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Looking back at 10 Years of the Arab Spring

As Seen from Theories on Democracy, Transformation, Modernisation and Interdependence ¹

"Contemporary world politics is not a seamless web; it is a tapestry of diverse relationships. In such a world, one model cannot explain all situations. The secret of understanding lies in knowing which approach or combination of approaches to use in analyzing a situation." (Robert O. Keohane, Joseph S. Nye: *Power and Interdependence*, 1977; 4th ed. 2012: 4).

On the tenth anniversary of the Arab Spring, the results from the perspective of Western democracies are mostly negative. But what criteria is this analysis based on? Couldn't a democracy-theoretical approach also lead to other findings? This article will also discuss other theories that contribute to an understanding of the current crises. The approach of system transformation, or rather transformation theory, points to deeper socio-economic and cultural contexts: According to this, there have already been consecutive processes of transformation or reform in economy and politics in the Arab world in the early 1990s. One approach that indeed predicted the Arab Spring was modernisation theory. Its marginalisation in the further discourse is incomprehensible, as it can explain quite simple but important interrelationships. For example, the strengthening of women's rights in Tunisia was the engine of social progress and a trigger for the revolution. Finally, the interdependence theory helps to assess the Arab Spring in the context of international politics. Accordingly, it was not only an expression of domestic developments; instead, external actors bear a joint responsibility for today's results. This ultimately leads to a reassessment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

The pictures of the self-immolation of the Tunisian greengrocer Mohamed Bouazizi (cf. welt.de/17.12.2011) went around the world on 17 December 2010 and triggered a worldwide wave of protests against arbitrary state power and corrupt political elites. It essentially affected the authoritarian states of the Arab world and led to internal shifts of power: Just four weeks later, Tunisia's President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali fled his country (14.1.2011). A series of resignations of governments and cabinet reshuffles followed, such as in Jordan (1.2.2011), Egypt (11.2.2011), the Palestinian territories (14.2.2011), Oman (6.3.2011), Yemen (20.3.2011), Libya (March 2011) and Kuwait (28.11.2011). In other countries, the success of the protests was reflected in early elections, for example in the Palestinian Territories (July 2011),

Morocco (25.11.2011) and Yemen (February 2012). In many places, (constitutional) reforms were promised and, in some cases, actually introduced, for example in Morocco (2011), Syria and Egypt (2012) and in Tunisia (2014).

Initial reports by German journalists on the further course of the Arab Spring showed a negative balance: "Five years later, it is an ice-cold winter. All blooming dreams have faded, the well-known, suffocating powerlessness has returned." (DFK, 23.4.2016) After another five years, this negative assessment is confirmed by all political foundations in Germany that deal with foreign cultural and development policy (cf. Figure 1). This article now asks the question to which standards these assessments were made, and which other evaluation criteria are available.

¹ This article is a translation: Sabine Riedel, *Ein Rückblick auf 10 Jahre Arabischer Frühling. Aus Sicht von Theorien zur Demokratie, Transformation, Modernisierung und Interdependenz*, in: (FPK, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2021 Feb 27), 15 p., and: *نظرة إلى الوراء في عشرة أعوام من الربيع العربي*, in: FPK, Vol. 5, No. 5 (2021 Mar 6), 17 p.

Because if you look outside the box in German publications, you will find much more differentiated assessments. Some experts claim, for example, that "the Arab Spring is far from over" (Fahmi 2021). These are not individual opinions,

Figure 1

Balance Sheets on the Arab Spring ...

"Ten years have passed since protests and uprisings changed the Arab world. The epochal impact of the Arab Spring is up for debate, as is its outcome: **Only one country has developed a fragile democracy since 2011. Many more countries in the region have sunk into war or experienced the restoration of repressive, authoritarian regimes.** But perhaps the most important point of the Arab Spring is that it presented alternatives. Possibilities to shape politics, state and society differently. [...]" (FES 2020: 5)

"Within a year, the authoritarian rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, who had ruled their countries for decades, were overthrown. [...] **But a rapid democratisation and a spring-like blossoming of the region did not follow. Instead, geopolitical and identity conflicts erupted in many places, protests were violently suppressed, frustration led to radicalisation and terrorist groups were able to take advantage of the instability of many states.** [...] Last but not least, the civil protests of 2019 in Iraq, Algeria and Lebanon, have once again reminded us that an answer to the demands of the "Arab Spring" has still not been found." (KAS 2020)

"Only in Tunisia did the resignation of the long-time ruler Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali also mean the transition to democracy and a new constitution. [...] Egypt, where long-time President Hosni Mubarak was deposed after 18 days of protest, gave hope to many others that change was also possible in their respective contexts. **But the military remained in the saddle and the country slipped increasingly into chaos under the elected president Mohammed Mursi.** It was also international support for an "orderly transition" that paved the way for Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's coup in the summer of 2013. **Since then, there are far more political prisoners and the death penalty is imposed more frequently than under Mubarak, who ruled until 2011.**" (HBS 6.1.2021)

"The future of the region lies in uncertainty, new regional and international constellations have emerged the effects of which cannot yet be assessed and **there is more reason for concern than euphoria.** Much will depend on whether the revolutionary and emancipatory forces succeed in finding lasting and democratically functioning organisational forms for themselves. At the moment, only one thing can be said with certainty: the process that began in 2010/11 is not over. **The social contradictions expressed in the so-called "Arab Spring" persist and will repeatedly lead to unrest, uprisings and revolutionary upheavals in the region.**" (RLS, 2020)

Sources: FES 2020, Dossier 10 Jahre arabischer Frühling: Das arabische Jahrzehnt, Berlin 2020; (KAS 2020), 10 Jahre Arabischer Frühling, Berlin 2020; HBS 6.1.2021, 10 Jahre Kampf um Würde und Freiheit, Berlin; RLS, 2020, Der unvollendete «arabische Frühling» [Translation and highlighting blue: S.R.].

as they are picked up by leading international media ([washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com), 18.2.2021). This includes the influential Arab news channel Al Jazeera, where critical journalists and scientists from the region also have their say. Looking back on the tenth anniversary of the Arab Spring, experts like Archeen Adeeb Muqaddam speak of a "second wave of demonstrations in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon" ([aljazeera.net](https://www.aljazeera.net), 23.11.2020). According to his forecast, the process of change in the Arab world will continue for years.

Based on these different assessments, this article would like to draw attention to aspects that have so far been neglected in the discourse on the Arab Spring. Thus, the above assessments are all based on assumptions of **democratic theory**. But the use of different criteria inevitably leads to different results. Moreover, from a scientific point of view, the question of the scope of this theoretical framework arises. Research on **system transformation** in Eastern Europe after 1990 and the **transformation theory** in general point out that political reform processes must always be viewed in the context of other areas, including economic and social development. Concrete explanations are presented below.

One research deficit in particular stands out in relation to the Arab Spring, namely the neglect of **modernisation theory**. Yet on this theoretical basis, the two French demographers Emmanuel Todd and Youssef Courbage predicted the political changes in the Arab world by years. Why did their hypotheses receive so little attention after the upheavals began? Finally, **interdependence theory** promises an insightful change of perspective. Because many authors focus their contributions on the upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East (MENA region) on domestic developments. At the same time, external actors have always interfered in this region and thus influence the results that they complain about today. If they do not reflect on their own role, assessments cannot be convincing (cf. Figure 2).

1. Applying different criteria from the democracy theory

It is worth looking back to the beginnings of modern democracy research in the 20th century and becoming aware of the criteria by which political systems are described as democratic. The US political scientist Robert A. Dahl named a core set of six basic freedoms. These include the right to vote freely and to access political office, as well as the right to freedom of expression and access to independent information (see Figure 3). If these freedoms are restricted, democracies are at

risk, as the presidential elections in the USA and the emergency decrees of European democracies in the Corona crisis show. It is also worth mentioning that Dahl called his model "polyarchy", i.e. "rule of the many", in order to depict the process character at the end of which the ideal-typical model of democracy stands.

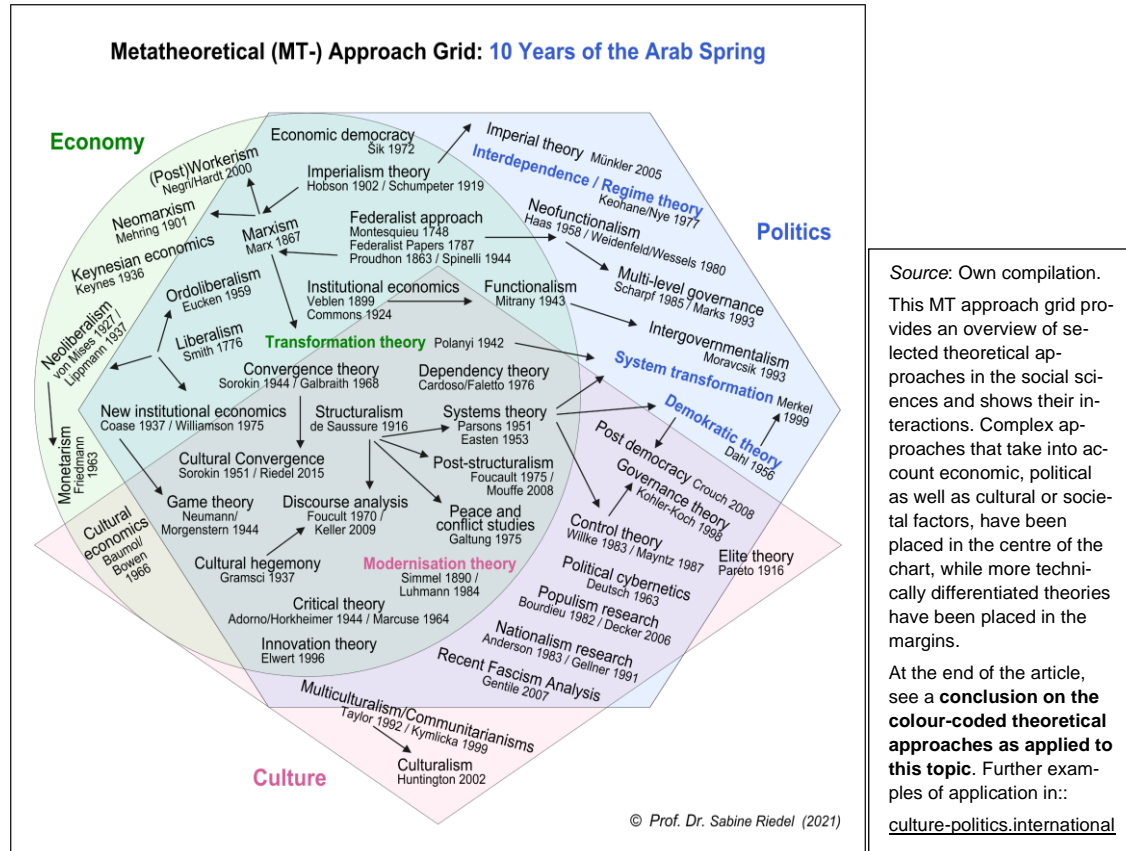
With the help of these formal criteria, not only democratic systems can be distinguished from authoritarian regimes. They can also be used to describe transitions as they were initiated during the Arab Spring. But the quoted negative balance sheets on the tenth anniversary are apparently not satisfied with that. They are results-oriented when they state that Tunisia is the only country where "a fragile democracy has developed since 2011" (FES 2020: 5, Figure 1). If one checks this statement against Dahl's catalogue of criteria, doubts arise as to whether Tunisia's political system meets all the requirements for a democracy.

A major deficit concerns the right of access to all state offices. Because the new constitution retains the provision that only a Muslim may apply for the office of Tunisian president (cf. art. 38 of Tunisia's Constitution of 1959 and art. 74 of Tuni-

sia's Constitution of 2014). This requirement is an expression of the Islamic identity of the Tunisian Republic, as stipulated in Article 1 of the Constitution (1959 and 2014). However, it contradicts other articles, such as the legal equality of all citizens (Article 21) and the right to freedom of religion (Article 6), which led to controversial discussions in the Constituent Assembly. Two political forces faced each other, the representatives of a strict separation between religion and state and the Islamist forces of the Ennahda movement (حركة النهضة). As their very name suggests, they are striving for a religious "rebirth" of Tunisia through the introduction of religious law, the Islamic Sharia (Ghannouchi 2016: 5).

Even if the Islamists were unable to push through their maximum demands, they considerably delayed the reform process. (Abdelkefi 2016: 2). From the perspective of democratic theory, it can be added that the reintroduction of religious law would have meant a return to pre-modern times, either to the period of the Ottoman Empire (until 1881) or to that of French colonial rule (1881-1956). Women would have been legally disadvantaged just as much as religious minori-

Figure 2



ties or citizens without religious affiliation. In the Tunisian constitutional discussion, which has been documented in detail by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP Arab States 2016), it is quite clear that Islamism and democracy are incompatible according to their value horizon. In contrast, Islam and democracy go together very well if Muslim organisations accept the religious pluralism of modern societies and recognise secular legislation as a superior legal umbrella that is binding for everyone (Riedel 2017: 28).

Even the successful example of Tunisia makes it clear that by focusing on the results of reforms, crucial process dynamics are ignored. In retrospect, Egypt and Syria can be cited as typical examples of countries where "protests were violently suppressed" and radicalisation ensued (KAS 2020, cf. Figure 1). From the perspective of democracy theory, however, the relevant question is which reform processes also took place there in the initial phase. The media portrayed "Egypt's Islamist president Mohammed Mursi" as a mediator (zeit.de, 27.6.2013), who called for "national reconciliation" after mass protests against the new constitution (2012, reuters.com 26.6.2013). In

contrast, Der Spiegel described the Syrian constitutional reform at that time as "Assad's reform lie" (spiegel.de, 24.2.2012), although it confirmed that this meant "the end of socialism" and that the Ba'ath Party with the new multi-party system lost its monopoly position

It is worth mentioning a comparison of the voting results in the two constitutional referenda. While 63.8 per cent of Egyptians voted yes (turnout 33 percent, sueddeutsche.de, 26.12.2012), the approval in Syria was 89.4 per cent (turnout 57.4 percent, nytimes.com, 27.2.2012). It remains to be explained by what standard the situation in the two countries was initially assessed so differently. Finally, the democratic theory approach is applied selectively regarding the 22 member states of the Arab League. Thus, there are only a few analyses of political developments in monarchies such as Morocco, Jordan and the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, UAE). Reports on the persecution of opposition activists are left to human rights organisations, for example in Bahrain (HRW 2020-1), in the UAE (HRW 2020-2) and in Jordan (HRW 2020-3).

Figure 3

Democratic Rights and Freedoms following Robert A. Dahl (Polyarchie):

"There is no need for me to describe in detail the basic political institutions of representative government in a modern democratic country, but by now it should be obvious that just as in the ideal so too in actual practice, the existence of a representative democracy pre-supposes that all its adult citizens possess a body of fundamental rights, liberties, and opportunities. These include:

- the right to vote in the election of officials in free and fair elections;
- the right to run for elective office;
- the right to free expression;
- the right to form and participate in independent political organizations, including political parties;
- the right to gain access to independent sources of information;
- rights to any other freedoms and opportunities that may be necessary for the effective operation of the political institutions of large-scale democracy.

Finally, to be fully democratic as we now understand the ideal, all or at any rate most adult permanent residents under its jurisdiction and bound by its laws would possess these rights. [...]"

Source: Dahl 2004, Robert A. Dahl, Democratic Politics in Advanced Countries: Success and Challenge, in: Attilio A. Boron (Hg.), New Worldwide Hegemony. Alternatives for Change and Social Movements, Buenos Aires 2004, p. 58f [Highlighting blue: S.R.].

2. Less attention to experiences of system transformation and (economic) transformation in Eastern Europe

One approach that has received little attention in academic analyses of the Arab Spring is system transformation. This is a clear indication of the low level of research interest in comparing political systems. Country expertise is apparently more in demand than the empirical knowledge from transformation research on Eastern Europe and Central Asia. A number of synergy effects could be expected here. If the analyses of the Arab Spring had taken into account the fact that the democratisation of Europe took place in four major waves and required a period of around 80 years (cf. Figure 4), their balance sheets would not have been as negative after only 10 years.

A comparison between the reform states of Eastern Europe and the Arab world would have brought the economic-political aspects into focus from a transformation-theoretical perspective. At first glance, the Arab Spring - unlike the revolutions in Eastern Europe - does not seem to have brought about any fundamental changes in the economic systems. But a look back at the 1990s reveals that some Arab countries were already affected by the transformation of Eastern Europe at that time. At least Algeria, Libya, Egypt and Syria had centralised economies based on the Soviet model. With the collapse of the socialist economic

and trade system under the leadership of the then Soviet Union, they were forced to open their economies to the world market and thus privatise many economic sectors.

The wave of liberalisation in North Africa in the early 1990s finally spread to the neighbouring countries. The European Union (EU) paid particular attention to supporting Algeria. France in particular had lobbied for new loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Because the gross domestic product (GDP) there had collapsed, so that the inflation and unemployment rate rose to over 20 percent and the budget deficit became more and more oppressive. After all, the growing imports from western industrialised countries had to be paid for with hard currency. The terms of the new IMF loans were the same as in the reform states of Eastern Europe: "Price increases for subsidised goods and further liberalisation of the domestic price regime; [...] The acceleration of public enterprise and banking sector reforms; A review of rents for public housing and further structural reforms in the housing sector." ([eur-lex.europa.eu, 4.10.1994: 3](#)) Further reports by the IMF show how, in addition to Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia also had to liberalise their financial markets at that time in order to be able to service their foreign debts ([imf.org, 7/1997](#)).

With the completion of the economic transformation or liberalisation measures at the end of the 1990s, the states of North Africa were able to consolidate themselves economically to some extent. But the price for this was an ever-increasing dependence on foreign donors. Because they were tempted to constantly import more than produce and sell their own products, so that they gradually slipped into a negative trade balance and a budget deficit. However, this happened at different times: While the national budgets of Tunisia and Morocco were almost consistently in the red over the last 20 years ([StBA Tunisia 2020: 4](#), [StBA Morocco 2020: 4](#)), Egypt's national debt only began in 2000 ([StBA Egypt 2020: 4](#)) and Algeria's in 2009 ([StBA Algeria 2020: 4](#)). The consequences are obvious, namely further cuts in investment, education and social spending.

These questionable results did not induce the IMF representatives to correct their reform proposals; but rather they called on Tunisia, for example, to continue with the necessary reforms in order to maintain macroeconomic stability" ([IWF Tunisia 2008: 3](#)). They did mention the high unemployment rate of over 14 percent (around 30 percent for young people). However, their recommendations for solving these socio-political challenges did not go beyond the collection of data

relevant to the labour market ([opt. cit.: 8](#)). Basically, they strengthened the backs of the ruling elites at the time, although in many cases they benefited from the reforms ([bpb.de, 2.2.2016](#)).

The extent of corruption in Tunisia only became apparent after Ben Ali's fall. A court had investigated him in absentia and found that the presidential family had embezzled a quarter of the entire GDP during these reform years ([spiegel.de, 27.1.2016](#)). In numbers, this was around 10 billion euros. The scandal was not yet finally over, because the dictator left the country with his fortune, including 1.5 tons of gold. This has been proven to be the result of tax fraud, illegal tax profits and

Figure 4

Klaus v. Beyme: System Change in Eastern Europe

In the period of the participatory revolution of the 1970s, democratisation was seen as a process that had to be carried from the state level into all subsystems. Even Robert Dahl (1984) became interested in economic democracy, which is deeply alien to the American tradition of thought. Economic democracy should complete political democracy. In this controversy, two conceptions stood against each other: one saw *oikos* and *polis* structured according to different principles since ancient democracy. [...] The second approach, in its call for more participation, threatened to de-differentiate society once again. An interest that was to encompass the spheres of business, culture and politics was the goal of more participation at all levels. [...] Full democratisation of all subsystems of society turned out to be a dream that did not do justice to the functional laws of fields such as economy, science, religion and art. However, the participation debate of the 1960s and 1970s left us with an insight: Democracy is not a final state. [...]

Europe has experienced four waves of democratisation through system change:

- (1) In the *first wave* of democratisation [after the First World War](#), the system change was often linked to the transition from constitutional monarchy to republic (Germany, Austria, Finland, later also Spain). [...]
- (2) The *second wave* of [democratisation after 1945](#) was in fact rather a second attempt in the process of democratisation. With the victory over the fascist powers, a re-establishment of democracy became possible. [...]
- (3) The *third wave* of [democratisation in Southern Europe and Latin America](#) was not as strongly triggered by war events as the first two waves. [...]
- (4) The *fourth wave* of [democratisation in Eastern Europe](#) was again triggered by a secular event: the decline of the block's superpower, the Soviet Union. The variety of models of system change was no less than in the third wave of democratisation. [...]

Quelle: [Beyme 2004](#), Klaus von Beyme, Systemwechsel in Osteuropa, Frankfurt/M. 1994, 3. Auflage 2016, S. 9–12 [Highlighting blue: S.R.].

related competitive advantages ([NZZ 27.6.2015](#)). This example illustrates the relevance of the research question of whether the transformation or reform processes in politics and economy are parallel, as in Eastern Europe in the mid-1990s, or consecutively, as in the countries of North Africa.

The argument offered by some political scientists that a "simultaneous transformation of the political and economic systems would be an excessive demand" ([Beck 2013](#): 656, there referred to: [Merkel 2008](#)) is not convincing. In retrospect, however, a country comparison allows a different assumption, namely that the parallel transformation in Eastern Europe also caused corruption scandals ([Riedel 2015:120f.](#)). In contrast, however, the people of North Africa had little hope of a change in the political balance of power. Thus, two decades later, the Arab Spring could be seen as a "catch-up" development. In this case, reality has refuted the scientific forecasts.

As in Eastern Europe, "civil society" moved into focus in the Arab Spring. This concept is about a "social self-organisation of citizens" with the aim of getting involved in public debates and changing social conditions ([Zimmer 2012](#)). But who is hiding behind all the "voluntary associations (Vereine), foundations, initiatives, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), non-profit organisations (NPOs)" etc.? ([op. cit.](#))? Already at the beginning of the Arab Spring, the European Union was aware of the problem that not all NGOs are oriented towards the common good, if we consider, for example, the financially powerful foundations of large corporations. In addition, they usually represent partial interests, i.e. they are only obliged to their members and have no democratic legitimacy. They often do not operate transparently and are not subject to public control. Therefore, civil society organisations, contrary to their declared intentions, can produce political inequality ([Sebald 2011](#)).

The Arab Spring is a particularly vivid example of this. It shows how civil-society actors came to political office through democratic procedures and filled them to the detriment of the democracy movement. They defended old structures of the authoritarian regime for the suppression of diversity of opinion where it seemed useful to them. This refers to the Islamist organisations that were among the political winners in Tunisia and Egypt soon after the fall of the incumbent presidents. They were internationally networked and programmatically well prepared to set the pace for the upcoming reforms when the upheavals began.

A key point for many demonstrators was the consistent separation between state and religious

institutions. This was because the overthrown state leaders had misused religion to persecute opposition figures. Even though Western media portrayed Hosni Mubarak as a "pharaoh" ([dw.com, 5.2.2020](#)), he had made Islam a dominant factor in domestic politics. He wanted to isolate the Muslim Brotherhood from an Egyptian Islam controlled by the state: "Moderate preachers were given prime-time TV slots, the authorities extended their control over mosques and there was broad censorship in the name of Islam." ([BBC, 25.1.2013](#)) When the Muslim Brotherhood came to power in mid-2012, they no longer had to introduce Islamic Sharia law, as it had been the main source of secular legislation since 1980 ([Riedel 2017: 25](#)). Rather, the controversial 2012 Constitution sought to "establish its fundamental and juridical rules" (ar. *قواعدها الأصولية والفقهية*, Article 219, ar. [دستور مصر 2012](#), en. [Egypt's Constitution 2012](#), also: [ahram.org.eg, 12.12.2013](#)). As a result, Salafist and Wahhabi doctrines from the Gulf states could have gained an entry into the institutions of Egyptian Islam. This was the real motive behind the mass protests and the military coup of 2014.

In contrast to Egypt, Tunisia was considered a cosmopolitan country until 2011, in which religion played no role in public life. This secular development, which had been initiated at the end of French colonial rule, gave rise to a violent Islamist resistance in the early 1980s, which was fought with authoritarian measures. This included the establishment of a Ministry of Religious affairs in 1992 ([affaires-religieuses.tn, 23.2.2021](#)), which controlled the Muslim self-governing bodies. Ennahda did not want to touch these structures because it was less interested in religious freedom than in placing its supporters there.

Here, the authoritarian states of the Arab world show parallels to the former socialist systems, where all religious institutions were under supervision. While a new era dawned for religious communities with the upheaval in Eastern Europe, the Arab Spring brought no progress on this issue, not even for Tunisia. It is a fact that the instrumentalisation of Islam is continuing and getting worse. This reveals another proof of the quality of democratic systems, namely tolerance towards other religions and diversity within one's own faith.

3. The Modernisation theory is entirely underestimated to this day – wrongly

In Germany, and certainly in other European countries, experts have accused each other of not having foreseen the Arab Spring ([Haders 2011: 10](#), [Beck 2013: 641](#)). Political decision-makers

could invoke this in order to divert attention from their own failures: "At the time, Europe slept through the opportunities of the Arab Spring" (Maget 26.11.2020). Critical journalists asked and received the astonishing answer from a former head of the Federal Intelligence Service, "None of the services, which historically had quite different interests and presences in the region as former colonial powers, foresaw these developments." (Cicero.de, 24.2.2021) From this one could conclude that many officials seem to have "lost touch with reality" (Cicero.de, 25.11.2016). But it would be even better to examine the initial thesis of whether science has actually failed.

This is not the case; on the contrary, the Arab Spring makes it clear how much social science research suffers from a specialisation of the disciplines. It is becoming less and less successful to analyse social developments from different perspectives. Researchers do not even consider less "attractive" approaches. Thus, modernisation theory was "out of fashion" for a while until it received more attention again a few years ago (Wehling 2014). Among the pioneers are the French demographers Emmanuel Todd and Youssef Courbage, who predicted the Arab Spring in their book "The Unstoppable Revolution" based on modernisation theory (Todd/Courbage 2008).

In this context, the two researchers made assumptions that are hardly disputed among demographers today, namely that social development depends decisively on the birth rate and the level of literacy or education. Based on this assumption, they already stated about 13 years ago that sooner or later the Arab world would experience political upheaval. Especially in North Africa, the number of university graduates was growing, especially among women, for whom relevant jobs were lacking. More and more well-qualified professionals were facing unemployment, which had to increase dissatisfaction with the political system (cf. in more detail figure 5)

A global statistic shows the development of literacy rates in North African countries since the 1980s (ourworldindata.org, 20.9.2018). Even if these data (cf. Figure 6) are based on estimates and the comparative figures for the countries of Europe and Central Asia may be too high, a clear trend can be discerned: Apart from Mauritania, all countries have reduced the share of illiterates by about 40 per cent within a few decades. Tunisia is no exception; in fact, its level of education has long been higher than that of Algeria, Egypt and Morocco. The graph not only impressively confirms the statements made by the two demographers Emmanuel Todd and Youssef Courbage

about the connection between the level of literacy and social change. It points to another correlation: Libya and Syria, whose education systems were far above average in the Arab world for a long time, have sunk with the Arab Spring into civil war. This not only destroys valuable infrastructure, but also their human capital, which is a heavy burden for the reconstruction of the countries.

Here follows another interesting consideration from the perspective of modernisation theory. Todd points out that rapid literacy triggers generational conflicts. The younger, well-educated generation no longer accepts much dictation from the older generation. There is a risk of a loss of authority, which is carried over from social relations to political culture and triggers a crisis of confidence in the political system (cf. Figure 5). Of course, this correlation alone does not explain the intense outbreak of violence. But it does point to a hidden potential for aggression that can be

Figure 5

Emmanuel Todd: Free! The Arab Spring and what it means for the world

@si Why is the birth rate important in your model then? In the case of literacy, it makes sense: You have to be able to write and read leaflets. But the birth rate? [...] If the woman can read, will she have fewer children? You have to explain that.

E. Todd [...] This doesn't mean that no more children will be born. But it means that birth control gradually sets in, that it is no longer accepted, so to speak, that fate or God decides how many children you have. We caused a great surprise in The Unstoppable Revolution [2008, S.R.], but from a demographer's point of view we were just making statements. The thought that humanity continues to develop universally through literacy, the decline in the birth rate, etc. is normal for demographers. [...]

Not all revolutions immediately achieve the ideal of free democracy. Perhaps, after decades of stabilisation, there will be free elections everywhere in the end. But in certain countries the revolution initially has the effect of establishing an authoritarian regime of a special kind [...]

In a society that controls their births, relationships between men and women have changed. In addition, this decline in births occurs in a society where young people learn to write and read. This leads to the situation that the sons, but not their fathers, can read. This leads to a break in the relationships of authority, not only at the family level, but implicitly at the level of society as a whole. In Arab societies, which are patrilineally organized and in which women are clearly subordinate to men in status, this is of course a decisive variable. That means that this world is moving.

Source: Emmanuel Todd, Frei. Der arabische Frühling und was er für die Welt bedeutet, Emmanuel Todd im Gespräch mit Daniel Schneidermann, München 2011, p. 24f., 26, 30 [Translation and highlighting blue: S.R.].

mobilised by other factors, including external actors (cf. point 4 on interdependence theory).

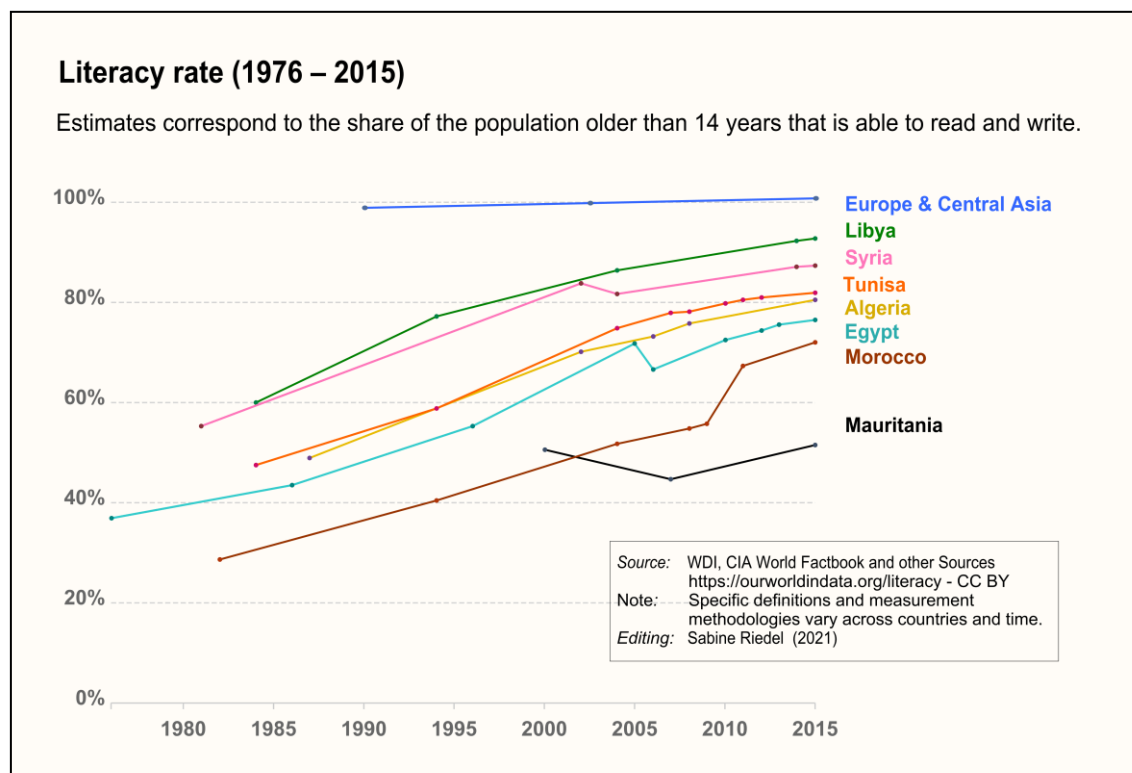
Another argument of modernisation theory concerns the social role of women in the Arab world. Demographers can prove that literacy goes hand in hand with birth control, which in turn promises women's chances of education, their own job and economic independence from their partner. Many of Tunisia's political measures for legal equality, such as the ban on polygamy and the interdiction of wearing the veil in public, were based on the Civil Code of 1956 (Toth 2010: 16 f.). In contrast to its predecessors, the first Tunisian Civil Code of 1909 and the Ottoman Mecelle (1869), it had changed the priorities: The coexistence of religious and secular law developed into a clear hierarchy: the dissolution of the religious courts symbolised the pushback of Islamic Sharia into the private sphere, so that from now on secular laws set the pace (Riedel 2017: 27 f.).

Some authors often argue that the then president Habib Bourguiba implemented these reforms with a hard hand and thus turned Tunisia into a "development dictatorship" (qantara.de, 20.11.2004). As justified as the criticism of the authoritarian leadership style may be, it does not change the fact that he took a step towards modernity and paved the way for Tunisian women to

achieve equality. This is still reflected in voting behaviour decades later. In the presidential election at the end of 2014, for example, around 75 percent of Tunisian women voted for Beji Caid Essebsi, who was then 88 years old (LMd, 9.7.2015). Under Bourguiba, he was Minister of the Interior and was considered a guarantor for a secular Tunisia. His rival, the human rights activist Moncef Marzouki, on the other hand, stood as the Ennahda candidate for re-Islamisation. Just as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt wanted to curtail women's rights after their election victory (spiegel.de, 15.3.2013), the ruling Ennahda in Tunisia lifted the headscarf ban. Tunisian women responded to the argument that it served the "self-determination of women" with long protests (Gerlach 2016). After his election as president, Essebsi implemented his promise and expanded women's rights: He legalised marriages from different religious communities, gave women equal status in inheritance law and protected them from domestic violence (sueddeutsche.de, 19.9.2017).

In other countries of the Arab world, too, the legal situation of women improved as a result of the Arab Spring. It should be mentioned here that in early 2020, the King of Saudi Arabia decided to give women more freedoms. Gender segregation in public spaces was lifted, as was the obligation

Figure 6



to wear the headscarf or face veil. From now on, they are free to choose their studies or professions, attend cultural events and even drive a car without male company. Nevertheless, they still have a male guardian, so they are not legally competent without him and are not allowed to marry against his will ([focus.de](https://www.focus.de), 10.3.2020).

While Saudi women are still second-class citizens, or more appropriately subjects, the kingdom recently granted citizenship to the human robot named Sophia ([youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), 30.7.2017). This example resembles a schizophrenic behaviour: Technologically, Saudi Arabia has long since arrived in the modern age and is far ahead of many other Arab countries. But social change continues to be suppressed, so that culturally it still remains pre-modern.

4. In Arab Spring, external factors existed following the **Interdependency Theory**

The Arab Spring was predominantly regarded in Western media coverage as a domestic event that triggered different developments depending on the country. In the social sciences, and especially in the study of international relations, this isolated view became outdated more than forty years ago. Transferred to the natural sciences, this would be comparable to explaining today's world with Newtonian physics. In this sense, Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye have enriched international politics with a new approach in their book *Power and Interdependence* (Keohane/Nye 1977). Even then, they claimed that a strict separation between domestic and foreign policy was hardly possible any more. This had to do with the fact that the circle of relevant actors has grown larger. In addition to official interstate relations, transgovernmental and transnational networks have long been determining the political agendas.

Following this approach, there must have been external influences on the Arab Spring. Whether they had a decisive impact on the course of the reform processes or only played a marginal role would be worth many research projects. Surprisingly, such questions have hardly been asked so far. Although there are publications on the role of European states, they are usually not seen as external parties to the conflict but as outside observers who, furthermore, would have overslept the upheaval ([Magnet 26.11.2020](https://www.magnet26.de)). Analysts today are all the more demanding support for democratic reforms, differing in the nature of the proposed measures depending on their political orientation. Some focus on political discourses ([KAS 2020](https://www.kas.de)), others call for more financial support for opposition activists in the Arab world ([Zenith 2020: 81](https://www.zenith2020.de)).

Finally, critical voices recall that Western elites supported authoritarian regimes for years ([boell.de](https://www.boell.de), 26.1.2021), but defend interference in the internal affairs of states when it comes to the "good" cause. In doing so, they apparently forget that such a decision is not within their power, but subject to international law.

What insights does the interdependence approach offer, where are the links to other theories and where does it definitely lead further? There is a direct connection to the theory of modernisation. Ben Ali's resignation at the beginning of 2011, enforced by Tunisian demonstrators, obviously alarmed the Arab monarchies. They live in a constant state of resistance to social upheaval because their political systems, which withhold elementary human rights from their women and foreign workers, are no longer up to date. One clear sign of their fear of revolts was that Ben Ali had found refuge in the Saudi port city of Jeddah, where he was offered a splendid exile. On the other hand, the Gulf states sent military units against the insurgents in Bahrain as early as mid-March 2011, demonstrating that they were not prepared to make any concessions ([Steinberg 2011](https://www.steinberg2011.de)). While this action was soon ended, the military intervention of the Gulf Cooperation Council in Yemen, which began in 2015, resulted in a civil war that has turned the country into a "scene of the worst humanitarian crisis worldwide" ([dw.com](https://www.dw.com), 12.6.2020).

Using the example of Yemen, another thesis of Keohane and Nye can be tested, namely the assumption that military force is used less between allies or economic partners to resolve disagreements, but rather against states belonging to a "rival bloc" (Keohane/Nye 1977: 20, Figure 7). In this case, the conflict in Yemen is considered a proxy war ([Transfeld 2020](https://www.transfeld2020.de)), in which Saudi Arabia wants to push back Iran's growing influence on the Arabian Peninsula. The Shiite theocracy is initially in religious competition with the Sunni Wahabi Kingdom of the Saudis. The remarkable thing about it, however, is that in both countries the Islamic Sharia serves as a guideline for secular legislation. This makes them all the more tough competitors when it comes to interpreting these religious sources. Moreover, they are rivals in terms of their political systems. The Shiite clergy legitimise themselves through the word of God, but they have to keep a functioning parliament under control, while political participation has remained a foreign word for the likewise religiously legitimised political power of the Gulf monarchies.

Saudi Arabia's interference in the civil war in Syria, which it regards as "Iran's gateway to the

Arab world" (friedenskooperative.de, 4/2018) fits in with the Iranian-Saudi competitive relationship. Instead of a direct military confrontation, Riyadh has supported the so-called Syrian opposition there since the beginning, which aims to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. This includes the Syrian National Council ([SNC, syriancouncil.org](http://SNC.syriancouncil.org)) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which foreign fighters have joined. From the beginning of the Syrian war, many Western states have adopted the Saudi threat perceptions and co-financed these organisations. The critical public is placated by the argument that this could prevent "moderate groups" from joining the militant jihadists of the Islamic State (IS) (sueddeutsche.de, 2.7.2014). The governments of Western democracies thus pretend to fight Islamic funda-

mentalists by cooperating with "moderate Islamists". In doing so, they are even willing to destroy a country that, even before the beginning of the Arab Spring, was further in its social development than the Saudi Kingdom is today. American, British and French air forces used a suspected use of poison gas by the Syrian military to justify their bombings in Syria, which violated international law (welt.de, 14.4.2018).

The question about the interests and motives of the Western states for such an irrational foreign policy that contradicts their own values can be adequately explained with the concept of complex interdependence. Apparently, the political, economic and military relations between the Western democracies and the Gulf states, particularly with Saudi Arabia, are already closely interwoven. Even historical references, such as Syria's belonging to the former French mandate territory in the Middle East, have apparently lost their binding effect. So-called path dependencies, as they are intensively discussed in transformation research, seem to have been suspended.

The analytical distinction between mutual dependencies and a complex interdependence is equally suitable for explaining the background to the international military offensive against Libya. It neither turned out to be a "humanitarian intervention" as announced by UN Resolution 1973 (17.3.2011), nor was it a "revenge campaign" by France against revolutionary leader Muammar al-Gaddafi (dw.com, 22.3.2018). Presumably, this was mainly about access to Libyan oil resources, as Russian media reported (rt.com, 12.4.2019). But this, too, will only be one component of a larger tableau of interests. Libya gave sufficient cause to attract international criticism, especially on human rights issues. Moreover, it had remained an outsider because of its hesitant liberalisation (Pöchhacker 2009: 118).

As a result of its striving for political independence and economic self-sufficiency, Libya joined the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) as early as 1963. After an initial preparatory meeting in Bandung, Indonesia (1955), this movement had finally come together organisationally in Belgrade (1961, cf. Figure 8). Its aim was to create a counterweight to the systemic confrontation at the time, i.e. to the Eastern Bloc or Warsaw Pact countries on the one hand and to the Western member states of NATO on the other. In this sense, they committed themselves to adherence of 10 principles that serve to maintain world peace. These include respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states, refraining from interference in their internal affairs and the will to

Figure 7

**Robert O. Keohane, Joseph S. Nye:
Power and Interdependence (1977)**

"Complex interdependence has three main characteristics:

1. *Multiple channels* connect societies, including: informal ties between governmental elites as well as formal foreign office arrangements; informal ties among nongovernmental elites (face-to-face and through telecommunications); and transnational organizations (such as multinational banks or corporations). *These channels can be summarized as interstate, transgovernmental, and transnational relations.* [...]

2. The agenda of interstate relationships consists of multiple issues that are not arranged in a clear or consistent hierarchy. *This absence of hierarchy among issues* means, among other things, that military security does not consistently dominate the agenda. *Many issues arise from what used to be considered domestic policy, and the distinction between domestic and foreign issues becomes blurred.* These issues are considered in several government departments (not just foreign offices), and at several levels. Inadequate policy coordination on these issues involves significant costs. [...]

3. *Military force is not used by governments toward other governments within the region, or on the issues, when complex interdependence prevails.* It may, however, be important in these governments' relations with governments outside that region, or on other issues. Military force could, for instance, be irrelevant to resolving disagreements on economic issues among members of an alliance, yet at the same time be very important for that alliance's political and military relations with a rival bloc. For the former relationships this condition of complex interdependence would be met; for the latter, it would not."

Source: Robert O. Keohane, Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 4th ed., New York 2012, p. 20f. [Translation and highlighting blue: S.R.]

settle international conflicts peacefully (Bandung principles).

The collapse of the Libyan state after the international military intervention tragically confirms that the Bandung principles have lost none of their significance. The question even arises whether Libya had incurred the wrath of powerful Western states precisely because of its commitment to independence and autarky. A parallel can be seen with the fate of Yugoslavia, which was even one of the founding states of the NAM. Shortly before the end of the system confrontation, Belgrade had knocked on European doors and applied for membership in the European Community (EC) as well as the Council of Europe (spiegel.de, 22.5.1989, Kalman 1993: 20). But instead of rewarding this formerly non-aligned country for its political and economic openness and giving it the chance of membership, the EC turned its attention to the then reforming states of the Eastern bloc, which had remained loyal to the Soviet type of socialist planned economy until the end (Riedel 2015: 169). She offered them membership while dropping the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Following this, it even supported separatist forces with military means, initially in Bosnia-Herzegovina and later in Kosovo.

To this day, the Western community of states seems to underestimate the potential of the NAM, expressed positively, because its relations are only interdependent with some members. However, a forward-looking and solution-oriented foreign policy will recognise scope for action here that could defuse or even pacify many current conflicts. Because at its core, a security architecture can be seen in this organisation, which is currently lacking in North Africa and the Middle East and makes it so easy for external actors to interfere and take advantage of disintegrating statehood. Instead of heating up the disputes within the Non-Aligned Movement, the Western states, especially EU members, should offer themselves as mediators to at least remind the state parties to the conflicts in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen of the Bandung Principles to which they have committed themselves. However, this presupposes that they themselves have an interest in peace.

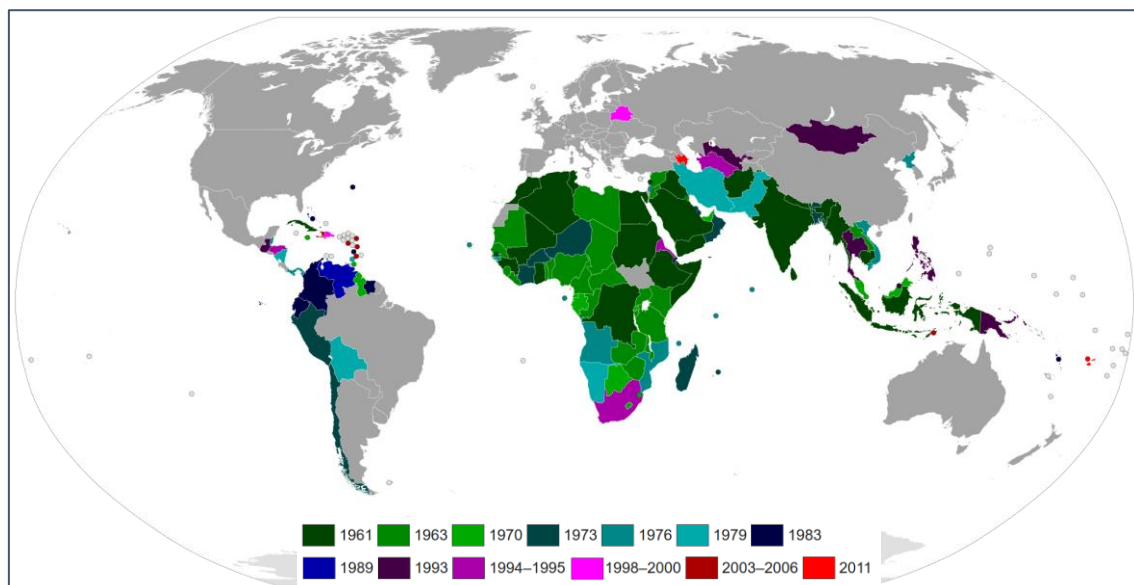
5. To sum up: The performance of theoretical approaches to the Arab Spring

The **Democratic Theory (Dahl)**:

- ♦ Most assessments of the Arab Spring are based on democratic theory. They measure the success

Figure 8:

Members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) by year of accession



Source: Map of Member Countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, color-coded by date joined, Author: Akhenaten0, 6.4.2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Non-Aligned_Movement_by_Date_Joined.svg

Note: Former founding members: Yugoslavia (1961-1992), North Yemen (1961-1990), Cyprus (1961-2004), former members: South Yemen (1970-1990) and Malta (1973-2004).

of the protest movements in the Arab world by the change in their **political systems**.

- ♦ Two models are compared, **democracy and authoritarianism**. The results are mostly negative: With the exception of Tunisia, there has been no system change towards democracy anywhere. Authoritarian regimes, in contrast, have been able to consolidate their power.
- ♦ The focus on these two models neglects **changes within the existing systems**. If, for example, system-relevant **constitutional reforms** are taken into account in the balance, even authoritarian states like Egypt and Syria perform much better.
- ♦ In relation to the 22 member states of the Arab League, **the democratic-theoretical approach is applied selectively**. There are hardly any analyses of the political development of **monarchies such as Morocco, Jordan and the Gulf Cooperation Council** (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, UAE).

The **System Transformation (v. Beyme, Merkel) / Transformation Theory (Polanyi)**

- ♦ The approach of system transformation is hardly mentioned in the analyses of the **Arab Spring**. There is apparently **little interest in comparing the systems of the former socialist states of Eastern Europe / Central Asia and the Arab world**, although synergy effects are to be expected here.
- ♦ According to findings from transformation research in the 1990s, the **democratisation of Europe took place in four waves** over a period of about 80 years. Consequently, the negative conclusions about the Arab Spring after 10 years have only limited significance.
- ♦ The **transformation theory** addresses the fact that the Arab Spring hardly led to any economic changes. But we could speak of **consecutive transformation processes** in North Africa. After 1990, Algeria, Libya, Egypt and Syria **liberalised parts of their centralised economies**.
- ♦ Decades before the Arab Spring, the entire MENA region experienced a wave of economic liberalisation. **In most authoritarian regimes, only the elites benefited** from this. External donors such as the IMF and the EU recommended that reforms continue, even though the countries fell into a debt trap.
- ♦ In the Arab Spring, the same systemic feature came to light: In all countries, **governments influence Islamic institutions and teachings**. Therefore, **Islam remained a vital ideological framework** among opposition movements (Riedel 2017).
- ♦ With the Arab Spring, a **transformation process** started that could lead to a **separation of state and religious institutions in the longer term**. Preventing this is the goal of authoritarian (neighbouring) regimes that legitimise their power with oil revenues and "God's will".

The **Modernisation Theory (Todd)**:

- ♦ Researchers were able to **predict the Arab Spring** on the basis of modernisation theory: The French demographers **Emmanuel Todd and Youssef Courbage** published "The Unstoppable Revolution" a few years earlier (Todd/Courbage 2008).
- ♦ They can explain why the protests started not in the Arab monarchies but in the republics. The decisive factors were **literacy and the decline in the birth rate**. The changed position of women initiated a **modernisation process**.
- ♦ Moreover, rapid literacy in patriarchal Arab societies led to **generational conflicts**. The **break in relationships of authority** spread from the family to the political system and weakened trust in the elites.
- ♦ Modernisation theory leads to the realisation that the **Arab monarchies** remain at a social level **pre-modern**. Their striving for technological progress may hide this, but like in Saudi Arabia, it produces a schizophrenic situation that can harbour political instability.

The **Interdependence Theory (Keohane/Nye)**:

- ♦ The Arab Spring is often described as an internal event, ignoring exogenous factors. R.O. Keohane and J.S. Nye, on the other hand, coined the concept of interdependence in 1977, according to which **domestic and foreign policy can hardly be separated**. Since long, transgovernmental and transnational networks have determined political agendas alongside interstate actors.
- ♦ Building on transformation theory, this approach can explain the interests of states such as **Iran or Saudi Arabia**: They are expanding their **regional supremacy through Islamic institutions and a foreign religious policy**.
- ♦ This approach explains that the **Western community of states** has adopted the **threat perception** of the Gulf monarchies, especially **Saudi Arabia**. This suggests a complex interdependence.
- ♦ In contrast, the **Western community of states** has dropped other Arab states, especially those from the **Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)**. At the same time, it contains at its core a **security structure** that could solve current conflicts.

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