

Feeling Revolution: Affect and the Afterlives of the Arab Uprisings

Yasmeen Mekawy

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Introduction

One demand that rang out across virtually all the Arab uprisings was the call for dignity, or *karama*. Though its precise meaning varied across national contexts and political actors, the act of reclaiming dignity generally signaled a response to sustained humiliation, and an assertion of pride, empowerment, and self-worth. As Dakhli argues in a recent special issue on post-revolutionary affect in the region,¹ dignity is at the heart understanding the 2011 mobilizations, understood as the struggle for “lives that are both felt as good and recognized as good.”² Dignity, in this sense, is not only a normative claim but an affective experience: during moments of mass mobilization and the occupation of public space, revolutionaries engaged in acts of reclaiming dignity through the expression of emotions such as anger, joy, love, and solidarity. These emotional practices were not only personal but deeply political, entangled with broader aspirations for social and political justice and the desire to escape what Dakhli describes as “negative emotions”³ tied to systemic repression. What renders these emotions political is that “through their subjectivation and sharing, they produce a political imaginary.”⁴

This chapter asks, what can affect and emotion tell us about the Arab uprisings and their aftermath? Scholars have turned to affect and emotion to account for a wide array of political phenomena—from rebellion, revolution, and resistance, to co-optation, polarization, quiescence, and even popular support for authoritarianism. This chapter surveys key contributions to this growing body of work since 2011, situating them within broader literatures on emotion in social movements, affect theory, and the study of informal politics and everyday practices in authoritarian contexts. Rather than offering a comprehensive review, this is a selective mapping of key intersections, conceptual convergences, and thematic innovations that illustrate how an emotion-centered approach can illuminate processes of mobilization, demobilization, and the exercise of authoritarian power during and after the Arab uprisings.

There are several challenges scholars studying political emotion come up against: First, there is no consensus on the concepts of emotion and affect, and the boundaries of what counts as an emotion or “feeling states” are often unclear. In her highly influential and widely cited study of the ACT UP movement in Chicago, Gould makes a useful distinction between affect and emotion, conceptualizing the former as visceral, inchoate, non-cognitive, felt responses to stimuli, and the latter as socially and culturally constructed codifications of those responses.⁵ This distinction is useful because affect not only calls attention to the embodied aspect of feeling, but also leaves room for unknowability and unpredictability, helping to avoid a deterministic and automated understanding of stimulus and response, of emotions and action.

Second, there are no unified models or generalized theories of emotions in mobilization comparable to those found in more traditional political science accounts of revolution or democratization. The “emotional turn” in social movement studies, crystallized in the influential volume by Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta,⁶ has provided valuable conceptual tools for analyzing how affect and emotion shape repertoires of contention, framing strategies, recruitment, identity formation, and movement sustainability.⁷ Yet these tools are often employed in fragmented ways, and remain subject to ongoing critique and revision. This lack of grand theory is not a failure of scholarly rigor, but rather a reflection of the nature of emotion itself, which is inherently ambiguous, ambivalent, contradictory, nonlinear, and multidirectional. Works highlighted in this review take this ambivalence seriously while reflecting on the political work that emotions do.

Finally, scholars must confront the perennial methodological question: how does one access, identify, and read emotion? A range of methods—from literary analysis to survey experiments to machine learning and emotion recognition or “sentiment analysis” software—have been deployed to study political emotion. This chapter focuses primarily on works that use ethnographic and interpretive discursive methods, which are especially attuned to the construction and circulation of meaning in emotionally saturated contexts. While not discounting the value of political psychology, this approach foregrounds the epistemological assumptions that undergird affective inquiry and emphasizes the importance of deep case knowledge. Tracing how affect shapes both social reproduction and political rupture requires sustained attention to history, language, symbolic form, and everyday practice.

Mobilization

The vast majority of political science scholarship seeking to explain the onset of the Arab uprisings focused on identifying the structural causes of revolution over the long *durée*: youth bulges, climbing inequality and unemployment rates, the corruption intrinsic to crony capitalism, globalization and imperial exploitation, and neoliberal reforms such as the retraction of subsidies, services, and welfare benefits.⁸ Much of the literature has also referred to structural characteristics of the state to explain variation in the uprisings, for example, pointing to regime type (e.g., monarchy vs. republic) to explain differences in scale and trajectory. While some scholars acknowledged the limitations of state-centered approaches and called for greater attention to contentious dynamics from below, the post-2011 authoritarian reconsolidation has largely pulled the field back toward its familiar analytical terrain: regimes, institutions, and elite behavior.

As Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule note, for many political scientists long invested in explaining the so-called exceptionalism of the MENA region—its resilience to democratization—the very features once seen as evidence of authoritarian durability suddenly became reframed as drivers of revolutionary rupture.⁹ Yet, as Pearlman reminds us, “the revolts were made not only by facilitating conditions, but also by individuals who managed to circumvent potential disruptions due to their determination to protest despite risk and their reasoning about the most effective ways to do so.”¹⁰ Structural explanations may broadly point to reasons *why*, but tell us little of the *how* mass mobilization that occurred in the Arab uprisings unfolded; the increasing interest in affect and emotion in recent years reflects a broader disciplinary shift toward more granular explanations of individual and group decision-making, allowing scholars to foreground how revolutionaries exercised agency—and astonishing courage¹¹—in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Thus, a burgeoning literature examines the role of affect in the mobilization of the Arab uprisings. Building on the “emotional turn” in social movement studies, and drawing on affect theory, scholars of the region have examined the “micro-foundations” of protest,¹² which entails attention to precipitating events, individuals’ actions, and dynamics on the ground, rather than long-term structural causes. Eschewing causal models and macro-sociological explanations,¹³ these scholars argue for a process-based approach, criticizing state-centric and structuralist explanations for marginalizing the cultural, ideological, and emotional dimensions of revolution. However, a micro-foundational approach is not *necessarily* incompatible with macro and structural explanations; rather, these works attempt to bridge the explanatory gap between grievances and

collective action. Or put differently, this work seeks to get at “how ‘systemic conditions are manifest in our felt experience’, and how ‘political structure[s] become subjectivized.’”¹⁴

These scholars recognize revolution as above all characterized by rupture—of time, space, norms of comportment, established patterns, scripts, and hierarchies of social relations, and of course, of affect and emotional habitus.¹⁵ Explaining mobilization is not just a matter of excavating individual motivations, but requires attention to rapidly shifting social dynamics in a time of uncertainty. As Kurzman observes, willingness to participate can “shift drastically moment to moment on the basis of amorphous rumors, heightened emotions, and conflicting senses of duty.”¹⁶ Rationalist theories grounded in fixed preferences or stable utility functions fail to capture how decisions are made *in situ*, under conditions of uncertainty, fear, and exhilaration. Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule thus argue for a situational, blow-by-blow analysis of revolutionary episodes—an approach that foregrounds historical legacies, contingent decisions, and the emergent logics of transformative events that exceed even participants’ expectations.¹⁷

Such an approach pays particular attention to transformative events, which are “significantly disrupting, altering, or violating the taken-for-granted assumptions governing routine political and social relations.”¹⁸ These are typically events that disrupt the pattern of expected behavior of a political actor in one way or another and thus carry a potent emotional impact. Related is the concept of moral shocks¹⁹—usually sudden and publicized events that provoke a sense of outrage and incline people toward political action. In her seminal work on the ACT UP movement in Chicago, Gould shows how a Supreme Court decision criminalizing sodomy constituted a moral shock and therefore effected a shift in the movement’s “emotional habitus” by authorizing anger and thus more confrontational tactics as a legitimate mode of opposition to the state’s oppression and stigmatization of the LGBTQ community.²⁰

In the context of the Arab uprisings, Pearlman traces a sequence of events that lit a spark of the Syrian revolution in Daraa—the arrest of fifteen children from a school where anti-regime graffiti appeared, as well as the brazenly insulting reaction of the security forces to the families seeking their children.²¹ While local social networks played a key role in facilitating mobilization, Pearlman underscores that what ultimately mattered was not just the *existence* of networks but the *affective charge* of the information circulated through them: the outrage, indignation, and empathy that animated people to act.²² Furthermore, she argues that a close reading of events can help parse between the relative salience of instrumental and strategic calculations, values and identities, and emotions as motivating forces to mobilize; of course, while the analytical distinctions are clear, the challenge for researchers lies in separating these logics empirically.

Many scholars have also highlighted the critical role of digital networks in mediating the affective dynamics of the Arab uprisings. In contrast to earlier protest waves, these movements were not driven primarily by tightly organized activist groups, but by looser, horizontal networks that coalesced rapidly through social media.²³ Castells, a communications scholar, identifies digital social networks as a key source of the “social production of meaning,” and thus a site of production of power. According to him, one condition “for individual experiences to link up and form a movement is the existence of a communication process that propagates the events and the emotions attached to it.”²⁴ Social media is specifically relevant to transformative events/moral shocks because the events themselves are constructed, interpreted, and disseminated collectively online, as with the *We Are All Khaled Said* Facebook page in the Egyptian case (discussed later). While much ink has been spilled on the efficacy or futility of internet technology in aiding revolution, what remains underexplored is the relationship between affect and networked technology.²⁵ At

minimum, social media has become an indispensable site for fieldwork, offering a rich, real-time archive of how events are interpreted, emotions expressed, and decisions negotiated. Scholars can track not only the diffusion of protest repertoires but the formation of what Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule describe as *situational norms*²⁶—the emergent, affectively charged rules of engagement that take shape in the heat of the moment.

Events that come to be experienced as transformative are shaped by a range of contextual factors—including, crucially, historical memory. In her widely cited article, Wendy Pearlman²⁷ compares the positive cases of mobilization in Egypt and Tunisia with a negative case—Algeria, where a mass uprising did not initially occur. She argues that in the absence of clear openings in political opportunity structures, it was the affective force of transformative events—like the deaths of Mohamed Bouazizi and Khaled Said—that catalyzed mobilization in Tunisia and Egypt. These events evoked what Pearlman calls “spiriting” emotions such as anger, hope, and pride. By contrast, in Algeria, the traumatic memory of the civil war in the 1990s generated “dispiriting” emotions—particularly fear—which contributed to political quiescence and a prioritization of safety and stability over revolt. Demobilizing/mobilizing emotion typologies, however, have been challenged by scholars who find transformative political potential even in “negative” or “dispiriting” emotions like disappointment, despair, or nostalgia.²⁸

And indeed, Algerians did eventually undertake their own uprising eight years after Tunisians and Egyptians revolted; one might speculate that the new generation of politically conscious youth in the Hirak movement, influenced by the first wave of the Arab uprisings, were not restrained by the visceral memories of the civil war-era repression that may have predominated the impressions and calculations of the previous generation of risk-averse activists. Ultimately, the question of *when*, *why*, and *for whom* certain events become transformative cannot be answered without deep contextual knowledge—knowledge best accessed through case-based research, including interviews and ethnographic fieldwork where possible.

Alongside this, theorists have drawn attention to the spatial and temporal dimensions of revolutionary experience, especially as they intersect with affect—observing, for example, that encampments were a successful technique of spreading protest movements in the Arab uprisings because the liberated zone “helps to overcome fear and anchor the protest over time” and constructs a unified image that stokes revolutionary enthusiasm, cultivating new habits.²⁹ As Sabea writes, the eighteen days in Tahrir constituted a “time out of time,” which had its own “rhythms and routines, its forms of aesthetics and sociality, and its possibilities and potentials,” or its own (extraordinary) ordinariness.³⁰ These spatial and temporal ruptures were inextricable from affective ones, generating new subjectivities and political imaginaries—ways of being, feeling, and imagining otherwise. Or as Schwedler puts it: “The uprisings ushered in a new temporality for many people, one that resulted in a rupture in their understanding of what is possible, how processes change, and their role—an active one—in that history.”³¹ Incorporating the notions of temporal, spatial, and affective ruptures, Ayata and Harders offer the concept of Midan Moments: affectively charged relationalities occurring within specific spaces, marked by the bodily co-presence of protesters and the suspension of ordinary emotional repertoires. These are “moments of rupture in which pre-existing emotional repertoires of fear, hate, repression, or respect for the political order are destabilized.”³² Distinguishing between two “affective arrangements”—the square as utopia and the square as battlefield—the concept of Midan Moments highlights not only *why* people protest, but “what protest does to people.”³³

Standout work shows how affect can shed light on both the root causes or grievances of mobilization and the repertoires of contention enacted by revolutionaries, and how those acts themselves are in turn emotionally transformative.³⁴ Ismail traces discontent in popular neighborhoods of Cairo to a pattern of humiliation inflicted on residents by the police in conjunction with neoliberalization of the economy and concomitant expansion of the security state.³⁵ She details the humiliation and anger experienced by popular-class youths individually at the hands of the police, as well as collectively by the Ultras, or football fans, who from their inception as a social organization in Egypt were met with violent confrontation from the police. These particular experiences of humiliation by young males, she argues, also explain the particular form and style of contentious acts taken by the Ultras against the Ministry of Interior. During the revolution, Ultras became renowned for their ferocity and bravery in battle, as they served on the front lines during skirmishes with police during the eighteen days and afterward, most famously during Mohamed Mahmoud in November that year. Ismail argues that the Ultras' "structure of feeling"³⁶ of humiliation, anger, disdain, and revulsion toward the police came to be expressed in songs and "scenarios of leveling" in which the Ultras enacted their "vindicated selfhood and dignity":

The insults and obscene words hurled at the officers acquire their potency from the social conventions and the situational dynamics of publicity and collective participation in front of large audiences. Ultras' performances bring down the signs and symbols of superiority and dominance, humiliating and shaming the officers ... The language and enacted resistance appear inspired by some of the same practices that they are intended to oppose as with the use of obscene insults and sexually charged language to humiliate the police officers standing guard at the stadiums or deployed in front of the Ministry of the Interior ... these performances—akin to carnival—effect symbolic leveling, which has the potential of rendering police practices of humiliation obsolete.³⁷

Ismail's analysis marries the structural explanation of neoliberal reform with attention to the affective dynamics of contention. Her case study offers an empirical example of how political emotions are embedded in structures of interactions, power relations, and cultural and situational contexts, as well as the social and class positionality of participants. The Ultras can be fruitfully juxtaposed with another group—silent standers, to highlight how these factors mediate emotions in shaping both mobilization processes and repertoires of contention.

Affective and Aesthetic Variation: Middle-class Respectability vs. Ultras' Irreverence

Most accounts of the Egyptian revolution start with the death of Khaled Said, a youth from Alexandria who was killed by police in June 2010, six months before the eighteen-day uprising in Tahrir. Two policemen dragged the twenty-eight-year-old computer programmer out of a cyber cafe and beat him to death in the street. While news spread through social media that he was at the café posting an incriminating video of police divvying the spoils of a drug bust,³⁸ official police reports claimed that Said was wanted for both theft and weapons possession, and that while resisting arrest he attempted to swallow a bag of hashish causing him to suffocate to death. At

the morgue Said's brother took a picture of Said's severely disfigured face, which was reported by bloggers and went viral after being shared on Facebook by the opposition politician Ayman Nour. Activists in Alexandria went into action immediately, organizing protests and getting locals from the neighborhood involved. Prominent politicians attended and visited Khaled's family. Following this, several Facebook pages dedicated to Said were created including *Kulena Khaled Said* (We Are All Khaled Said) which attracted 36,000 members on the first day, and eventually exceeded one million.³⁹ It was in this online forum that anti-police brutality protests of January 25, a national holiday honoring the police, were announced and publicized. From June to January, there were silent stands and protests every month all over the country, not only in the major cities of Cairo and Alexandria but also on the periphery, in cities like Damietta, Tanta, and Port Said. Attendance ranged from dozens to thousands, and they were also attended by well-known opposition figures.

But Khaled Said's death was not the first case of well-documented police brutality, nor the first to go viral; so how and why did it become an emotionally transformative event, becoming inscribed in collective memory as prefiguring the revolution? In my larger project, I argue that the death of Khaled Said becomes a transformative event because it represented an affective break in the emotional habitus of mostly middle-class, internet-savvy young Egyptians, or the group referred to as *shabab el net* (internet youth), who were among first movers in the initial January 25 protests.⁴⁰ During the six months between Said's death and the Tahrir uprising, they cultivated a contentious repertoire, culminating in silent stands, which embodied both their fear and moral indignation within the confines of the norms of middle-class respectability, in contrast to the more aggressive contentious style of confrontational groups like the Ultras. While the Ultras' experiences were shaped by a history of aggressive confrontation with the police, the silent standers lacked such experience. This is largely why Khaled Said's murder constituted a moral shock, and indeed, became a transformative event for this group; prior to Khaled Said, they perceived that their class status had protected them from such abuses. This became clear in interviews when asked about their reaction to other viral police brutality cases—what almost all respondents emphasized was that the difference between other cases and Khaled Said was that he resembled them: some pointed to class markers subtly, mentioning that Khaled was using Facebook and Twitter, listening to music, attending the *nady*,⁴¹ etc., while others acknowledged explicitly that they identified with him on the basis of social class and thus felt moved to do something. As a precursor to this fuller argument, here I will just elaborate on the contrast between the Ultras' and silent standers' contentious styles, building on Ismail's argument, to illustrate how emotion shapes contentious style.

The administrators of the *We Are All Khaled Said* page knew that its members felt angry, saddened, and shocked, but also vulnerable and scared, and they set the page's distinct rhetorical tone accordingly. Wael Ghonim writes in his memoir about how he used colloquial Egyptian Arabic instead of the more formal Modern Standard, and "deliberately avoided expressions that were regularly used by activists, like *nizaam*, the Arabic word for regime."⁴² The page deliberately "spoke the language of the Internet generation," the tone was kept "decent and non-confrontational," and Ghonim avoided association with any specific political cause.⁴³ He wrote to one of the admins of another Khaled Said Facebook page: "The expression 'dogs of the regime' has been a central feature of your discourse since the page was launched. I agree that this is an appropriate, angry description in light of Khaled Said horrible fate, but there are certainly groups of

members who find this kind of language repulsive.”⁴⁴ The avoidance of vulgar language appealed to a middle-class understanding of respectability.

Ghonim also recounts how the group gradually ramped up engagement and participation: the page’s first goal was simply to attract members. The second was to get them involved and interacting in the group by commenting on and sharing the posts. The third was to get them to participate in and contribute to the online campaigns, for example, requesting that members photograph themselves holding a sign that read “We are all Khaled Said” and post it to the page. The admins also constantly solicited ideas from the members to give them a sense of agency and contribution—for example, the idea to decorate Ramadan lanterns with Khaled Said’s face and hold charity *iftars* in his honor, or to write Khaled Said’s name in during the parliamentary elections came from the page members.⁴⁵ The final step was to come together for collective action. One of the reasons the silent stands were successful is that they were novel and distinct from the usual activist tactics, which non-activists saw as overly confrontational and likely to elicit police brutality in response; ironically, when the idea was first proposed, seasoned activists derided it and predicted it would be a failure. The admins were in fact hesitant to call for any kind of action, as they felt this would make them responsible for the possible injuries or death of participants; in the end, however, they compromised on the silent stands.⁴⁶ The idea of the silent stands was not proposed by activists but was in fact the result of collective deliberation amongst members of the Facebook page.

In Ismail’s interpretation, the Ultras’ style of confrontation signified an irreverent leveling, whereas the silent stands, I suggest, enacted a one-sided rejection, a literal turning of backs on the corrupt and abusive police practices and those who perpetuate them. The discourse around Khaled Said’s death was marked by somber feelings of grief and fear, and the silent stands were calibrated to the expression of these feelings. The anger, jeering, and contemptuous tone of the Ultras’ contentious practices stand in stark contrast with the mood of sadness, mourning, and sobriety enacted during the silent stands. In the same vein, the Ultras’ embrace of an aggressive and ultra-masculinist attitude contrasts with the peaceful (*silmiyya*) approach of my middle-class interlocutors, who recounted stories of trying to protect individual police conscripts caught in the crowds from physical harm during the uprising. A group’s emotional habitus is engendered by their experiences, perceptions, interactions with others, the information they are exposed to, and their cultural norms. The silent stands were culturally resonant with middle-class notions of “respectability”—many members of the page spoke enthusiastically about expressing dissidence “in a civilized manner.” This appealed to a middle-class ethos—especially for those inexperienced in protests—in contradistinction to what is often portrayed as lower-class thuggery (*baltaga*); this is also reflected in the gendered dynamic of the male-only Ultras and their hypermasculine performances in contrast with the restrained silent stands, in which “respectable” women are highly visible.⁴⁷

The comparison between these two groups reveals a clash between the emotional habitus, aesthetic styles, and contentious practices of different actors in Egypt’s revolution—the restraint of the activists and respectful *shabab el net* versus the contemptuous defiance of the Ultras. The contrast between the Ultras and the Silent Standers and activists illustrates how a group’s emotional habitus directly affects how events are perceived, felt, and interpreted, and in turn, what kinds of contentious acts are validated and deemed appropriate. It also calls attention to the ways in which “political agency and its emotional and affective registers are deeply mediated through intersectional inequalities”⁴⁸ like class and gender.

Demobilization, Ideology, and Affective Legacies

Aside from identifying the emotions that drive the formation and mobilization of movements, scholars have analyzed “emotion work”⁴⁹ done by movements in sustaining participation or engagement with political causes, as well as changing emotional rules and culture toward such issues. Allam illuminated the emotion work of anti-sexual violence groups in Egypt formed during and after the uprising; she shows they transformed feelings of shame into more positive emotions (e.g., pride, moral outrage), and documents “emotional opportunities” opened by the activism of these groups, which succeeded in “encouraging the public display and expression of different ‘deviant’ emotions in response to the [sexual] violence” for later groups.⁵⁰ Moreover, she argues that in the absence of political opportunities, organizational resources, and frame resonance, the emotional rules and expressions of challenging shame created by the movement continue to shape emotional culture around the issue of sexual violence. Such work thus draws our attention to the less obvious consequences—or reverberations—of revolution: shifts in language, consciousness, and culture.

As the case of the Algerian abstention from and then reprisal of the Arab uprisings suggests, work on affective memory provides context for how events may be perceived, which may help scholars explain future movement trajectories and transformative events. Memories of victories, violence, and loss become inflection points for local mobilizations and become inscribed in political practices below the level of regime overthrow. In this vein, Mekawy documents how the Egyptian revolution is portrayed in media through various affective registers, ranging from hopeful and romanticized to dystopian and depressed, and argues that micro-practices that nostalgically enact the utopian togetherness of the square preserve the memory of the eighteen days for younger generations in the context of state erasure.⁵¹ Both Mekawy and Jaber⁵² also examine how the state restages fictionalized versions of real contentious events in *musalsalat*, attempting to recode them with different affects that support regime narratives, and consider the ways in which those recoding attempts may fail.

In the wake of revolutionary defeat, scholars have also used memory to excavate the affective bases of demobilization. ElMasry documents the compounding of feelings of resentment after the Egyptian revolution’s defeat, particularly in the absence of a collective narrative reckoning with classism, regional hierarchies, and sexism and sexual violence within the revolutionary movement, experienced as traumatic betrayals for the revolution’s marginalized rank and file.⁵³ Nonetheless, following Gould,⁵⁴ she suggests that combining and recoding despair with different emotions can open new political horizons. In a similar vein, Stragapede details life histories to shed light on the practice of silence in the affective and intimate dimension of politicization in Tunisian youth,⁵⁵ while Hassabo and Ruiz de Elivira explore how the ambivalent emotional legacies of the Syrian and Egyptian revolutions affect activists’ daily lives in the present.⁵⁶

In his analysis of the demobilization of Lebanon’s 2019 uprising, Grimm also departs from state-centric frameworks by foregrounding affective mechanisms that are endogenous to the movements and participants themselves.⁵⁷ Rather than attributing demobilization solely to repression or institutional constraints, Grimm offers a nuanced account of how individuals responded to the traumatic rupture of the Beirut port explosion—a moment he treats as a transformative event. He identifies three distinct processes through which demobilization unfolded: adaptation, disengagement, and abeyance—each marked by specific cognitive and emotional dynamics. His core insight is both simple and compelling: “The effects of systemic ruptures crucially

depend on how external pressures are internalized on the micro level—how they affect the hearts and minds of those ‘making’ a revolution.”⁵⁸

The works discussed in this section share a commitment to bridging the structural and the subjective—but with the aim of explaining collective *inaction* rather than action. They challenge reductive accounts that treat demobilization as the inevitable outcome of authoritarian repression, instead contextualizing state violence and coercion as forces that interact with—and are refracted through—activists’ lived experiences and subjective perceptions. Ultimately, they underscore the value of ethnographically grounded approaches to political affect, interrogating individual subjectivities, social media practices, and popular cultural artifacts as fertile sites for tracing the entanglements of emotion, memory, and political disengagement.

Indeed, it was not only repression that stymied the uprisings; ideological/affective atmospheres can contribute to demobilization or non-mobilization in diverse and subtle ways. Wedeen argues that in Damascus and Aleppo, for example, mass mobilization was constrained by the affective attachments of a category of “gray” citizens suspended between a desire for change on the one hand, and an investment in neoliberal fantasies of the good life—bound up with regime narratives of order and stability—on the other.⁵⁹ These attachments, she argues, produced a form of political paralysis that inhibited mass mobilization in cities like Damascus and Aleppo, ultimately forestalling the emergence of the critical mass necessary for regime overthrow in 2011.

In a chapter on fear and foreboding, following Brian Massumi’s formulation of the “political ontology of threat,”⁶⁰ she shows how anticipatory fear also worked to bolster regime survival. She examines how the circulation of a rumor that people knew to be unlikely or untrue functioned as a type of “affective recruitment,”⁶¹ sidestepping veracity by gesturing to what *could* or *might* happen in the future, while encouraging the incitement of solidarity and preemptory fear along sectarian lines. Wedeen’s analysis reveals how ideology is reproduced in everyday practices (like spreading rumors), structuring and harnessing affective energies. It also calls attention to the ways in which ideology can invite individuals and groups to maintain contradictory beliefs and affective states.

Also attentive to the affective scaffolding of regime support, Winegar⁶² examines how the mobilization of the affects of love and disgust by both protesters and the regime exacerbated the ossification of the sovereignty struggle of 2011 into two poles: either pro-military (or pro-Sisi) and pro-Muslim Brotherhood camps, ultimately helping to congeal state power. Malmström⁶³ similarly probes the affective landscape of Morsi’s ouster and Sisi’s ascent, analyzing the sensory textures of political fear and love to map how authoritarian power was reconstituted. Together, these accounts enrich our understanding of the affective workings of complicity, loyalty, quiescence, and containment.

Conclusion

Scholars seeking to understand the role of affect and emotion in resistance, domination, and ideology should start from below, not only studying the dramatic ruptures, but the interstices where power is reproduced and challenged in small and seemingly insignificant ways. Political scientists were not caught off guard by the Arab uprisings because of falsified preferences, but because they had largely overlooked how ordinary people could sustain critical subjectivity even while passively—or at times actively—reproducing the very conditions of their domination. The

exception to this is the rich literature on informal and quotidian practice.⁶⁴ Recent works in this vein include Schielke's study of boredom and despair⁶⁵ and Pettit's analysis of hope⁶⁶ in Egypt, Khosravi's work on waiting and hope in Iran,⁶⁷ and Allen's work on cynicism toward Western human rights organizations in Palestine, in which she argues that cynicism "can be not only a way that power is reproduced and political stasis maintained, but also part of how people continue to critique and search, or at least hope, for something better."⁶⁸ These works explore how individuals navigate and endure the lived realities of neoliberalism, translating macro-level structures into micro-level experiences. Yet, there remains a need for deeper theorization of how affective micro-processes concatenate into meso-level dynamics and, in turn, shape broader macro-political, social, and economic formations. Attending to the affective mechanisms and effects of informal and everyday practices can equip scholars to better anticipate—though not predict—the conditions under which collective action and inaction emerge.

Building on this work requires both an embrace of interdisciplinarity and a capacious understanding of the political. Scholars engaging with affect and urban space and infrastructure,⁶⁹ music and performance,⁷⁰ social media practices,⁷¹ and the production of gendered subjectivities⁷² illuminate how the political is not confined to formal institutions, but is instead embedded in ordinary routines, symbolic forms, and embodied experiences. El Zein, for example, both critiques a facile reading of Arab rap as resistance and proposes a conception of yearning (enacted in listening to music) as political agency, arguing "it is precisely this way of relating to politics as is that listening is able to affect" and that "affecting the relation to these conditions [of existence] is a significant part of changing them."⁷³ Here El Zein articulates the political work everyday practices do *through affect* in structuring subjects' orientation to politics and therefore their horizon of possibility.

Work on subjectivity is always already about affect, even when affect is not explicitly foregrounded, for affect is central to how individuals come to understand themselves in relation to the political. Scholars engaging with affect should strive for greater conceptual precision when naming emotional and feeling states. What, for instance, do we mean when we call unity or solidarity an emotion? Compound emotions and concepts like nostalgia may call for affective disaggregation, encompassing contradictory affective valences—melancholy, wistfulness, joy, elation, depression, etc. At the same time, researchers must embrace the ambiguity and messiness of affect and emotion rather than always attempting to resolve it; it is often in the tensions, contradictions, and dissonances that politics becomes most legible. This sensitivity also allows us to move beyond rigid typologies that distinguish between "mobilizing" emotions like hope or anger and "demobilizing" ones like fear—frameworks that can obscure the textured, contingent nature of decision-making.

As Ayata and Harders put it, the uprisings cannot be "unfelt"⁷⁴ and will continue to shape politics in the MENA in the decades to come. The fifteen years since their start has seen a burgeoning of literature on the affective workings of authoritarian power and resistance, but current research has still only begun to scratch the surface of the myriad ways in which affect drives political action and inaction in the region. By adopting a microfoundational approach that treats affect and emotion as intersubjective, embodied, socially constructed, and often ambivalent, future research can help reorient political science away from its top-heavy focus on institutions and elites, and toward a more grounded account of how everyday people—through their feelings, practices, and attachments—constitute the political itself.

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