Mirror, Mirror on the Wall:
Political Cartoons of the Arab Spring

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to understand Arab political humour by applying an image studies approach to examine political cartoons presenting the Arab Spring and its aftermath. An attempt is made to search for common themes undertaken by the cartoonists, then the cartoons are divided into several categories according to these findings. It is proved that the political cartoons mirror collective consciousness on the one hand, and stimulate people’s imagination on the other. The cartoonists prefer to display Arab solidarity and serve as agents of ethical responsibility and socio-political change rather than just being funny.

The one thing a tyrant can’t stand is to be laughed at.

The so called ‘Arab Spring’, the series of uprisings that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread across the Arab world in 2011, witnessed a boom in cultural production relating to music (hip hop, rap), graffiti, and political cartoons. From newspapers to online sources, and onto the walls of buildings – satirists have been noting every iteration of politics in the revolutionary and post-revolution reality.

The aim of this paper is to explain Arab political humour reflected in the chosen cartoons presenting the Arab Spring and its aftermath. It argues that political cartoons in the Middle East form a threat to Arab regimes as they have the potential to generate change – by freeing the imagination and resisting state control. Thus, political cartoons can be considered as a significant societal force. In addition to that, they provide a glimpse into the thoughts of the common people living in the Middle East.

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1 This article is based on a speech delivered at the conference ‘Towards a New Middle Eastern Society. Expectations and Reality after the Arab Spring’, Warsaw, November 19, 2013.
Although to gain a thorough understanding of political dynamics in the Middle East, one needs to not only examine political cartoons, but also other mediums, ranging from television to the internet to street art. Because of spatial constraints, I aim to focus only on one medium. By analysing political cartoons, I do not wish or intend to separate ‘hard politics’ from ‘soft politics’ as these two spheres are intertwined. I also do not wish to distinguish between the cultural and the political, since politics sometimes takes a popular cultural form and often incorporates elements of popular culture such as image making and performance. Very often political culture is politics and the image-making act can itself be a political act.

**Image studies and visual culture studies**

Images present a fascinating and challenging field of interest. There is no single definition of images, though different meanings and usage can overlap. According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, to make sense of a term such as ‘image’ one must perceive a complex network of relations between the different meanings. Taking Wittgenstein’s point of view, there cannot be absolute clarity in terms of a philosophical concept of the image, nor a designated set of tools to guide research in advance.

The image remains a focal point in visual culture studies which are broader than image studies. David Morgan’s definition of visual culture makes the basis of this article’s analytical approach, “Visual culture is what images, acts of seeing, and attendant intellectual, emotional, and perceptual sensibilities do to build, maintain, or transform the worlds in which people live. The study of visual culture is the analysis and interpretation of images and the ways of seeing (gazes) that configure the agents. Practices, conceptualities, and institutions that put the image to work”. Some early work on visual culture has been done by John Berger and Laura Mulvey. Other writers important to visual culture include William J. T. Mitchell, Griselda Pollock, Stuart Hall, Roland Barthes, Jean-François Lyotard, Rosalind Krauss, Paul Crowther and Slavoj Žižek.

It may seem obvious to state that, ‘seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak’. For John Berger, ‘image is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved – for a few moments or a few centuries’. I prefer a different definition of images though, and understand them as ‘constructs infused with meanings,

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10 Ibid., pp. 9–10.
attributes and projected perceptions’. Hence, the images can be perceived as mental attributes.

What is important is that the new mass means of reproduction (advances in printing techniques, broadcast media, Internet) have caused situations when images enter the mainstream of life and surround the people. A new ‘language of images’ has been created – and the potential for a democratization of meaning-making. At the same time a new kind of ‘visual literacy’ has become necessary to achieve a more reflexive understanding about the character of society.

The question remains open whether digital culture does fulfil such hopes or whether it only continues to replicate traditional power relations. There is no single answer – one may argue for or against. What is sure is that images, especially political ones, can be used for critical and creative purposes – and their potential should not be underestimated. Régis Debray suggests sarcastically, ‘if you want to make yourself known everywhere and establish a form of domination over the world, manufacture images instead of writing books’.

For the use of this article I have analysed hundreds of cartoons drawn by Arab cartoonists which were published online or appeared in newspapers and then were reproduced on the Internet. I have chosen approximately 70 cartoons using purposive sampling techniques. Content analysis was used to identify the themes contained in the picture depictions. Qualitative methods helped to analyse the cartoons through semiotic analysis. All the cartoons were drawn by Arab artists. The only non-Arab national among them was the Brazilian Carlos Latuff (who actually has some Lebanese ancestry) due to the fact that he has become ‘an unlikely star of the Arab Spring’. His cartoons, turned directly to Twitter and were rapidly disseminated among campaigners across the Middle East.

A history of political cartoons

It must be reiterated that Sunni Islam, like Judaism, has traditionally discouraged figurative representations in the hadiths (reports of the deeds and sayings of Muhammad), especially of the Prophet and his family, but also regarding depictions of humans and animals. Despite this attitude, the portrayal of figurative miniatures in books occurred in most Islamic countries, though they were more common in Persian lands and less so in Arabic-speaking areas, and in the Umayyad era frescos and reliefs of humans and animals were created.

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11 Khatib, *Image Politics...*, p. 3.
14 Ibid., p. xxvi.
The precursors of political cartoons were the Renaissance broadsheets – political images printed on loose sheets of paper and sold to the public.\textsuperscript{17} There were emblematic books that developed a pictorial language from the medieval conventions of allegory and myth. Since the sixteenth century it was a common practice in Italy to depict humans as animals. During the same period the term \textit{caricatura} was coined.\textsuperscript{18} Caricatures gave political dissidents the chance to ridicule and in this manner to delegitimize the kings. As a result a new shared set of political symbols were generated. The French king Louis XIV banned caricatures fearing their ‘revolutionary character’,\textsuperscript{19} but the caricaturists moved to Holland and continued their work. Other caricatures were illegally trafficked to France from the more liberal Dutch Republic. In the late eighteen century caricatures portrayed French citizens as Greeks and Romans, mocked the king and his court, and thus hastened the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{20}

The nineteenth century witnessed an improvement of printing techniques – the steam powered press made its way to printing houses; and cartoons started to reach the illiterate masses. Political priorities were changing as well. The term \textit{cartoon} first appeared in 1843 when the British magazine \textit{Punch} parodied politicians.\textsuperscript{21} Cartoons were crucial in mobilizing civilians to fight for the emerging nations – foes were drawn as weak and pathetic, and the allies as powerful and honourable. During World War I political cartoons were used both at home and against the enemy. A ‘visual warfare’ was fought along the frontier.\textsuperscript{22} However, the growing popularity of cartoons was paralleled by an escalation of censorship. It always increased during wartime when governments were less tolerant of criticism.

Germany was first to understand fully the power of propaganda and finance humour magazines.\textsuperscript{23} Many German cartoonists ‘put their talents at the service of the nation’, which meant that they chose self-censorship.\textsuperscript{24} Nevertheless, the German government controlled the paper and print supplies – the editors of pro-regime magazines had access to quality paper.\textsuperscript{25}

Political cartoons did not remain limited to Europe – they were spread all over the world. In the second half of the nineteenth century, they came to the Middle East. The first Ottoman cartoon appeared in the journal \textit{Istanbul} in 1867, while the first

\textsuperscript{17} Alice Sheppard, \textit{Cartooning for Suffrage}, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{20} Göçek, ‘Political Cartoons…’, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{23} Göçek, ‘Political Cartoons…’, p. 5.
caricatures in the Arab world were drawn in 1877 by Ya’qub Sannu, a Syrian Jew and Egyptian patriot, who coined the phrase ‘Egypt for Egyptians’. In 1887 Sannu published *Al-Tankit wa Al-Tabkit* (Joking and Censure), a humorous newspaper whose aim was to criticize the West.

Since then the Egyptian press was the major source of cartoons until 1925 when *Kannas al-Shawari* (The Road Sweeper) was established by Michael Tays in Iraq. Other famous pioneering caricaturists were Khalid Kahhala from Syrian *Al-Mudhik al-Mubki* (The Weeping Joker) and Bayram al-Tunisi from Tunisian *al-Shabab* (The Youth).

Generally, Middle Eastern caricatures expressed anti-colonial feelings, disagreement for foreign reign, and called for changes. Since the creation of the state of Israel, anti-foreign sentiment was directed at Jews, and more specifically at Zionists. Even today this is quite visible as anti-Semitic cartoons appear constantly in the printed Arabic press. Most probably they will not disappear in the foreseeable future as they work as unifier of the Arab world.

Conversely, the Middle Eastern cartoons have become a medium of negotiation often ‘borrowing, mixing and inventing forms’ from Western and local contexts. Their range was enriched by pre-existing sources of humour, characters from ‘shadow plays’, the tales of Juha and Nasreddin Hoca, and the ‘wise fool’. The result was a mixture, a hybrid generating ambiguity which could subvert the narratives of both the West and local governments. Still, Western dominance remained unruffled. Middle Eastern cartoons could to some extent undermine Western values but they were not able to alter its forms of domination.

Just like in Europe, political cartoons in the Middle East used to be initially censored by the governments and then by the Allied Powers. During World War I and shortly after it, Ottoman caricatures tried to resist censorship in a few ways, for example by sending erasable drawings for approval and then replacing them with more provocative ones or leaving a blank space in the place of the censored cartoon. Later, when the modern states were born in the Middle East, the cartoons started to fight with local problems and politicians.

### How to read political cartoons?

As Fatma Müge Göçek notes, the political cartoon emerged as a very powerful social medium because of the multiplicity of meanings and forms embedded within;

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it contains both a visual and textual message on political events presented through cultural symbols as interpreted by the caricaturist. The social impact of the political cartoon derives from its simultaneous appeal to the intellect and emotion. The cartoon presents a picture as the essence of truth, a message as to what should be done on behalf of the portrayed, it suggests how the viewer ought to feel about certain facts. It is the cartoonist’s interpretation of larger societal practices and forces through the use of textual and visual codes. The process of decoding the cartoon reveals layers of meaning as multiple audiences may find different renditions. The ambiguities in the message help protect cartoonists and avoid issues of control.

James Scott describes humour embedded in cartoons as ‘a hidden transcript that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant’. Political cartoons transport the event from the realm of serious events to that of fiction, distorting the subject and allowing the viewer to decode the puzzle. Everything is transformed into ‘cheerfully irreverent quotation marks’. This is most apparent in societies where people do not feel free to speak openly, whereas cartoons enable them to share their frustrations and desires.

**Cartoons in political struggle**

The politics of the Middle East is now more visible than ever. State and non-state actors, oppositional groups and ordinary people are using these images in their political struggles. The media appears to be a political actor, and not just a mediator, exerting political influence. Boris Groys suggests, ‘the desire to get rid of any image can be realised only through a new image – the image of a critique of the image’. Political struggle changes into the visually productive, an endless process of images battling, reversing, erasing and replacing other images. All sides are fighting to be visible and maintain visibility. For authoritarian regimes, political power means having control over visual production and consumption, while the opposition searches for democratic

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33 Ibidem.
34 Ibid., pp. 2–3.
38 Göçek, ‘Political Cartoons…’, p. 2.
representations. For people with a political agency, the ability to be seen, and not only heard is of utmost importance.44

There are several forms of manifestation of the visual in political struggle: as a mass media image, a digital image, a cartoon, a piece of art, a physical space or object, an image on paper, a wall or another physical medium, and ultimately as a human embodiment. It can be a conceptual image as well. As all these forms merge, an image cannot be looked at in isolation from the others. Although visuals had been used in political struggles in the Middle East before, its role has accelerated since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Thus, the key political moments of the last decade are remembered in the form of images: the collapse of the Twin Towers, Osama bin Laden’s video messages, the Separation Wall in Palestine, the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad, Saddam’s execution, the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, Abu Ghraib, the Green movement in Iran, and most recently the Arab Spring.45

Interestingly, the lasting images of the aforementioned events are not necessarily the official versions, but rather the new, oppositional ones. The enduring image of bin Laden is him sitting in a house in Pakistan smoking marijuana and watching pornography. The enduring image of the United States’ war on Iraq is embodied in the photographs of tortured prisoners in Abu Ghraib. The lasting image of Israel’s Separation Wall is Banksy’s graffiti challenging Israeli domination. The lasting image of Hosni Mubarak’s regime is his thugs attacking protesters in Tahrir Square on camels and horseback.46

Nation states embraced visual processes in their image management strategies; a legitimizing of the self and a deligitimizing of the others, moblising and demobilising, empowering and disempowering. Authoritarian countries in the Middle East are particularly reliant on the image as a tool to maintain social consent. Henri Lefebvre divides oppressive societies into three levels: ‘the repressive society’, using ideological persuasion and compulsion; the ‘over-repressive society’, which also uses language to ‘deaden’ the opposition; and the ‘terrorist society’, where terror and violence cannot be located but are seemingly widespread and diffused. Images testify to the progression of authoritarian states in the Middle East to this third level; the citizens are always watched by the state – physically and/or symbolically.47 As Lefebvre argues, a terrorist society, ‘cannot maintain itself for long (…) when it reaches its ends, it explodes’.48

Such an explosion happened during the Arab Spring. The process of gradual visual rejection resulted in changing the status quo. Arab citizens have become members of a network society in which cultural codes flow. The domino effect of the uprisings proved that images have the potential to activate the viewer. Sontag argues that the

46 Ibid., p. 2.
47 Ibid., pp. 7–8.
presence of images documenting revolution in a neighbouring country makes the concept of revolution less remote.\textsuperscript{49}

**Before the Arab Spring**

Arab political cartoons before the Arab Spring used to focus on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Naji al-Ali, a Palestinian cartoonist who was assassinated in 1987, is regarded as one of the most influential Arab artists of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. During his life, Al-Ali drew more than 40,000 cartoons, most of which illustrate symbols of occupation and resistance. He created Handala\textsuperscript{50} (Arabic for ‘bitterness’) a barefooted 10 years-old child with his back turned towards the observer\textsuperscript{51}, in shabby clothes and with the head of a hedgehog\textsuperscript{52}, who symbolizes Ali’s lost childhood.\textsuperscript{53} The New York Times once wrote ‘If you want to know what the Arabs think of the US, look at Naji Al-Ali’s cartoons’.\textsuperscript{54}

Political cartoons as a form of dissent gained popularity during the first Gulf War in 1991. For the first time, the conflict was depicted and viewed by two different parties – the Americans and the Iraqis – and the Arab artists presented their views to local audiences.\textsuperscript{55} During riots in Egypt in 2005–2006, the cartoonists became more brave and published cartoons which sometimes could be called radical.

**The Arab Spring – a ‘Golden Age’ for political cartoonists**

In contrast to the West, where electronic media tends to have the upper hand, the printed press is still strong in the Middle East. As Simon Cottle writes about the communication channels during the Arab Spring period, ‘new social media and mainstream media often appear to have performed in tandem, with social media variously acting as a watchdog of state controlled national media, alerting international news media to growing opposition and dissenting events and providing raw images of these for wider dissemination. The international news media, including Al Jazeera, have distributed a flood of disturbing scenes and reports of the uprising, which are now easily accessed via Google’s YouTube, and ‘boomeranged’ them back into the countries concerned. Mainstream newspapers and news broadcasters in their online variants

\textsuperscript{49} Khatib, *Image Politics…*, pp. 9–10.
\textsuperscript{53} Atalla, ‘Remembering Naji al-Ali…’.
\textsuperscript{54} El-Khoury, ‘Understanding Politics…’
also increasingly incorporate direct links to these new forms of social media, effectively acting as a portal to their constant updating of communication flows and a near ‘live-streaming’ of images direct from the protests themselves. This moving complex of interpenetrating communication flows and their political efficacy across different aspects of the uprising deserves careful documentation and comparative analysis’.  

Almost each Arab newspaper employs cartoonists, and recently the biggest titles have had several employees in this field. One of them, Emad Haijaj a Jordanian editor of Palestinian origin, said that since 2011 he had endured the best and the worst times of his life. On the one hand, there is such an abundance of cartoons, that it is impossible to see them all (they leap off the page and into public places, from street art to galleries, on leaflets and TV programs). On the other hand, the cartoonists still risk their health and safety when they cross invisible, still existing lines.

Emad Hajjaj described his state of being as something like euphoric, when two immovable dictators in Tunisia and then Egypt were ousted from power by their own people. He had been doing editorial cartoons about Arab politics for 20 years, and all of a sudden, the impossible was happening. But shortly after the feeling of euphoria subsided. The task of commenting on daily events in the Arab world became a lot more complicated.

For sure Arab cartoonists have been getting more daring and their works carry more punch. According to Jonathan Guyer, a Cairo-based Fulbright fellow, recently there have been hardly any stupid gags or anti-Semitic tropes in recent times. Guyer investigates Egyptian cartoons and publishes them on his blog *Oum Cartoon* (he does a good job translating the captions from *amiyya*, an Egyptian dialect, to English). Another good source of information about Arabic cartoons is *Tok Tok* published quarterly since January 2011.

What was the role of the Arab cartoonists during the Arab Spring? Most certainly, they were not the main cause of the revolution, they did however capture the public mood even before events unfolded, and many of them joined the protests, sometimes holding high their own cartoons to inspire the people. In other words, they were a part of the story.

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59 ‘Cartoonist Emad Hajjaj…’.
One of the most famous cartoons was the one drawn by Carlos Latuff depicting Khaled Said (a young Egyptian who was killed by security forces in Alexandria in June 2010) holding Mubarak who is portrayed as a mouse trying to escape. Another Latuff cartoon presented the idea of Christian-Muslim unity – a Coptic priest and Muslim imam embrace each other, their robes forming an Egyptian flag.

Generally, the intent of the Arab caricaturists was mainly to provoke, shock, and make people question their reality – to make them ‘wake up’, and many showing the fear and anxiety of the Arab leaders who, whilst watching the media coverage of the Tunisian revolution, sense that they might be losing their power. Freedom signifies the getting rid of corrupted kings and presidents but also of the post-colonial influences of Americans and Europeans, as well as escaping the effects of globalization. Crowds demand and ‘execute’ freedom, crushing its leaders simply with their weight of numbers. But freedom (huriyya in Arabic) is always threatened – rope nooses serve as a reminder of its fragility.

**Bad and worse rulers: Differences in portrayals**

Ilan Danjoux notices that during the Arab revolutions there were dramatic differences in the way the Libyan president Qaddafi was depicted and the way Mubarak was portrayed. ‘Mubarak was seen as an official, he was not demonized as much as Qaddafi, who became the devil incarnate. Those cartoons might have predicted the two dictators’ respective fates. The more demonized the depiction of the person, the narrower the policy options become. You can no longer negotiate with people that are depicted as animalistic or barbaric. Mubarak and Gaddafi both had revolutions ousting them – but one was killed, the other went on trial’.

The Tunisian president Zine El Abedine Ben Ali was mocked as a wicked coward, the weak husband of greedy Leila, who became a ‘lightning rod’ for dissatisfaction within a Tunisian society disgusted with ‘her lack of education, low social status and conspicuous consumption’. Syrian opposition newspapers show President

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63 http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-MuhlMPQQixo/TVX8yGVvVnI/AAAAAAAASFxE/ZOn7ecP1pc/s1600/229961799.gif (accessed 5.11.2013).
66 http://memri.convio.net/images/content/pagebuilder/12630.jpg (accessed 5.11.2013).
Bashar Assad as a butcher\textsuperscript{73} or a vampire bathed in blood,\textsuperscript{74} and the one to be blamed for a chemical attack on the Ghouta in August 2013.\textsuperscript{75}

**Toppling the rulers: Domino effects**

The most typical representation of the process of toppling the rulers of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen is portrayed by some kind of domino ‘stones’ with leaders’ heads falling one upon the other\textsuperscript{76} or dynamite sticks, with Arab countries flags, catching a spark and looking set to explode.\textsuperscript{77} From the broken pillars on which the monuments of much hated, greedy presidents stood, flowers with the dates of certain revolutions sprang.\textsuperscript{78} Sometimes poetry is used to make the message more powerful like a quote from Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi’s *The Will of Life*: ‘If the people have the will to live, providence is destined to respond favourably’. This sentence explains the action of the people’s metaphorical fist destroying the old regime.\textsuperscript{79} The point is to not only oust the rulers but also their confidants in order to make space for the new.

**Media: Censorship, and the power of Facebook and Twitter**

Many cartoons focus on censorship – imposed by the rulers (eg. Mubarak making Al-Jazeera blind, deaf and mute)\textsuperscript{80} but also by the journalists themselves – a reporter witnesses a scene of bloodshed but he chooses to draw the hand of Fatima (a popular palm-shaped amulet) rather than a hand of a dying person.\textsuperscript{81} Nevertheless the media, and especially sources of social media, are a powerful weapon. A young boy is able to ‘scare’ a big soldier using ‘Facebook’;\textsuperscript{82} a Twitter bird leaves a cage in the shape of a military man;\textsuperscript{83} a cartoonist risks sketching although his hand is placed in a guillotine-like device.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{73} http://25.media.tumblr.com/401e5793c4a6aa9d2cb09e2cfaac81fa/tumblr_mxsxmc0Jnar1qd3e8co3_1280.jpg (accessed 7.11.2013).


\textsuperscript{75} http://25.media.tumblr.com/ce628f9af317c48f5dc0bde05267b6ac/tumblr_mxsxmc0Jnar1qd3e8co2_1280.jpg (accessed 7.11.2013).


\textsuperscript{77} http://rohama.org/files/ar/content/2011/2/15/19733_104.jpg (accessed 8.11.2013).


\textsuperscript{79} http://www.cartoonmovement.com/depot/cartoons/2012/06/685gOk4cS8uWmerx-clpnA.jpeg (accessed 8.11.2013).

\textsuperscript{80} http://www.cartoonmovement.com/depot/cartoons/2012/06/685gOk4cS8uWmerx-clpnA.jpeg (accessed 8.11.2013).

\textsuperscript{81} http://www.cartoonmovement.com/depot/cartoons/2013/10/Pnf99nKmRs6_LdpNH12JSg.jpeg (accessed 8.11.2013).
The last cartoon draws attention to the problem of freedom of speech. In Egypt the country’s media is more careful about publishing images critical of the army. Some artists received warning calls from the military. In other countries they received threats – for example Yemeni cartoonist Kamal Sharaf often mocked President Saleh and consequently received emails warning him that he would regret it. ‘Don’t step on people who are above you’, said one email. Anyway, newspaper publishers do not seem to appreciate cartoonists in Yemen. However, Facebook gives them a broader audience and a chance to show their cartoons. In Morocco the punishment for satirising the king is imprisonment, and in Syria it seems even worse. Syrian artist, Akram Raslan, was arrested a year ago and has not been heard from since – it seems likely that he has been murdered.

Victims

Almost all cartoonists try to commemorate victims of the regimes. Sometimes the people’s only fault was that they were not conformist enough – they had to disappear as they posed a threat. A few victims are heroes whose faces are known – like Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire on the 17th of December, 2010, in protest of the confiscation of his goods. The captions say that his carriage destroys the presidential throne. An anonymous Yemeni victim resembles a mummy but also a janbiya, a type of dagger worn as a sign of high social status. The artists know that history seems to repeat itself – two Egyptian ‘martyrs’ drawn as skeletons have a conversation – both were killed under tanks – one died on the 6th of October (during the outbreak of the October War in 1973) and the other on the 9th of October (during the Maspero demonstrations in 2011). The social network ‘rallying calls’ of Tweets and Facebook entries could not protect a young protester from being shot. The bloody flower of revolution is handed over to a new revolutionary.

Women’s issues

Doaa Eladl, who calls herself a Muslim anarchist, is a famous Egyptian woman cartoonist who began publishing her drawings in 2007. Now her cartoons appear in

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88 http://www.cartoonmovement.com/depot/cartoons/2012/05/L93luugLTP-0czm3-P8O2g.jpeg (accessed 8.11.2013).
the prominent newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm*. According to her there has been no improvement in women’s freedom since Mubarak’s fall – their status seemingly lower than that of Copts and Egyptian Christians. The Muslim Brotherhood wanted to silence the women and deprive them of their rights. The ordinary men still accept polygamy and harassment. However, Doaa Eladl says she does not only criticize men but some of the habits which are wrong and must be totally reconsidered.

Eladl uses her art to bring attention to domestic violence, underage marriage, sexual harassment, violence against women, and the new phenomenon of attacks against female demonstrators. Some claim that her work is too shocking. Most disturbing, yet thought-provoking, is one cartoon against female genital mutilation, in which a man is standing on a ladder between a woman’s legs, reaching up to cut her with a pair of scissors. This image serves as a reminder that the majority of Egyptian women are circumcised.

**Cartoonists are threatened but still fighting**

On the one hand, people are hungry for this kind of visual imagery, so political cartoonists in the Arab world enjoy the popularity usually reserved for movie stars, but on the other hand, the authorities always seem to try to and fight back. Horan, a cartoonist from Daraa in Syria, who chooses to remain anonymous out of fear for his safety, remembers the hardships he faced at the start of the revolution. ‘We struggled because of house raids and searches by security forces. We were forced to constantly change our location, and get rid of any traces of our work. We hid our markers, paint, cardboard boxes and pieces of cloth in a valley near our neighbourhood.’

In 2011 Ali Ferzat, a renowned Syrian political cartoonist who has published more than 15,000 caricatures, was badly assaulted in Damascus after drawing president Bashar Assad trying to hitch a lift from Libya’s dictator, Muammar Qaddafi. The

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92 [http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-bYWcA5U8-e4/ULYd1RZvUDI/AAAAAAAAAmU/svGP1LRTeUc/s400/New+Egyptian+Constitution+-+Cartoon+by+Doaa+El+Adl.jpg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-bYWcA5U8-e4/ULYd1RZvUDI/AAAAAAAAAmU/svGP1LRTeUc/s400/New+Egyptian+Constitution+-+Cartoon+by+Doaa+El+Adl.jpg) (accessed 10.11.2013).


95 [http://www.counterpunch.org/wp-content/dropzone/2013/03/Egyptian-Female-Cartoonist-Pokes-Fun-at-Fundamentalists_html_m3f0a83e9-e1364525692645.jpg](http://www.counterpunch.org/wp-content/dropzone/2013/03/Egyptian-Female-Cartoonist-Pokes-Fun-at-Fundamentalists_html_m3f0a83e9-e1364525692645.jpg) (accessed 10.11.2013).


97 Benjamin, ‘Egyptian Female Cartoonist…’.


horrific beating of Ferzat, whose fingers were broken, drew such attention that *TIME* magazine included him in their list of the 100 current, most influential people in world.

Although the Moroccan king likes to present himself as ‘liberal’, ridiculing him or somebody from his family can still result in a prolonged spell in a prison cell. In 2008 Fouad Mourtada, a young engineer, was sentenced to three years in prison for impersonating the king’s brother on Facebook. In 2012 Walid Bahomane appeared before a court in Rabat. The 18-year-old was accused of ‘defaming Morocco’s sacred values’ by posting pictures and videos on Facebook mocking king Mohammed VI of Morocco.101 Several Egyptian cartoonists were sued for making fun of president Morsi.102

**Anti-American/Anti-Israeli**

These two topics can be treated separately or together as they are not mutually exclusive. The Anti-Defamation League has compiled newspaper cartoons depicting what they describe as ‘the Arab media’s demonization of the 2012 presidential election and the US-Israeli relationship’.103 It proved that generally speaking, these two countries cooperate closely, and that US policy is influenced by Israeli lobbyists.

The US is depicted as a greedy state wanting Arab oil,104 collaborating with Arab governments behind the backs of the common Arab people,105 using the Arab leaders to realise their own political goals and then getting rid of them.

Israel sometimes appears as a mouse106 which scares the Arabs, but more often it appears as a powerful and dangerous aggressor who – with the help of the US and the ‘silence of Arab countries’ – devours Palestine.107 Both Israel and the US want to destroy the Middle East – the difference being that Israel conducts this plan openly while the US does so covertly.108

Arab cartoonists have long been accused of anti-Semitism but they defend themselves by saying that they just criticize the criminals, while the Western media are very delicate and refrain from condemning Israel.

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102 ‘Skewering Dictators…’.
Anti-Islamist

The Arab cartoonist hardly ever mocks its religion. There is obviously nothing strange about this. Tunisia sentenced two cartoonists, Jabeur Mejri and Ghazi Beji, to seven years in prison for posting cartoons showing a naked Prophet Mohammad on a Facebook site. The two cartoonists have published many inflammatory and provocative cartoons on the Internet, including one of a pig sleeping on the Kaaba, an Islamic shrine in the city of Mecca.\(^\text{109}\)

Nonetheless, several cartoonists dare to mock the clerics and the fundamentalists. In Egypt some people quickly changed alliances – they were pro-Mubarak and then they became pro-Morsi.\(^\text{110}\) The difference between these two regimes appears to be insignificant.\(^\text{111}\) Under Mubarak, Egyptians were threatened with prison, whereas under Morsi – who wanted to be like a king ruling from a throne – they were threatened with hell.\(^\text{112}\) In 2012 Salafi lawyer Khaled El-Masry, Secretary General of a group called the National Center for Defense of Freedoms, filed a complaint against Doaa Eladl for defaming the religious prophets. The cartoon he objected to shows an Egyptian man with angel wings lecturing Adam and Eve.\(^\text{113}\) Conversely the image of a man, bearing a picture of Osama bin Laden on his bag of ill-gotten gains, being forcibly ejected from his country by an ‘ancient’ Egyptian, signifies the end of the Muslim Brotherhood’s reign of terror.\(^\text{114}\)

The international community

The international community is commonly presented as indifferent to the sufferings of the Arabs. The Arab League is like a blind person – it does not notice mass killings in Syria although it is walking over blood in a Jewish \textit{kippa} – a symbol of being Israeli-orientated.\(^\text{115}\) The ‘revolution tourists’ cross the Syrian border, merely to take pictures to share on social media platforms,\(^\text{116}\) in an attempt to gain fame.\(^\text{117}\) A commission looking for the weapons in the Middle East region overlooks the pile of Israeli missiles.\(^\text{118}\) The peace sign composed of rifles, pistols and bullets shows that

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\(^\text{109}\) Mohamed, ‘Mighter than the Sword…’.  
\(^\text{111}\) http://cartoonmovement.typepad.com/a/6a014e5f5d3c7c970c017c3847952c970b-750wi (accessed 12.11.2013).  
\(^\text{113}\) Benjamin, ‘Egyptian Female Cartoonist…’  
the international community prefers to sell weapons to the Middle Eastern armies and rebels, rather than work for peace in the region. Finally, one of Al-Watan’s cartoons depicts glasses with a kind of permanent view on the burning World Trade Centre. The caption says: ‘Western glasses for the Islamic world’.120

Elections

The elections conducted both in Egypt and Tunisia brought lots of hope in the early days. Even the Sphinx seemed to be content with his metaphorical finger bearing a sign of voting. A similar idea of patriotism and involvement was conveyed by an image of a Tunisian flag framed into the fingerprint of a voting person. But soon the cartoonists became disillusioned – the Egyptian parliamentary elections of 2012 were to be won by Islamic fundamentalists, just as in the elections two years earlier which had to be won by the military men from Mubarak’s clique. The big word ‘revolution’ (Arabic thaura) strangely did not fit into the voting box, unlike fulul (lit. notches) – the word which in today’s Egypt describes the cronies of the previous regime, people loyal to Mubarak. The young Egyptian is stunned when he notices the military men pulling the hand of a clock backwards to the symbolic midnight – the time when Mubarak ruled.

Present

A lot of international cartoonists are limiting themselves to commenting on the bloodshed in general, lamenting all the lives that are lost without clearly pointing out who is to blame. Other cartoonists condemn the role of the military. This perspective seems to be in line with global public opinion, where most countries have strongly condemned the aggression used by the army against the pro-Morsi protesters. The ‘girlish’ Egypt is being torn between the soldier and the Islamist. A little boy asks the military man when there will be a democracy and the soldier responds, ‘not yet!’ The captions on an imaginary card, that the Armed Forces might send the

127 Guyer, ‘The Writing on Egypt’s Walls…’. 
Egyptian people in gratitude for their support, says ‘Thank you for your authorization’. It is a particularly ironic as the cartoon was drawn by Tawfiq, an artist who has published anti-military caricatures. The poster by Ganzeer was widely circulated on Facebook. The sign next to the skulls reads ‘Bread, Freedom and Social Justice’, the ‘calling card’ and chant of the January 2011 uprising. Ganzeer is one of Egypt’s pre-eminent graphic artists; his stencils and decals can be spotted on walls throughout Cairo. Amr Talaat is the author of the cartoon strip ‘The Blood’. In the past year, whenever violence broke out in Egypt, the independent newspaper Al-Tahrir would recycle a familiar cartoon, simply titled ‘The Blood’. A moustachioed man enters a blood bank and asks the attendant, ‘How much does a bag of blood cost?’ ‘It’s free’, responds the employee. The customer immediately retorts, ‘Why?’ In a typically dry Egyptian joke, the employee replies, ‘Because it’s Egyptian blood’.

Future

The cartoons which try to foresee the future make it clear that the cartoonists represent a broad spectrum of opinion and their cartoons reflect reality: confusing, complex and uncertain. The optimists want to believe that love will conquer hate. The realists know that the road to democracy seems like a labyrinth and people adapt to even the most terrible conditions. The Egyptian authorities attempted to clear Rabaa on the 7th and 27th of July 2013, killing fifty-one and seventy-two people, respectively. In that environment, Andeel, a cartoonist for the independent Al-Masry Al-Youm newspaper, poses a challenging question to the reader: At what point will Egyptians become indifferent to violence? The Arabic writing says ‘Last night I tried to cry about all the people getting killed. Nothing came out!’

Pessimists predict that nothing would really change – the old dictators will be replaced by the new ones – nothing better. The future of Palestine, the land which in the past was ‘green’, and in the present is bloody and pitch dark. There is seemingly no hope for a poor Palestinian boy – no revolution will help him.

The role of political cartoons in the Middle East

According to Fatma Müge Göçek, in the Middle East, especially in the countries where the literacy rate is low, it is much easier and more convenient to use visual

\[\text{Ibidem.}\]
\[\text{Ibidem}\]
\[\text{Guyer, ‘The Writing on Egypt’s Walls…’.}\]
\[\text{http://www.cartoonmovement.com/depot/cartoons/2012/06/14e81B76RBebGjZTU-5_5w.jpeg (accessed 15.11.2013).}\]
\[\text{http://rohama.org/files/ar/content/2010/12/6/13915_950.jpg (accessed 15.11.2013).}\]
mediums because anyone who sees the cartoons can interpret them without needing subtitles. The Arab political cartoons, despite being quite simple, manage to create an intellectual challenge and excite the imagination of people. As the main purpose of Arab political cartoons is to be an outlet for frustration, analysing them gives a rare chance to penetrate the Arab mind.

For Ilan Danjoux, ‘cartoons are like seismographs – they show there is tension brewing. And if something happens, you know where the fault lines are. Like an earthquake: you know where the fault lines will be and you also know certain places where the earthquake will not happen’.  

The political cartoons hardly provide arguments, they rather reproduce them. Cartoons cannot change opinions. In World War II the Allied Powers were dropping cartoons on enemy populations to try to change them, and in the 2006 war, the Israelis dropped cartoons on Lebanon to try to say that Hezbollah is a ‘snake’. It did not work though, because the cartoons confirm what people already believe. They also explain the world by simplifying it.

The cartoons can be seen in three different ways: as predictors, opinion-changers or chronicles, not necessarily in terms of facts, but in terms of opinions. The idea of the chronicle is the oldest and most common. ‘It is being used by historians all the time: if you want to know what a society is, look at the cartoons’.

Cartoonists in the Middle East do not just entertain. They choose to display Arab solidarity and serve as agents of ethical responsibility rather than just being funny. They prefer to teach a Tunisian lesson that ‘the revolution is possible’. There is no exaggeration in saying that they are among those who lay the basis and prepare the groundwork for a new political culture in the Middle East.

136 Mohamed, ‘Mighter than the Sword…’.
137 Danjoux, ‘Cartoons Are Like Seismographs…’.
141 Ibidem.
142 ‘Cartoons Chronicle Conflict…’.
143 Mohamed, ‘Mighter than the Sword…’.