

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Oxford
Unit of Assessment: UOA27
Title of case study: The Arab Spring: providing advice and informed analysis
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The Middle East Centre (MEC) has achieved a unique standing in providing informed analysis of the region, based on its cumulative academic expertise. It has made significant contributions to the media's and the public's understanding of political and societal developments in the Middle East. The MEC has given advice both to emerging Arab democracies on their own political systems, and to other governments on their relations with the countries of the region. The centre itself has also become a place of neutral ground, where individuals from opposite sides in conflicts in the region can meet, away from local tensions.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The MEC, based at St Antony's College, serves as the centre for the interdisciplinary study of the modern Middle East in the University of Oxford. There are seven Fellows and five further Senior Associate Members. This case study primarily concerns those whose research proved to be directly relevant to understanding the events of what became known as the Arab Spring of 2011.</p> <p>Michael Willis, H.M. King Mohammed VI Fellow in Moroccan and Mediterranean Studies since 2004, has conducted research into the endurance of authoritarian political regimes in the central Maghreb. He has sought to explain the longevity and resilience of the political regimes in three states: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. These states, which achieved independence from colonial rule in the 1950s and 1960s, kept their fundamental political structures intact for fifty years, in spite of numerous challenges during their early decades. Willis' research found that, despite the similarities between the three regimes and their circumstances, each adopted a different strategy to ensure political survival: Algeria's regime emphasised the centrality and cohesion of its military; Tunisia's regime centralised political power; while in Morocco, the monarchy's skill at co-opting and disarming challengers to its authority enabled them to concentrate political power.</p> <p>These findings then explained why the events of the Arab Spring had markedly differing impacts on the three states. In Tunisia the regime was overthrown. In Morocco it rapidly reformed itself. In Algeria, on the other hand, the regime was unaffected by the popular protests sweeping through the wider Arab world. The research concluded that the overthrow of the Tunisian regime was due to its essential brittleness. It had relied too much on coercion, and lacked alternative methods of dealing with dissent and opposition. By contrast, the adaptability of the Moroccan regime was demonstrated by the swiftness with which it was able to co-opt and undermine protest movements by promising significant political reform. Algeria had already experienced social and political upheavals in the 1980s and 1990s. Willis concluded that this turmoil, not the strength of the military, had severely reduced any public appetite for revolutionary political change.</p> <p>Eugene Rogan has been Faculty Fellow and University Lecturer in the Modern History of the Middle East since 1991. His research focuses on the modern history of the Arab world, from the sixteenth century to the present. His book, <i>The Arabs: A History</i> (2009), captures the growing malaise in the Arab world at the start of the 21st century. It argues that if the Arab world aspired to a new age of accountable government and dignity, the Arab people would have to take the initiative themselves. While not predicting the Arab Spring, it provides the background knowledge and historical analysis necessary to understand the wave of popular uprisings that swept the region in 2011: why they broke out, and what forces have been shaping changes in the region since then.</p> <p>Tariq Ramadan, Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies since 2009, has contributed substantially to highly visible public discussions of our time: the destiny of Muslims in the West, and the Islamic revival in the Muslim world. In his <i>Islam and the Arab Awakening</i> (2012), Ramadan analyses and explores the challenges and opportunities that have arisen in countries across North Africa and the Middle East. He asks whether Muslim-majority countries can bring together Islam, pluralism, and democracy without betraying their identity. He explores the reasons behind the events of the Arab Spring and offers a commentary on what the future might hold. The book is</p>

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aimed both at the ordinary layperson and at students and scholars of the Middle East. It has already been translated into three languages: French, Turkish, and Arabic.

The research of three further fellows is relevant to the political and social understanding of the Arab Spring: Ahmed Al-Shahi, Research Fellow and co-organiser of the Sudanese Programme, whose research interests include economic and social development, sectarian politics, and social differentiations; Marwa Daoudy, Departmental Lecturer in the Politics and International Relations of the Middle East, whose research concerns international relations, non-traditional security studies, and conflict and peace studies; and Avi Shlaim, Emeritus Fellow of St Antony's College, formerly Professor of International Relations, whose main research interest is the Arab-Israeli conflict.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Islam and the Arab Awakening, Tariq Ramadan, 2012 (OUP). Available on request.

'Tariq Ramadan, one of the foremost Muslim intellectuals...comes into his own as a historian and provoker of ideas.' Robin Yassin-Kassab, *The Independent*, 5 May 2012. Translations available in Arabic, French, and Turkish.

The Arabs: A History, Eugene Rogan, 2009 (Basic Books). Available on request.

Selected as a Best Book of 2009 by the *Economist*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Financial Times*.

Translations available in Arabic, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, and Spanish.

Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring, Michael Willis, 2012 (Hurst; Columbia University Press). Available on request.

'Willis succeeds brilliantly in the task [of producing] a much needed introductory text to the region ... providing an accurate, comprehensive and readable study of the modern history and politics of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. ...[this book] does much to expand our knowledge of the Maghreb and its importance to the wider world.' Ronald Bruce St John, *International Affairs* **89**, 2 (March 2013): 541-42.

Michael J. Willis 'Conclusion: The Dynamics of Reform in Morocco', *Mediterranean Politics* **14**, 2, 2009 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629390902990851>). Peer reviewed journal.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Members of the MEC, including Ramadan, Willis, and Rogan, are frequently invited to discuss their research with a variety of audiences in both the Middle East and the West, including governmental policy groups, business think-tanks, and public media gatherings. These diverse audiences have benefited from informed analysis at a time of momentous political changes in many Arab and North African countries.

Enhancing the capacity of Middle East politicians, governments and states through advice and guidance: The MEC has played host to meetings, conferences, and seminars, acting as a neutral place for academic and non-academic discussions involving key players from several North African states. In January 2011, a discussion on "The Western Sahara Conflict: Is there a Solution?" featured speakers from Morocco and Algeria. Representatives from the Polisario Front and the Moroccan Embassy attended, enabling the two groups to express and exchange points of view on the dispute. Later that same year, Ahmed Al-Shahi organised a series of meetings under the auspices of the MEC's Sudanese Programme, with invited participants from both the Sudanese regime and Southern Sudan [i]. These meetings provided a neutral forum for the two groups to meet and talk in the period running up to the formal secession of Southern Sudan in 2011. MEC members have also participated in discussions on constitutional reform in the countries concerned. For example, Willis was invited to attend a two-day seminar on constitutional reform at Al Akhawayn University, Morocco, in June 2011. The seminar developed recommendations and presented them formally to the Moroccan Commission for Constitutional Reform [ii].

MEC members have been invited to informal talks with select government delegations and ambassadors. For example, in March 2011, Rogan opened discussion at a Britain Club dinner

hosted by the Kuwaiti Ambassador with a talk on “Arab Unrest: Where Are We Heading?” The dinner was attended by other ambassadors and MPs [1]. Later in the same year, Rogan attended a series of sessions involving a Jordanian government delegation comprising the Minister for Political Development, the Minister for Media and Communications, former Prime Minister Fayez Tarawneh, and officials from the Prime Minister’s office and the Royal Court. A dinner for the delegation at the House of Lords was hosted by Baroness Morris and Richard Burden MP (Chair of the APPG on Jordan) [2].

Helping ensure Western policy-making and business relations are informed by current research on the Middle East. Politicians, government officials, and ambassadors (e.g. from the UK, US, and Australia) have invited MEC fellows to provide background knowledge and to discuss future approaches. Rogan met with HM Ambassador to Yemen in October 2011 [3]. Willis gave a background lecture to the UK Foreign Office on *Modern Maghreb Politics* in October 2012. In December 2012, he contributed to a formal brainstorming session that was assembled to brief the HMA Designate to Rabat on perspectives for Morocco prior to his deployment to the region: the government wanted as much background information and knowledge as possible because the degree of change in Morocco had so greatly surpassed expectations [4].

In a more formal setting, Rogan was a witness (29 November 2011) at a House of Commons Select Committee for Foreign Affairs meeting on *British Foreign Policy and the “Arab Spring”*. He is quoted extensively in the report of the meetings. A conclusion drawn from his evidence, regarding the inclusion of members of the British arms trade in the delegation of a Prime Ministerial visit to the Gulf, was further discussed in the *Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee Report*, although the Government ultimately rejected the criticism made [iii].

The Conservative Middle East Council (CMEC) seeks to ensure that Conservative party policy is grounded in a deep understanding of the complexities of the region through enabling discussions between Conservative parliamentarians and leading experts on the Middle East. The CMEC has frequently consulted with members of the MEC in two main ways: through briefings and through presentations to MPs in Westminster. For example, in February 2011, an emergency session was convened to brief parliamentarians on the extraordinary turmoil in the Middle East. The assembled panel of leading expert commentators included Willis [iv]. Numerous CMEC publications, which were distributed widely among MPs and members of the House of Lords, included contributions from MEC fellows Rogan, Ramadan, and Daoudy; an example is the CMEC booklet “The Arab Spring: Implications for British Policy” for the Conservative Party Annual Conference of 2011 [v].

Think-tanks and strategy forums have extended invitations to MEC members for advice on economic and business matters. Rogan has participated in panel debates and has given lectures to organisations ranging from the Global Strategy Forum to the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House). In February 2011, Ramadan and Rogan were on a panel convened at the Royal Geographical Society by Intelligence Squared, which discussed “Turmoil in the Arab World: Is the Genie of Democracy out of the Bottle?” Their participation led to further requests for meetings, e.g. with a chief economist at Deutsche Bank [5] and the Britain Club Dinner (see [1]).

On 16 December 2011, the Morocco Institute, in partnership with the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) – The Hague, hosted a meeting of experts, “Political Transition and Stability on the Borders of the Union: Morocco and North Africa”. The meeting brought together over 40 academics, practitioners, specialists, and policymakers with specific knowledge of transitional processes in volatile environments or in-depth regional expertise. Willis presented the keynote speech entitled “Morocco: The Arab Spring and the Challenge of Reform” and is one of the experts quoted on the webpage summarising the event [vi].

Enriching public understanding of events in the Middle East through improving the quality of media coverage, informing other authors’ works, and participation in literature festivals and discussions: Public interest in the revolutionary events surrounding the 2011 Arab Spring has created greater demand for informed analysis from those with academic understanding of the political situation. Members of the MEC have been called upon regularly to provide expert commentary and accurate

background information for various international media outlets.

In addition to giving interviews to major UK and European radio and TV news programmes on events following the Arab Spring in Tunisia and the terrorist bombings in Marrakech, Willis has been interviewed several times by the media local to the events, e.g. by 2M TV in Morocco and by local press and media outlets in Tunisia [vii]. Examples of print media contributions include an interview with Rogan discussing Egypt, which was featured in “Inside Story” on *Aljazeera* in November 2012 [viii]. Willis is quoted in an article on Morocco’s February 20 reform movement in *The National* (Abu Dhabi Media company’s first English-language publication) [ix]. Advice to the media has extended beyond contributing content to newspieces. In 2012, four fellows of the MEC (Rogan, Willis, Al-Shahi, and Shlaim) were among 17 members of the “External Organisations and Individuals” panel which contributed to a formal review by the BBC Trust of the BBC’s coverage of the events of the Arab Spring [x].

The research of MEC fellows has also had an influence on popular publications, such as the book by the BBC’s Middle East correspondent, Jeremy Bowen: *The Arab Uprisings: The People Want the Fall of the Regime* (2012). Bowen quotes both Rogan and Ramadan and their books and cites their publications. In his acknowledgements, he refers to “the brilliant and essential book *The Arabs: A History*” [xi].

The publication of books such as *The Arabs: A History* has also led to many opportunities to engage more directly with public audiences through book launches and literary festivals. For example, in the UK Rogan debated with Paddy Ashdown at the Sunday Times Oxford Literary Festival 2013. In March 2013 Rogan also participated in panel discussions and book talks at the *Emirates Festival of Literature*, Dubai, UAE [xiii]. Such activities have enabled MEC members to enrich public understanding of events in the Middle East itself.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Testimony

- [1] Email invitation from the Company Secretary, Argo Group Ltd.
- [2] Email invitation from the Executive Director, Centre for Opposition Studies
- [3] Email invitation Arabian Peninsula Research Analyst, Foreign Office
- [4] Email invitation confirmation from Head of Middle East and North Africa Research Group, FCO.
- [5] Email from Chief Economist (EMEA), Deutsche Bank AG

Other evidence sources

- [i] <http://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/mec/Sudan/Sudan-Conference-21-May-2011.pdf>
- [ii] <http://www.aui.ma/en/media-and-news/news/286-al-akhawayn-university-holds-expert-seminar-on-constitutional-reform-in-morocco.html>
- [iii] <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm84/8436/8436.pdf> see paras 53-56.
- [iv] <http://cmec.org.uk/2011/02/egypt-and-tunisia-the-regional-impact-of-the-jasmine-revolution/>
- [v] <http://cmec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CMEC-Arab-Spring.pdf>
- [vi] <http://www.icct.nl/activities/past-events/political-transition-and-stability-on-the-borders-of-the-union-morocco-and-north-africa>
- [vii] <http://www.webmanagercenter.com/magazine/idees-et-debats/2012/10/11/125882/michael-willis-de-la-chaire-oxford-a-voir-l-etat-des-sondages-ennahdha-perdra-les-prochaines-elections>
- [viii] <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2012/11/201211176645209765.html>
- [ix] <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/for-moroccos-february-20-reform-movement-new-constitution-means-rebirth>
- [xi] http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/arabspring_impartiality/appendix_c.pdf
- [xii] Jeremy Bowen, *Arab Uprisings: The People Want the Fall of the Regime* (London: Simon and Schuster 2012), e.g. pp. 10, 15-16, 314.
- [xiii] <http://tickets.emirateslitfest.com/v-411-eugene-rogan.aspx>