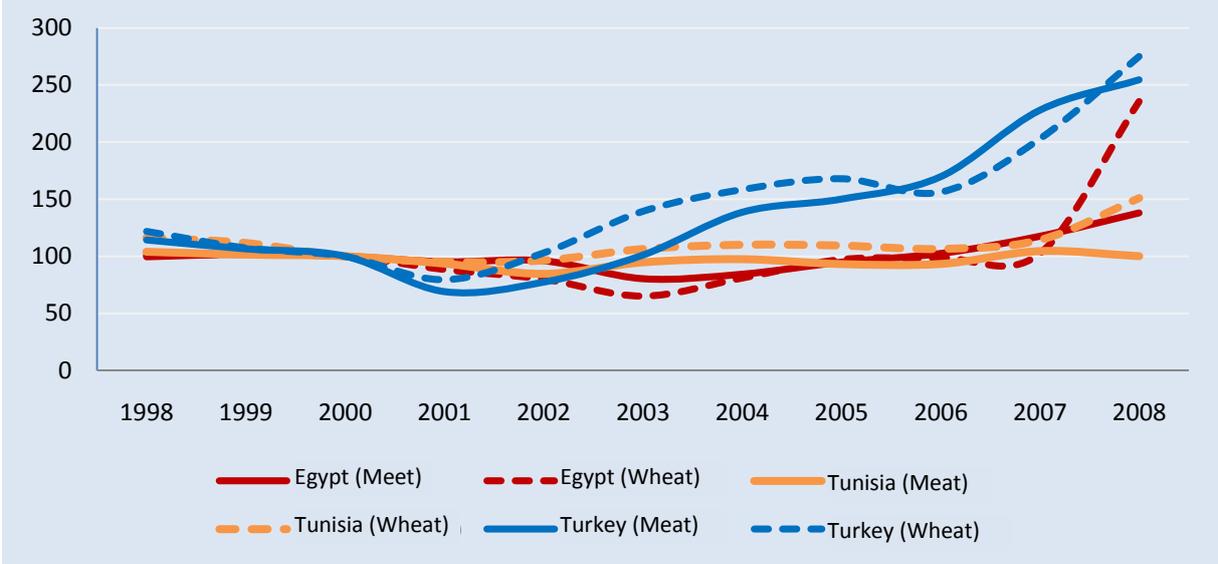


Source: Economist Intelligence Unit

Figure 1 shows the annual movement in consumer prices. The current picture weakens the argument that consumer prices played the major role in the eruption of rebellion in Tunisia. Another striking point reflected in the figure is the 32.4% inflation rate in Egypt over the 2007-2009 period. Although price hikes are an important problem for Egypt, the relatively lower inflation rate in Tunisia, 8.6%, in the same period puts price movements at the back seat as a cause.

It is argued that along with the overall inflation, substantial increases in food prices particularly after 2008 played a significant role in the social explosion in Egypt and Maghreb. As figure 2 showing the movements in the meat and wheat prices reveals, this hypothesis, however, is not validated with the data. It is evident that food prices have been increasing globally. Nevertheless, the increase in meat and wheat prices in Turkey is higher than that in Egypt and Tunisia implying that the hypothesis in question cannot explain the wave of riot and rebellion alone.

Figure 2. Producer Price Index for Wheat and Meat, 2000 = 100



Source: Food and Agriculture Organization

The unemployment rate, youth unemployment in particular, is another area often referred to in order to explain the wave of rebellion. When the figures on total registered unemployment are examined, it is seen that unemployment is a structural problem in all of the countries where riots are observed. For the period between 2001 and 2009, the average annual change in unemployment rate was an increase by 0.86% in Egypt, 0.52% in Syria and 9.58% in Turkey but a decrease by 2.31% in Tunisia. Therefore, it is apparent that unemployment data fail to answer why the riots broke out at this exact time.

On the other hand, youth unemployment has a higher explanatory power considering the ongoing riots on the Arab streets. Table 1 that shows the share of individuals at or below the age of 29 in the total unemployed population indicates that Egypt ranks at the top with 88.7%. Given the broadcasts about the riots revealing that young population is the driving force of the mass movement, it would not be wrong to conclude that the youth unemployment is the strongest economic indicator raised to explain the wave of rebellion.

Table 1. Share of Young Population in Total Registered Unemployment According to Labor Market Surveys

	15-19	20-24	25-29	15-29	Total # of unemployed (thousand people)	Total Unemployment Rate (2009)
Egypt (2007)	15.42%	47.46%	25.81%	88.69%	2135.20	9.40%
Syria (2007)	19.20%	37.66%	22.45%	79.31%	454.80	8.50%
Tunisia (2005)	13.92%	28.41%	27.14%	69.47%	486.40	12.63%
Turkey (2008)	12.64%	21.72%	20.11%	54.46%	2611.00	14.05%

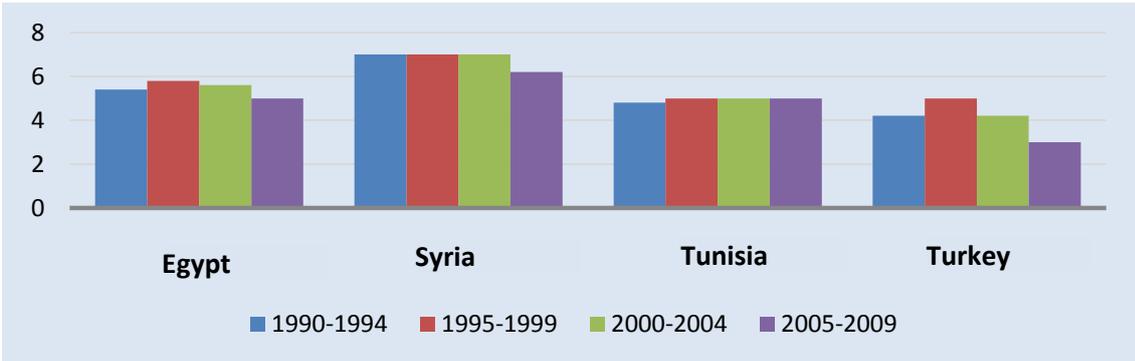
Source: ILO, EIU

When the economic dynamics underlying the wave of rebellion in Maghreb and Egypt are analyzed, it is seen that among the indicators named as the usual suspects only the high unemployment rate has any explanatory power. High youth unemployment and hikes in food prices have created a suitable environment for rebellion, however, over the same period, similar economic problems have been felt in politically more stable countries like Turkey even at a higher degree in real terms. Therefore, we believe that it is not possible to explain the rebellion solely in relation to economic dynamics.

Can the Oppressive Regime of the Arab Palaces Be the Cause of the Rebellion Wave?

Besides the economic approaches, some accounts argue that the authoritarian and oppressive tendencies of the Arab regimes also have triggered the wave of rebellion. The Freedom House database, one frequently referred to in democratization literature, grades countries on a scale from 1 (highest degree of freedom) to 7 (oppressive). As the examination of the changes in the rating of the studied countries suggests, it is not likely to explain that the wave of rebellion solely on the basis of the oppressive regimes.

Figure 3. Freedom Index, 1990-2009



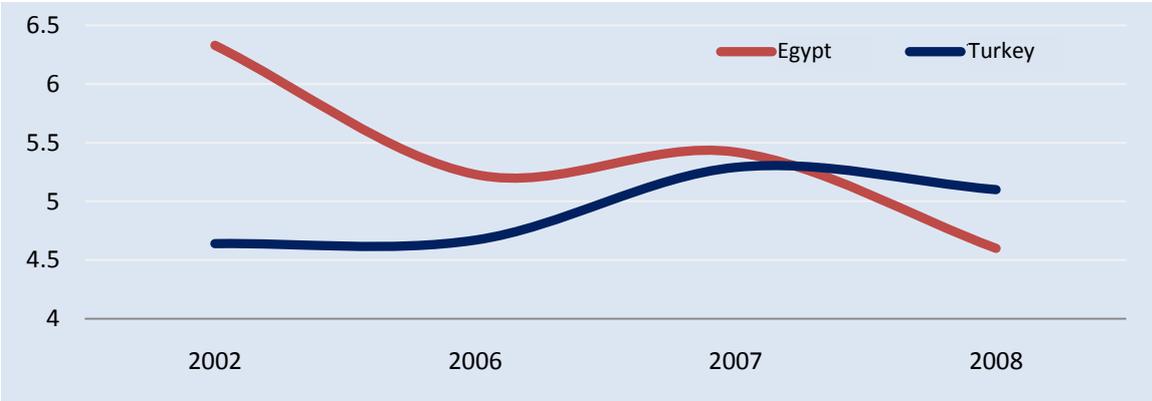
Source: Freedom House

As figure 3 also suggests, between 1990 and 2009 the level of civil and political liberties did not change in Tunisia. Over this period, civil liberties in particular improved slightly in Egypt. Thus, the riots on Arab streets cannot be explained on the basis of the oppressive regimes of the Arab palaces.

The Main Cause of the Rebellion Is the Unhappiness of the Arab Streets

To recall the fundamental principles of the relative deprivation theory, governments can maintain happiness within society as long as they can manage the expectation of citizens on the difference between the future image in their eyes and the opportunities at their disposal. The happiness index² developed by Veenhoven in the light of the results of perception surveys reveals that the perceptions of individuals about their lives have been deteriorating since 2007. The question on life perception in the survey based on which Veenhoven have developed the happiness index indicates that especially in Egypt, the level of happiness decreased as of 2007 mainly due to relative deprivation.

Figure 4. Life Satisfaction Index



Source: World Database of Happiness, <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>

The survey question in relation to the perception of life is “Suppose the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder the worst possible life. Where on this ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time?” As shown in figure 4, the level of happiness in Egypt has been decreasing steeply since 2002. The mean of the range which stood at 6.33 in 2002, decreased to 5.23 in 2006 and to 4.6 in 2008. Then,

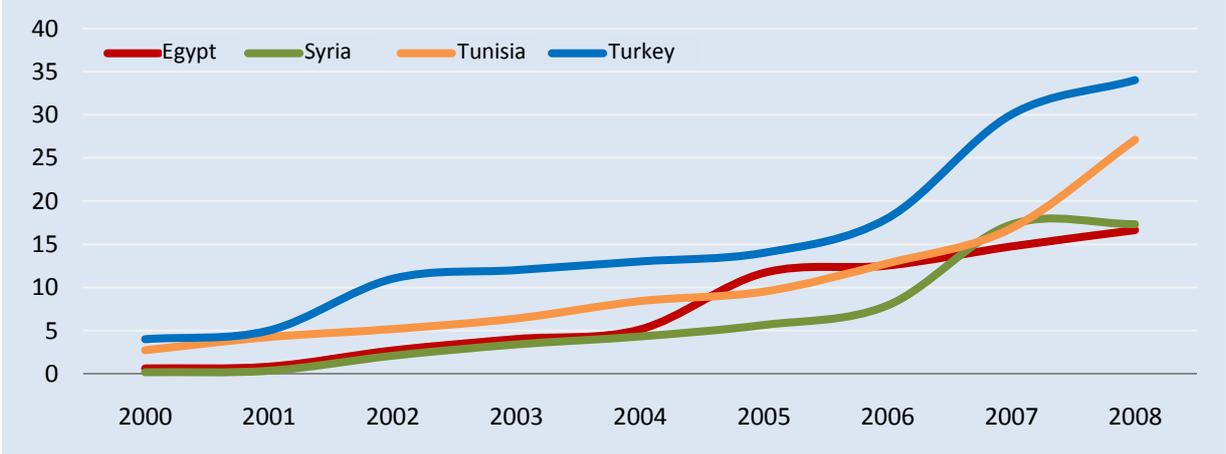
² R. Veenhoven, World Database of Happiness, collection Happiness in Nations, Overview of happiness surveys. <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>

why did the level of happiness and perception of life among people living in Egypt deteriorate after 2002? We believe that the Arab streets' becoming increasingly aware of the relative deprivation they encounter played a major role in their becoming increasingly unhappy. As it appears, the Arab streets have started to consider the oppressive and ill rule of Arab palaces as an impediment to their future imagination. As figure 4 suggests, following 2005 when the EU accession negotiations were initiated for Turkey, life perception and happiness among the Turkish people improved considerably. We are of the opinion that this development was associated to a high degree with the change in life expectations in the positive direction with the excitement and hopes raised by the EU accession process.

Did the Social Globalization and Social Networks Trigger the Rebellion?

Thanks to the technological toys of the era and the development of social networks, social globalization has turned into the number one mobilization mechanism for mass movements. Taking into account the function of the Internet and social networks in raising awareness about relative deprivation, it is of great importance to examine the impacts of social globalization across Maghreb and Egypt.

Figure 5. Internet Users (per 100 people)



Source: World Development Indicators

In Egypt only 2.7 out of 100 people used the Internet in 2002. As of 2008, this number reached 16.7 out of 100. In Tunisia, the figure increased from 5.1 in 2002 to 27.1 in 2008.

As demonstrated in Table 2, out of 17 million internet users in Egypt, approximately 4 million use the social platform “Facebook”. In Tunisia, 15.8% of 3.6 million internet users, corresponding to 1.67 million people, have Facebook accounts.

Table 2. Social Media Usage, 2010

	Number of Internet Users	Rate of Use (%)	Number of Facebook Users	Rate of Use (%)
Jordan	1,741,900	27.2	1,061,080	16.6
Syria	3,935,000	17.7	30,000	0.1
Egypt	17,060,000	21.2	4,077,520	5.1
Tunisia	3,600,000	34.0	1,671,840	15.8
Morocco	10,442,500	33.4	2,085,280	6.6
Turkey	35,000,000	45.0	23,516,140	30.2

Source: Internet World Stats

The KOF Index of Globalization³ uses trade, foreign direct investments and portfolio investments as indicators for economic globalization, as well as the participation in international conventions, increase in the number of diplomatic missions and the number of international organizations to which the country is a member to. With respect to social globalization, the index refers to the share of tourism revenues in the GDP for personal communication, rate of foreign population, international calls and correspondence, Internet use for information flow, number of televisions per 1000 people and daily circulation of newspapers. Tunisia and Egypt have been converging rapidly on Turkey in the globalization process.

Table 3. Change in the Social Globalization Index, 1971-2007

	1971-1980	1981-1990	1991-2000	2001-2007
Egypt	-0.30%	0.20%	93.81%	4.81%
Syria	-0.73%	-8.52%	23.09%	33.28%
Tunisia	-1.24%	-2.53%	21.73%	2.59%
Turkey	13.32%	40.61%	43.88%	-6.86%

Source: KOF Index of Globalization

³ Dreher, Axel (2006): Does Globalization Affect Growth? Evidence from a new Index of Globalization, *Applied Economics* 38, 10: 1091-1110.

The most striking detail the KOF Index of Globalization reveals is the significant leap in Egypt in terms of social globalization between 1990 and 2000. In the said period, indicators on social globalization increased by 93.81% in Egypt as compared to 21.73% in Tunisia and 43.88% in Turkey. In the light of this data our hypothesis is that social globalization triggered the rebellion wave in Maghreb and Egypt by raising awareness about the relative deprivation that has been suffered on Arab streets for decades. The high rate of youth unemployment and hikes in food prices also have created a suitable environment for rebellion.

Concluding Remarks

We believe that the prominent cause of the ongoing wave of rebellion is that social globalization has reached the Arab streets. It is unrealistic to expect that unemployed and unhappy Arab youth in the 20-30 age group watch the soap operas marketing the American dream online, and meet with their peers all around the world on Facebook and Twitter and not question the circumstances the oppressive Arab palaces have been imposing on them for more than three decades. Especially given the fact that the youth represents almost 90 percent of the total unemployed population in the country, it is easy to understand why the young population in particular rebels against the palace in the Arab streets. Discussions have begun on which leaders and governments will shape the future of Egypt and Maghreb. The priority of the governments to shape this transition period must to manage the expectations of the Arab streets, which have changed as a result of social globalization.