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**The Political Economy of Oil
and the Crisis of the Arab
State System**

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Giornalistica Italia (AGI)

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Keywords: Oil, Energy, Political Economy, MENA, Globalization, Arab Spring

JEL Classification: F6, N5, O1, P1, Q3, Q4

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Abstract

This paper argues that the so-called Arab spring is part of a tectonic shift which signals the frailty of the Arab state system as such. Countries benefitting from oil and gas rents have been more resilient, because of their potential to create systems of incentives and disincentives in order to prevent disruptive social change. Islamism, whose emergence is connected with rentier state dynamics is, at the same time, an opportunity and a threat for the survival of the Arab state and, in general, of the Arab states system. In this context, national oil companies can increasingly be conceptualized not merely as instruments of the state, but as bulwarks of nation-state legitimacy in a period of chaos.

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Introduction

The so-called Arab spring has often been read by the media as a moral struggle between freedom and authoritarianism. Thus, triumphal narrative has frequently obscured the real issues and socio-economic forces at play. On the contrary, the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, which witnessed the highly predictable electoral success of Islamist parties in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, has often been described as an ‘Islamist winter’. Both these interpretations, it is argued here, are highly ideological and fail to capture the complexity of the processes involved. What was missing in the mainstream account was, arguably, an awareness of the dimensions of the unrest in the political economy. Thus, a more nuanced picture is needed in order to provide a scientifically sound and rigorous theoretical framework to interpret the events.

A crucial issue which needs to be addressed is why certain non-democratic regimes, such as the oil-producing Gulf monarchies, demonstrated more resilience than other, non-oil-producing, Middle Eastern countries. The present study argues that these differences can be addressed within the framework provided by Rentier State Theory (RST), a perspective which hypothesizes the existence

of causal links between energy rents and authoritarian governments. Thus, this study stresses the validity of establishing explicative relationships between oil prices and the forms of political organization, as well as exploring their links with the nation-states' very existence. On a general level, the whole Westphalian order imposed on the Middle East and North Africa after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire seems to be at stake; in other words, the recent 2011 uprisings appear to reveal profound shifts which expose the frailty of the entire system.

Thus, in the present era of unrest, energy rents provided by National Oil Companies (NOC) have allowed rentier states to survive, and in some cases to extend their influence, as in the case of Qatar. However, low oil and gas prices could put at risk the stability of the Gulf monarchies, hence triggering a deeper crisis in the Arab Westphalian system.

Oil and the Arab state

Beyond the First Law of Petropolitics

Gulf monarchies, with the partial exception of Bahrain, have only been marginally affected by the Arab uprisings, while the countries which experienced turmoil, notably Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria, were all oil-importers, and not monarchies. Libya is, of course, an exception, because of its peculiar geo-political context. What clearly emerges is that oil-producing countries of the Gulf showed a high degree of resilience to the phase of regional unrest which started in December 2010. It is evident that the real issue which triggered the turbulence is not authoritarianism in itself, since the Gulf monarchies cannot be considered as models of Western-style democracy. The resilience of these regimes need to be explained by taking into account their different social contract, which is based on the political economy of oil.

Several explanations have been proposed to account for the resilience of the governments of the oil-producing countries. In this regard, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman (2006) suggested a First Law of Petropolitics (FLP), which postulates the existence of a causal link between high oil prices and “the pace of freedom”. Thomas Friedman (2006) formulated the so-called First Law of Petropolitics as follows:

The First Law of Petropolitics posits the following: The price of oil and the pace of freedom always move in opposite directions in oil-rich petrolist states. According to the First Law of Petropolitics, the higher the average global crude oil price rises, the more free speech, free press, free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, the rule of law, and independent political parties are eroded. And these negative trends are reinforced by the fact that

the higher the price goes, the less petrolist leaders are sensitive to what the world thinks or says about them. Conversely, according to the First Law of Petropolitics, the lower the price of oil, the more petrolist countries are forced to move toward a political system and a society that is more transparent, more sensitive to opposition voices, and more focused on building the legal and educational structures that will maximize their people's ability, both men's and women's, to compete, start new companies, and attract investments from abroad. The lower the price of crude oil falls, the more petrolist leaders are sensitive to what outside forces think of them.

Friedman's FLP, which attracted considerable attention, has been criticized by, among others, Wacziarg (2012), whose empirical research denies any econometrically significant relationships between the two variables. Undeniably, the main shortcoming of FLP consists in its axiomatic nature, which postulates a rigid cause-effect relationships between "the price of oil" and "the pace of freedom". It is exactly this approach which makes FLP easily subject to criticism. For example, Wacziarg (2012: 654) can affirm that "none of these empirical tests led to any evidence of an inverse relationship between political freedom and oil prices, in particular for oil-producing nations post-1961" and that in conclusion "there is no such thing as the 'First Law of Petropolitics'".

In this regard, the real question concerns whether econometric tests are the most appropriate tool to measure something such as "the pace of freedom". Indeed, the combined Polity score, employed by Wacziarg (2012: 642), which ranks countries from the most autocratic (-10) to the most democratic (+10) is arbitrary at best. On the whole, the phenomenon described by Friedman needs to be understood more as a general trend than in a mechanistic fashion. Besides, Friedman's framework seems to be too permeated by an ideological framework which identifies the Western idea of freedom as the only morally 'good' path to development.

Hence, instead of analyzing the link between "the price of oil" and the "pace of freedom", it would be arguably more scientifically correct to substitute the second variable with 'resilience of autocratic forms of governments', where the term 'autocratic' does not imply any moral judgment, but merely a different form of state organization. Indeed, Friedman's democratic faith is animated by the persuasion of a moral superiority of Western 'modernity' and of the persuasion that oil prices somehow hinder the 'pace of freedom', teleologically interpreted as the unstoppable march of progress. This problem makes it difficult to verify the claims of FLP since, while the first variable, i.e. oil prices, is quantifiable, the second one, "the pace of freedom" is abstract and immaterial to such an extent that every attempt to substantiate it cannot avoid being arbitrary. Hence, it would be more appropriate to establish a link between oil prices and forms of state development.

The present study aims at stressing the extent to which a relationship can indeed be identified between oil prices and non-democratic forms of government. It is worthwhile mentioning that the

theories which explain the problems of development in terms of a 'resource curse', such as RST, have been advanced also to overcome previous 'cultural' explanations, which explained, for example, the alleged underdevelopment of Arab countries by attributing its root-causes to Islam. Thus, an important theoretical acquisition by RST has helped the academic community to move beyond these explanations, not because they were politically incorrect, but because of their epistemological and empirical flaws. However, this paper argues that, in order for the relationship advanced by FLP to be appreciated, it is important to move beyond its simplistic and deterministic formulations and to analyze them through the analytical tools provided by RST. Such a framework allows a more nuanced understanding of the Arab uprisings and their aftermath.

The framework of Rentier State Theory (RST)

First of all, hydrocarbons should not simply be conceived as resources MENA's regimes draw on, but need to be recognized as a crucial element in the genesis, development and resilience of these socio-political systems. As Marcel (2006: 14) affirms: "Oil has played a seminal role in the historical emergence of the modern state in the Middle East and North Africa", being "the building block of these countries as modern states" (2006: 107). It is this primordial relationship which permits an understanding of the extent to which, as Anderson writes, "the notion of the rentier state is one of the major contributions of Middle East regional studies to political science" (Anderson, 1987: 9). In other words, the development of the Arab nation-state and of its energy industry needs to be read in dialectical terms, since the two phenomena have profoundly influenced each other: RST represents the most organic attempt to carry out such an endeavor. This theory was proposed by Mahdavi (1970), later elaborated upon by Beblawi and Luciani (1987) and then expanded and enriched throughout the years. When compared with FLP, such a theorization offers a more articulated understanding of the so-called 'resource curse'. The core of this theory is the concept of "rentier state" defined as "a country that garners a substantial portion of its income from external sources, most generally from the sales of resources such as oil and gas." (Losman, 2010: 428). An important consequence for what concerns the relationship between economy and politics is that, as Shambayati (1994: 308) puts it, "the state becomes financially independent of domestic productive groups", and therefore is not accountable to them. These conditions lead to the emergence of a peculiar social contract:

The rentier state and its NOCs gain revenue largely independent of their citizenry; they do not have to extract taxes from their populations. Without the need to demand that their citizens "cough up" tax revenues, government actions are far less constrained by public pressures since the public bears no visible tax burdens. A social contract evolves in which the citizens make relatively few political demands upon the government as long as the state provides many services without levying taxes. (Losman (2010: 429)

What is more, Luciani (1987: 71-72) draws a distinction between “productive” and “allocative” states, where the former are based on taxation and the latter on rent distribution. One of the main features of allocative states is that they are not interested in economic growth, since the expansion of the state’s fiscal basis is not among their priorities. Not needing taxation, thus, rentier states do not develop any form of democratic representation. Moreover, according to RST, a system characterized by rent-seeking feasibly hinders productive economic activities (Losman, 2010: 443). As Shambayati (1994: 307) affirms: “rentierism enhances state autonomy by eliminating economically motivated pressure groups and by making a segment of the bourgeoisie dependent on the state.” Furthermore, the “ruling bargain” between the regime and the population is founded on wealth allotment through patronage networks (Kamrava, 2004: 101) since they “buy legitimization through allocation” (Luciani, 1987: 76). Such a system allows neo-patrimonial forms of state to prosper. Besides co-optation, regimes resort to repression in order to neutralize challenges to their authority. The most evident weakness of rentier states is that their strength is connected to energy prices; as Losman (2010: 445) puts it:

without real economic development and significantly broader political participation to increase accountability for poor efficiency, periods of relatively low oil prices are likely to generate painful political and economic stresses in the Gulf region — and what is painful for this region is also likely to be highly painful for the rest of the world.

Michael Ross (2001: 328) systematized in new terms the relationship between oil and autocratic governments, by attempting to verify whether “oil and mineral wealth tend to make states less democratic”. He complained about overstretching Rentier State Theory and so decided to submit it to statistical tests (Ross, 2001: 331). Ross’s analysis is particularly interesting inasmuch as it reformulated RST, identifying three “causal mechanisms” which “might explain the alleged link between oil exports and authoritarian rule” (Ross, 2001: 332): He identifies a “rentier effect”, a “repression effect” and a “modernization effect”. The first one relates to the fiscal policies of the state, and is composed of a “taxation effect”, which implies that since the state does not need to tax its citizens they are less prone to ask that it becomes accountable; of a “spending effect”, which lead the state to invest in the creation of patronage networks and of a “group formation effect”, which suggests that it hinders the development of independent social groups, such as a bourgeoisie. The second one, the “repression effect”, suggests a link between oil rents and investments in security apparatuses, while the third one, the “modernization effect”, taken from modernization theory, postulates relationships between economic development and democracy. Ross’s (2001: 356) empirical tests lead him to the conclusion that, indeed, “the oil-impedes-democracy claim is both valid and statistically robust; in other words, oil does hurt democracy”. All in all, he affirms that:

there is at least tentative support for three causal mechanisms that link oil and authoritarianism: a rentier effect, through which governments use low tax rates and high spending to dampen pressures for democracy; a repression effect, by which governments build up their internal security forces to ward off democratic pressures; and a modernization effect, in which the failure of the population to move into industrial and service sector jobs renders them less likely to push for democracy (Ross, 2001: 356-357)

The flaw in Ross's analysis is that, as in the case of Wacziarg (2012), the criterion he used to classify democratic and autocratic governments, i.e. the Polity 98, is questionable; however, Ross's merit is to have re-stated the RST questions in an effective manner. The last revision of RST has been proposed by Gray (2011), who offers a version of RST which facilitates comprehension within its framework of the recent changes in the political economy. As Gray (2011: 2) suggests, oil-exporting countries such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are currently profoundly different from when RST was proposed, and it would be mistaken to blindly adapt this framework without taking into account the recent developments. However, despite the theoretical overstretching of RST, Gray (2011: 2) argues:

the tenets of RST seem to retain a general validity. The GCC states are not democratizing by most usual measures of "democracy;" the regimes retain clear "red lines" on what are acceptable or unacceptable political challenges to the state's authority, and economic power in these states ultimately remains highly centralized. (Gray, 2011: 2).

It is in this context that Gray (2011: 2) proposes his framework as follows:

Late rentierism accepts the broad validity of the principles of RST, but also allows for both domestic imperatives and external influences to have impacted the wealthy Gulf states, bringing significant changes to their political economies but retaining, even entrenching, ruling family and elite roles, as well as most of their privileges. The region has changed markedly, it is argued, but not in terms of a true or profound political transformation or dispersal of power.

In his study, Gray offers a comprehensive literature review of RST, highlighting its different phases and the relationships between these theoretical developments and the contemporary transformations of the political economy. Gray admits that neo-patrimonialism theories have considerably refined RST theory, but also argues that the concept of 'state capitalism' should be taken into account (2011: 8), as well as the influence of globalization on Gulf states together with demographic and employment challenges (2011: 19). As Gray (2011) notices in relation to Gulf monarchies:

rents and rentierism are central to an understanding of the nature of Gulf regimes, their durability, their behavior, and the nature of their relationship with society. Yet although these other non-rent characteristics affect the political dynamics of the region, the explanatory primacy of rentierism should not be under any serious challenge.

To put it simply, RST should not be used only to explain why rentier states are not democratic, but also why they are more resilient than other forms of political organization. Indeed, it can be argued that Gulf monarchies are more resilient than oil-importing Arab regimes because they do not need to open up their systems in order to survive; they can rely on oil rents as a leverage against social and economic threats. Thus, the more oil rents are available, the more they have the financial means

to buy survival. Of course, such a relationship should not be interpreted as axiomatic, since other factors may be influential.

Understanding national oil companies (NOCs)

NOCs play an important part in rentier states dynamics. When compared to international oil companies (IOCs), NOCs seem to be lacking in both efficiency and investments (Losman, 2010: 445). But, moving beyond a strictly economic framework to also take into consideration social issues, it appears that, while IOCs' only goal is to make profits for the shareholders, NOCs need to take into account stakeholders' concerns, such as welfare and infrastructure, in order to guarantee social cohesiveness (Marcel, 2006: 230-231). However, NOCs are competing increasingly with IOCs, as well as investing in technology and know-how acquisition, thus forcing IOCs to operate in challenging environments such as the Arctic in order to preserve their technological competitive advantage. It needs to be noted that often rentier states are criticized not only on economic grounds, for example for their lack of efficiency, but often on moral grounds, out of a postulation that productive states are intrinsically 'good' and allocative states are intrinsically 'bad'. However, the claim that NOCs are inefficient is often based on moral grounds. Marcel's (2006) groundbreaking study should promote, also within RST, a re-evaluation of the categories employed to describe the changing dynamics of NOCs.

A sound understanding of NOCs, free from moral judgments, is imperative, given the fact that state-owned companies control ninety percent of global oil reserves (Marcel, 2006: 1). Insistent calls in the West to privatize NOCs is often met with skepticism in oil-producing countries, where these companies are usually seen as symbols of national prowess against foreign organizations which are seen as tainted by colonialist and imperialist motives (Marcel, 2006: 3). NOCs are seen, in oil-producing countries, as essential for the defence of state sovereignty and national interests, as well as for the promotion of social welfare, not to mention fostering the state's foreign policy goals (Marcel, 2006: 3). Hence, the privatization of NOCs may be popularly viewed in international organizations, but in oil-producing countries, and especially in the Middle East, it would be felt like a take-over of nation-state legitimacy from foreign colonizers.

In other words, the so-called 'resource nationalism' narratives are a crucial ideology which preserves Westphalian state legitimacy in contexts such as the Middle East and the North Africa. The Western call to separate 'politics' from 'economy' is often ineffective in "the highly politicized national and international environment in which oil is produced and traded" (Marcel, 2006: 3). This

leads to the interesting question such as whether, in oil-producing countries, instead of conceiving NOCs as the governments' long arm, government themselves are a sort of superstructure of the NOCs, since the latter constitute the backbone of the nation-state. Marcel does not go this far; however, she affirms:

The legitimacy of the political structure is tied to its oil policy and management of hydrocarbons, but even more directly to its distribution of oil revenues. Public attitudes and the political role of oil specific to each country shape oil policy in terms of exports, investments and the redistribution of wealth. The stability of these political systems depends on the capacity of the state to continue to generate sufficient oil rent to satisfy the needs of the population. It is in their critical role as wealth-generators that states depend on their national oil companies (Marcel, 2006: 7)

Marcel's analysis invites the reader to focus upon the relationships between NOCs, the state and society, which are essential for the survival of the countries. Indeed, the problem is, as Marcel underlines, that in many oil-producing countries of the MENA "the needs of the population are growing faster than the oil rent" (Marcel, 2006: 8). It is precisely in the relationship between these two variables that it is possible to identify the main challenges to the stability of the oil-producing regimes. And, conversely, it is the presence of the oil rent, and its ability to satisfy, at least partially, the needs of the population, which can explain the resilience of regimes in oil-producing countries. In other words, the presence of oil rent is one of the pillars which guarantees the survival of the Westphalian system in the MENA. The issue is that Gulf monarchies, being rentier states, have the financial means to buy legitimacy, for example through subsidies, and they therefore have more chances to prevent threats to their legitimacy. Among the strategies developed by rentier states to prevent challenges, the most significant are certainly co-optation and repression. The resilience of the Gulf monarchies during the Arab uprisings demonstrates the effectiveness of these strategies, at least in the short-term. However, the stability of Gulf monarchies has been brought into question by Davidson (2012), according to whom a mounting set of challenges is about to lead to their "collapse". His analysis clearly shows the frailty of the social contract of these countries.

A great challenge to the stability of oil-exporting countries is also demography, which could undermine the social contract. The energy industry cannot offer enough employment opportunities to the young often educated unemployed. (Marcel, 2006: 115). While the population has been growing, the job market has not managed to absorb them, leading to the rise of unemployment; poverty is becoming visible also in countries as rich as Saudi Arabia (Marcel, 2006: 117). This is one of the most serious challenges for the social contract on which rentier economies were based.

As Marcel (2006: 236) correctly points out, "the critical question for the hydrocarbon sector is how far it can deliver growing support to the dependent economy in the medium term". It may be argued that if and when oil-producing countries of the MENA reach a "crunch point" (Marcel, 2006: 237),

that will be the moment at which the oil and gas sector will not be able to sustain their economy, and the very pillars of the Westphalian system may start shaking.

The Westphalian order in the Middle East and its challenges

In Europe, the treaty of Westphalia of 1648 ended the religious wars, establishing the modern nation-state system by founding a relationship between sovereignty and territoriality and initiating a process of retreat of religion from the public to the private sphere. Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the Westphalian system was later exported into the Middle East and North Africa, where the reduction of religion into the private sphere proved very difficult. The Arab state, which attempted to give birth to a different model of state, failed in this operation and, to the contrary, contributed to the development of its nemesis, Islamism.

The 2011 uprisings and their aftermath seem to reveal the frailty of the architecture of the region, especially the rise of social forces which cannot easily be contained within the boundaries of the Arab state. The genesis of the Arab Westphalian system is profoundly connected with the political economy of oil; as Marcel affirms, “the emergence of aspiring, independent states in the Middle East was closely tied to asserting sovereignty over natural resources” (Marcel, 2006: 14). This system, which became consolidated after decolonization, in the 50s, has been aptly labeled by Lawson: “an anarchic regional system of mutually antagonistic sovereign states.” (2000: 529). As Lawson stresses, it is “misleading to conceive of the crystallization of the Arab states system as a uniform process” (2000: 529), since this was differentiated in the different contexts. It is worth pointing out that, in the establishment of Westphalian sovereignty over the Middle East and North Africa, a country which played a important was Syria (Lawson, 2000: 533). Civil strife in Syria seems to be a sign of crisis for the entire order.

Thus, on the whole, Islamism could be considered as a threat to the Arab state and to the entire Westphalian system. However, it is argued here that Islamist movements could also strengthen the Arab state, as well as paving the way for the emergence of post-Westphalian forms of political organization, such as the caliphate, which has always been declared by the Muslim Brotherhood as their long-term goal. The other factor which will be taken into consideration, and which seems to point to the dissolution of the Westphalian system through the emergence of a pan-Arab public sphere, is the changing media landscape.

Islamism: threat or opportunity for the Arab state?

A relationship has been proposed between the development of the *rentier state* and the emergence of Islamist movements. Modernization theory wrongly assumed that the new wealth acquired by oil-producing countries would trigger the emergence of a middle class which would ask for freedom and representation. RST attempted to construct a theoretical framework to explain why these changes did not happen in oil-producing countries. The cronyism and patronage features of the Arab state have arguably been an important factor in contributing to the emergence of the Arab state's nemesis, that is, Islamism as a social movement and as a political ideology. Indeed, Islamist movements can be interpreted as a reaction to the shortcomings of the Arab state, and they have been thriving during this crisis. What is more, these movements have been sponsored by the monarchies, which have often attempted to employ them as a foreign policy tool. In the same context, these movements can be interpreted in the emergence of Islamic banks, made possible by the oil boom which followed the 1973 Yom Kippur war and the consequent OPEC embargo. In broad terms, the developments of the global oil industry are indeed profoundly intertwined with the Westphalian system, which was guaranteed for decades in MENA first by the balance achieved during the cold war and afterwards by the United States.

Shambayati (1994: 308) argues that *rentier states* have contributed to the emergence of Islamist movements, because the latter tend to define relations between governments and citizens in non-economic terms, thus contributing to the shift of the counter-hegemonic narratives in moral and religious terms, to the point that: "The unintended consequence of this move is that culture and ideology become the main arenas of conflict between the state and civil society." (Shambayati, 1994: 310). Shambayati (1994: 329) also affirms that: "the relation between the ruled and the rulers is defined in moral and ideological, not economic terms. Consequently, organized challenges to the state are based on moral and cultural issues, where rentier states are most vulnerable".

Such an issue is related to the main weakness of the Arab state, that is, its lack of consensus: according to Ayubi (1996), its apparatuses were so incapable of achieving cultural hegemony that the regimes had to mainly rely on their coercive machinery in order to maintain their power. In contrast, Islamists managed to occupy civil society through their institutions. Indeed, they developed ramified networks of social institutions which had been the incubators of their hegemony over large segments of Arab societies, especially in countries such as Egypt and Jordan. In general, Islamic social movements are, at the same time, a reaction against the Arab state *qua* rentier and its product. They are a reaction against it since they developed a narrative which criticized the dirigist

features of the Arab state, highlighting the failure of Arab socialism, and on this basis they were able to rally social strata, such as a rising middle class, against that model. It is in this context that it is possible to speak of an 'Islamist middle class' which, through Islamic social institutions, attempted to establish an 'historical bloc' by establishing alliances with the disenfranchised strata. This strategy is at the core of the Islamist hegemonic quest, which can be witnessed in countries such as Egypt and Jordan. At the same time, this class is a product of the rentier state, since it developed because of an alliance between the Gulf 'petroc capitalists' and Islamists vanguards such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus, with the rise to power of the Islamists, the long decay of the Arab socialist state, which started in 1967 after the war against Israel, is concluding; however, during the long trench war between the hegemonic Arab state and the counter-hegemonic Islamists the two social actors profoundly cross-fertilized each other. The paradox is that, while Islamist movements, as well as Islamic social institutions, and Islamic banks, based their expansion on the failures of the 'dirigist' Arab state, they nevertheless thrived because of their dependency on oil rents. To put it differently, while Islamists criticized Arab socialism for its dirigist features, the Islamic capitalism which emerged as its nemesis was less marked by Schumpeterian entrepreneurs and more by rentierist features. The genesis of Islamism and of Islamic business is not irrelevant; in fact, this reveals to what extent Islamism may be incapable of transforming the social structure of Arab countries, since features such as rentierism, corporatism and clientelism (Kamrava, 2004) seem to mark both the regimes and Islamist movements. Not surprisingly, once in power Islamist movements seem to have reproduced the authoritarian features of the Arab state, but this time legitimized with a stronger emphasis on Islamic narratives. In other words, it is questionable whether the 'Islamic alternative' can be described as such, since it seems to have Islamized the characters of the Arab state. When moving from the 'periphery' to the 'centre', Islamic movements seem to perpetuate the same features of the previous political systems, since they are, at the same time, product and producers of the same socio-economic environment of which they share the same epistemology. On the one hand, the regimes were permeated by the Islamists, by co-opting them and absorbing their symbols and language, by carrying out their 'passive revolution'. On the other hand, the Islamists absorbed the authoritarian features of the Arab regimes and, when in power, they seem to reproduce the old order, this time legitimized by the adoption of Islamic frames, instead of giving birth to a model of 'Islamic democracy'.

Such an understanding challenges two common readings. On the one hand, there is criticism of the 'Orientalistic' prejudice according to which an Islamism movement is per se anti-democratic because of an alleged and essentialised 'nature' of Islam. On the other hand, the reading which postulates a Manichean war between autocracy and freedom, where the former is identified with the

Arab regimes and the latter with their opponents, is similarly challenged. The reality seems to show that the opponents of the regimes adopt the dominant narrative to such an extent that they have not been able to establish a new moral and intellectual order, but they have merely managed to reproduce the features of the previous one, by reframing it in Islamic terms.

Thus, should Islamist social movements be seen as a challenge to the Westphalian order? On the one hand, the more movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood become part of the 'centre', the more they seem to point to assimilating characteristics of the centre, increasingly becoming identifiable as 'Islamist-nationalists'. On the other hand, the growth of transnational movements such as the *salafi*, which embody a 'modern', globalised Islam, points to the overcoming of the Westphalian order. Thus, Islamism seems to contain both trends: the centripetal, embodied by the "Islamist-nationalist" and the centrifugal, represented by the *salafi*. Islamic movements, which emerged as challengers of the status quo, appear today as extremely diverse: some are a threat to the Westphalian system, when they emphasize a pan-Islamic narrative, while others, embracing an Islamist-nationalist narrative, may allow the Arab state to survive, albeit in new forms. The Turkish case offers an interesting case study of the dynamics between 'centre' and 'periphery' which may be construed as taking place in the contemporary Arab world. Indeed, interesting studies have been conducted with regard to Turkey, where an Islamist party, the AKP, has ruled since 2002. The Turkish case shows the same dynamic of a 'periphery' becoming the 'centre' and thus starting to share some of the features of the old system (Yavuz). However, Turkey is different inasmuch as its economy does not show rentier features, nor does it have an authoritarian character comparable to the Arab state. Thus, the development of Islamic capitalism in Turkey exhibits the features which have been defined as 'Islamic calvinism', while in the Arab world capitalism developed under the influence of rentierism. Hence, any attempt at conflating realities as different as the Turkish and the Arab one, not to mention, say, the Malaysian case, under the label of an alleged 'Islamic model' are flawed, inasmuch as the local contexts are profoundly different. Nevertheless, a comparative analysis between Arab countries and Turkey presents several areas of interest. The issue of Islamic movements is closely related to the political economy of oil: in oil-producing countries, high oil prices allow the regimes to invest in their systems of incentives and disincentives in order to buy consensus or to repress dissent, while low prices weaken state control over society. Besides, high oil prices allow oil producing countries to sponsor social movements abroad. A case in point is that of the relationship between Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood; indeed, according to the UAE's newspaper *The National*, "There are strong indications of media help, political training and financial support" (Azem, 2012). In other words, the stronger an oil-producing country's economy is, the stronger their support can be for, and their influence over, external social movements. The

Muslim Brotherhood is obviously the most interesting example, being a movement which is active all over the Arab world and that has considerably benefited from the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings.

In general, the hegemony of the secular Arab state is challenged by Islamists; nevertheless, among Islamists, some embrace its logic by indigenizing through the adoption of the idea of the 'Islamic state'. The caliphate, as a myth, in Sorel's terms, is a powerful challenge to the Westphalian system, since it conceives of the *Aufhebung* (ablation) of the nation-state to a superior order. Such a myth allows social actors to dream of a future which could reconcile the utopia of the past (the perfect Islamic society of the *salaf*) with the challenges of globalization. The issue of the actual historical viability of the path of the reconstitution of the caliphate will not be touched upon here; what matters is the importance of this myth in shaping the imaginary vision of segments of the contemporary Islamic societies. To a contemporary Arab society which is increasingly immersed in a 'liquid modernity' (Bauman: 2000) which challenges entrenched values and social structures, an ever more important answer is to reconstruct a 'solid' modernity - in this case, in the form of an Islamic society. Thus, the resurgence of religion in the Arab world not only points to the emergence of 'multiple modernities' as an epistemological framework to interpret current transformations, but also to the possible inadequacy of the Westphalian system to indigenize the resurgence of religion.

Tibi (1998) argues that political Islam represents a threat to the very idea of the nation-state; however, Islamism could also trigger either a reconstruction of the nation-state *qua* Islamic state or the emergence of a new reality, such as a post-modern caliphate. While this claim is probably false if applied to movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, it may probably be applied to transnational *jihadi* movements such as Nigeria's Boko Haram or Somalia's Al Shabab. In areas such as the Sahel, the dissolution of the Westphalian order is indeed contributing to the emergence of liquid areas, where transnational *jihadism* is putting down roots. In this respect, Nigeria, Mali and Somalia are interesting case studies. What jihadists are challenging is also the nexus between sovereignty and territoriality, which is a pillar of the Westphalian system. Mendelsohn (596) highlights the hiatus between religious and Westphalian order, since

the religious source of authority is higher than any temporal claimant to authority. Therefore, the state can never be accepted as a source of authority. Because a divine order can accept no constraints or limits, it also negates physical borders, seen as arbitrary creations. Religion circumvents the territorial divide by seeking to unite people around a set of rules applied on a non-territorial basis.

In this sense, the victorious resurgence of political Islam associated with the so-called ‘Arab spring’ of 2011 will become not so much a victory of freedom over authoritarianism, as was often presented by the media, but a sign of the crisis of the Westphalian system in the Arab world. What this paper argues is also that oil played a crucial role in the survival of the Arab state during the 2011 uprisings. Indeed, while oil-producing countries, with the significant exception of Libya, resisted the waves of protests, several oil-importing regimes did not survive the storm. Furthermore, oil-producing countries, such as Qatar, were able to contribute to re-shaping the region, for example allegedly supporting movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Hence, the possible dissolution of the Syrian nation, cradle of the Arab state ideology, in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings of 2011 poses challenges to the whole system. In fact, the implosion of the Syrian state may be interpreted as a sign of weakness of the Arab state narratives as such. In other words, there is a decisive relationship between the political economy of oil and the emergence, as well as the resilience, of the MENA’s Westphalian system. What is challenged, for example, by non-state actors such as Al Qaeda and Hizb ut Tahrir, is the nation-state as an organizing principle, since they want religion as to be the unifying factor (Mendelsohn, 2012). This leads to a growing lack of definition between ‘international’ and ‘domestic’ issues. In the Arab world, this process is also particularly evident because of the rise of a public ‘Arab sphere’, made possible by the emergence of pan-Arab TV channels, such as Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera, and of the IT revolution.

Overcoming the Westphalian system: the changing media landscape

An analysis of the resilience of Arab autocracies cannot leave aside the new role of the media in the Arab world, since, as Lynch (2011, 301) puts it: “The uprisings destabilized the findings of a sophisticated literature on authoritarian persistence which had developed over the previous decade to explain the resilience of Arab authoritarian states in the face of multiple disruptive forces”. At the same time, the emergence of the Arab public sphere seems to point to a dissolution of the Westphalian system and to the birth of a new pan-Arab reality.

Undoubtedly, the new media have posed a wide array of challenges to the authoritarian Arab state. However, the role of the media in the ‘Arab spring’ has often been over-emphasized, to the point that they were sometimes presented as the cause itself of the uprisings; however, circumscribing their role should not lead to their being seen as entirely marginal (Comunello and Anzera: 2012, 453). Social media appear, because of their characteristics, to already be pointing to the overthrow of the Westphalian system. In this respect, a difference should be made between the pan-Arab TV

satellite channels, such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, and social media. Indeed, pan-Arab channels are still within the Westphalian system, since they arguably represent the foreign policy tools of the states which sponsor them. Since they are funded by oil-producing countries, the media war between the pan-Arab TV satellite channels and the national media is profoundly related to the political economy of oil and to the rentier state system. On the other hand, the development of social media is based on different dynamics, which imply the decay of the Westphalian system. While both phenomena reveal the emergence of an Arab public sphere, the second indicates a dissolution of the old order. However, the two intersect with each other, leading to the paradigm that Jenkins (2006, 259-260) calls “convergence culture”, characterized by a cross-fertilization among different media. Their convergence should not, however, obscure the fact that the two belong to two different universes: the first to a Westphalian one, the second to a post-Westphalian. Also in the analysis of the importance of social media in the 2011 uprisings, it is crucial to go beyond a “technological deterministic framework” (Comunello and Anzera: 2012, 453), by locating them in their historical situatedness.

The role of al-Jazeera in the 2011 uprisings was central (Rinnawi, 2012). First broadcasting in 1996, the Qatar-sponsored al-Jazeera has transformed the Arab media landscape. Rinnawi (2012, 123) carried out a study which supports the view that al-Jazeera’s coverage of the Egyptian uprisings tended to depict Mubarak’s regime in a negative way, while supporting the protesters. In particular, in the period between the 25 January 2011 and the 11 February 2011, al-Jazeera always presented the end of Mubarak as a “*fait accompli*”. Moreover, al-Jazeera’s coverage of the events, as revealed by the visual analysis of Rinnawi (2012, 124) was characterized by

glorification of the demonstrators, obfuscation of the Egyptian security forces (the police and the troops of the president), vulgarizing the Mubarak supporters, marginalization of the regime authorities, and finally demonization of Mubarak and his regime.

In other words, al-Jazeera’s coverage of the event was crucial in presenting the Egyptian uprisings as both positive and inevitable, and such a stance has been very influential on Western media as well. The narrative developed by al-Jazeera was that of the masses against the evil dictator, using a series of techniques to this end (Rinnawi: 2012, 126). On the whole,

al-Jazeera’s coverage of the Egyptian uprising was biased towards delegitimizing Mubarak’s regime and legitimizing the demonstrators among the Arab audiences in general, and specially among Egyptian audiences, which no doubt helped to resolve the ‘battle in Egypt’ with Mubarak’s resignation” (Rinnawi: 2012, 128).

The role played by al-Jazeera during the Arab uprisings well illustrates the difference between Qatar and Egypt. While the former, thanks to its oil-revenues, played an active role, projecting its influence externally and influencing the course of events by relying on the platform of al-Jazeera,

the latter played a passive role, enduring foreign influences. A decisive point Rinnawi (2012, 131) invites to focus upon is:

the role of al-Jazeera in the representation of the foreign policy of Qatar and the recent role played by Qatar as a regional power (equivalent to Egypt or Saudi Arabia) in imposing and removing regimes in the region – not with a military army, but with an army of journalists and one solitary broadcaster

In other words, the emergence of a pan-Arab public sphere strengthened the position of some countries, especially of oil-producers, while it weakened the others. It is not a coincidence that Qatar contributed huge amounts of money in grants, deposits and investments in the new Muslim Brotherhood-led Egypt (Gulf Times, 9/1/2013).

As Rinnawi (2012, 130) suggests, al-Jazeera played a crucial role not only during and after the uprisings, but also in the 15 years before, thereby paving the way for the change which took place in 2011. Clearly, the role played by al-Jazeera was not merely the outcome of the availability of oil revenues, but was based on advanced managerial skills. The final result of al-Jazeera's strategies was what Rinnawi (2006) calls "McArabism". On the whole, the change promoted by pan-Arab TV satellite channels has determined a comprehensive mutation in Arab consciousness (Pintak, 2009). The main point is that undoubtedly the media played an important role in the Arab uprisings. In particular, pan-Arab TV satellite channels played a decisive role in creating "insurgent consciousness" (McAdam, 1982) while social media offered new channels of mobilization. However, the role of the latter, though important, has often been over-emphasized; as Lynch (2011, 304) sums up by quoting a saying, "Twitter doesn't cause revolutions, but revolutions are tweeted". Also in the case of the social media, it is possible to observe the extent to which they are, on the one hand, a resource to mobilize the opposition, but they can also be successfully employed by the regimes to strengthen their control over the population (Lynch: 2011, 305). In this respect, the more financial resources a regime has, the more it can absorb the challenge represented by the social media, thus transforming a potential threat into a means to strengthen its power. Hence, it can be observed that regimes, such as Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen, where the financial means of the regimes were limited in proportion to the challenges, experienced crises. On the other hand, the development of social media in the Gulf monarchies did not significantly impact the stability of their regimes. As Lynch (2011: 307) affirms:

the strongest case for the fundamentally transformative effects of the new media may lie in the general emergence of a public sphere capable of eroding the ability of states to monopolize information and argument, of pushing for transparency and accountability, and of facilitating new networks across society.

On the one hand, the Internet represents a challenge to the Westphalian system, because it creates new patterns of interaction, such as the blogosphere, which cannot be contained within the borders

of the old system based on the nation-state. This is particularly true for the Middle East and North Africa, where the emergence of a transnational Arab public sphere challenges the existence of the assets established after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. However, a “new Westphalian web” is emerging, as Maher (2013) aptly called it, referring to the efforts of states to create the so-called “national Internet segment”. Such an attempt, not coincidentally, was initiated by a group of countries, the so-called Rucass, an acronym which stands for Russia, United Arab Emirates, China, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Sudan, later joined by Iraq (Maher: 2013). It is not a coincidence that this group includes oil monarchies and countries which host sovereign wealth funds and NOCs, showing the extent to which rentier states appear as pillars of the nation state, i.e. of the Westphalian order.

What is more, it has been argued that the Arab uprisings were possible also due to the meddling of foreign Arab countries, which allegedly sponsored the media and political forces in order to foster their geopolitical interests. In other words, oil rents allowed some Gulf states not only to prevent the propagation of the uprisings within their borders, but also to project their power abroad. These phenomena show a growing degree of integration among Arab countries, i.e. the emergence of an Arab public sphere in which pan-Arab TV channels, often funded through energy rents, as well as social media, played a role. What is generally missing in the accounts concerning the emergence of an Arab public sphere is the awareness of its links with oil and gas rents.

Broadly speaking, it may be appropriate to point out that the Information Technology revolution has not been a vector of change in itself, but is a factor of globalization. Thus, globalization has been significant inasmuch as it contributed to the erosion of the Arab state and to the social construction of a new Arab public sphere, strengthened by the emergence of new trans-Arab social groups.

Concluding Remarks

The present paper has argued that the Arab uprisings of 2011 are a sign of the crisis of the Westphalian order in the Middle East and that the rentier states, thanks to their capability to buy legitimacy, seem to be more resilient than other political systems. The present acute phase of crisis has been interpreted here as the manifestation of a profound tectonic shift which reveals the possible disintegration of the pseudo-Westphalian order, imposed by foreign powers in the Middle East and North Africa following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

The contention of this paper is that not only the social contract within the countries is at stake, but that the whole Arab Westphalian system is in crisis. In this regard, RST provides remarkably useful analytical tools to understand social reality. In oil-producing countries, the state can rely on huge financial means in order to 'buy' the consensus of the population. The allocation of oil rents is indeed a powerful tool for the state to defuse potential threats to its legitimacy. Moreover, an elaborate system of incentives and disincentives has been developed in order to contain Islamic activism (Wiktorowicz: 2001). In countries such as Egypt, the financial strength of the state was not sufficient to maintain this course of action. In contrast, Saudi Arabia, for example, responded to the potential unrest with subsidies which managed to neutralize the threats for the time being. It is in this regard that Friedman (2006)'s FLP possesses a degree of epistemic value, inasmuch as the elaboration of a system of incentives and disincentives is indeed a costly process. Thus, high oil prices provide regimes with more financial means to invest in guaranteeing their stability. On the whole, MENA's autocratic governments with rentier features seemed to be better equipped to weather the storm than oil-importing autocratic governments. Oil prices thus seems to have a remarkable influence in strengthening or weakening the Arab state, though more empirical research is certainly needed.

Broadly speaking, while some factors seem to point out to a downfall of the Arab Westphalian system, others seem to suggest its stability. The crisis of the Arab state system could thus lead to the surfacing of the 'failed state', that is to say, areas where heterogeneous forms of domination are exerted by non-state authorities. In other words, the crisis of the Westphalian system could pave the way to phases of religiously motivated instability not unlike those experienced by Europe during the Thirty Years War. It may therefore not be a coincidence that Syria, the country which played a remarkable role in the birth of the idea of Westphalian sovereignty in the Arab world (Lawson: 2000; Lawson: 2006), is now experiencing violent sectarian strife. An issue to be considered is also whether the current changes the Middle East and North Africa are undergoing may return the region to a sort of pre-Westphalian situation in the region, with the growing relevance of non-state actors such as transnational Islamic social movements, which are occasionally supported, or opposed by, oil-producing oil monarchies.

The crisis of the Westphalian system is also highlighted by the emergence of the myth of the caliphate as a model of political organization, which could allegedly overcome the failure of the Arab state *qua* secular state. The reconstruction of the caliphate is, indeed, seen as a long-term goal by heterogeneous Islamist movements which find in this model a point of convergence. Not only the success of Islamist movements, but also the emergence of a pan-Arab public sphere as well as of

a transnational Muslim middle class against the background of the crisis of the Westphalian order, may suggest that re-aggregations of Islamic societies along cultural and religious lines are not impossible in the following decades.

Islamism challenges the very idea of the Arab state *qua* nation-state, seen as an alien product. In this sense we can comprehend a complex and heterogeneous movement such as Salafism as the outcome of processes of hybridization between Islam and globalization. However, the resilience of the Westphalian system could be guaranteed by an ongoing mutation of Islamism, leading to the consolidation of 'Islam-national' tendencies, that is to say, social actors moving from the 'periphery' to the 'centre' through processes of indigenization *qua* Islamization of Arab state features. Indeed, at this point, the Arab state seems to have survived a phase of acute crisis, by maintaining its authoritarian character while being 'conquered' by Islamist movements and discourses.

However, the re-construction of the caliphate which, as the General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood Muhammad Badie recently repeated, is the long-term objective of the movement, points towards the creation of a post-Westphalian order in the region, which rejects the principle of the secular nation-state and proposes a form of state organization legitimized by Islamic principles. The success of Islamist movements, as well as the emergence of an Arabic public sphere through the developments of the media, may both contribute, in the long-term, to making the re-emergence of a post-modern caliphate less implausible.

In the short and medium term, a continuation of the authoritarian features of the Arab state is likely. Notwithstanding the fact that Arab regimes are greatly heterogeneous, all of them present authoritarian features which are rooted in the very genesis of the MENA's pseudo-Westphalian order. The features of the Arab state are of paramount relevance for the purposes of this study, since oil production had a great influence in shaping this state historical development in the XX century, as the theoretical framework formulated by RST helps to understand. On the whole, countries which do not accept Western democracy should not be seen as intrinsically 'problematic', but simply as proposing different models of political organization. Thus, instead of asking why certain countries do not embrace Western democracy, as was common in the '90s when 'modernization theories' reached their apex, different models of socio-politic development should be studied on their own terms. The crisis of state institutions could, in due time, drive new forms of organization which could replace them. In this scenario, actors such as the NOCs may be interpreted as tools of the nation-state to guarantee its stability within, but also to project their force outside. The presence of strong NOCs is, in other words, a mainstay of nation-state legitimacy, which explains the resilience

of Gulf monarchies. It is in this sense that the evolution of NOCs may suggest not conceptualizing them any more as instruments of the state, but as their very backbone.

Thus, it would be interesting to explore new ways of conceptualizing NOCs, no longer simply conceiving them as “instruments of the state”, as Marcel (2006: 231) still defines them, but as “bulwark[s] of nation-state legitimacy” in the age of globalization, as Clark and Monk (2010) defined sovereign wealth funds (2009), if not the very ‘structure’ of political power itself. Further research is needed on the relationships between nation-state and NOCs, as well as their potential to resist further waves of erosion of the MENA’s Westphalian system. What is more, these states could be conceptualized as pillars of the MENA’s Westphalian system, with respect to the integration between their energy industry and their governments. Thus, a sudden change in energy prices could threaten not merely the rentier states’ regimes, but could lead to the whole region plunging into chaos. Hence, if in the medium-long term the hydrocarbon sector does not manage to sustain the economy of oil-producing countries, this could trigger deeper processes of the dissolution of the Arab Westphalian order.

Glossary

FLP: *First Law of Petropolitics*

IOC: *International Oil Companies*

MENA: *Middle East and North Africa*

NOC: *National Oil Companies*

RST: *Rentier State Theory*

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