

# ANALELE UNIVERSITĂȚII BUCUREȘTI

## LIMBI ȘI LITERATURI STRĂINE

2013 – Nr. 2

### SUMAR • SOMMAIRE • CONTENTS

*LITERATURĂ ȘI STUDII CULTURALE /  
LITTÉRATURE ET ÉTUDES CULTURELLES /  
LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES*

IOANA COSTA, The Hermit and His World .....	3
DIANA YUKSEL, Toegye as a Teacher: From Sage Learning to Sagehood .....	11
ROXANA UTALE, Itinerari critici danteschi: Francesco de Sanctis .....	23
MARIA SÂRBU, Régime diurne et régime nocturne de l'image dans l'oeuvre d'Alain-Fournier .....	33
ANCA PEIU, A Rose for Edith: An Oasis of Poetry in the Citadel of Old New York Prose .....	45
IRINA DUBSKÝ, The Gates of the Invisible. Moby Dick as the Hieroglyph of the Absolute .....	55
ANCA-LUISA VIUSENCO, Sylvia Plath and Zelda Fitzgerald or Madness and Creativity Intertwined .....	65
IRINA-ANA DROBOT, Modernist and Postmodernist Representations of the World in Virginia Woolf's <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> and in Graham Swift's <i>The Light of Day</i> .....	75
HANIBAL STĂNCIULESCU, Strategie de riscrittura nella narrativa italiana postmoderna .....	89

MIHAI IACOB, La Indistinción ontológica del discurso erótico: <i>Coños</i> de Juan Manuel de Prada .....	101
LAURA SITARU, On Cultural and Political Constants in the Context of Contemporary Developments in the Arab World .....	115
DELIA GRIGORE, School Education and Rroma Ethnic Self-Esteem .....	127
*	
<i>Recenzii • Comptes rendus • Reviews</i> .....	147
<i>Contributors</i> .....	161

# ON CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONSTANTS IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ARAB WORLD

LAURA SITARU\*

## *Abstract*

During the recent revolutionary process, the classic pyramid describing the distribution of the power in Islamic traditional politic thought which have as basis the *umma* has been reversed. This mutation is calling other reformulations inside the conceptual field which commonly characterize the Arab Islamic political systems. Thus, concepts such “people”, “revolution”, “liberty”, “democracy” and “state” are reshaped within a new political meaning of political participation. The old traditional referents are replaced by a new schema of understanding the power. The current research’s purpose is to explain the reshaping of a classical politic paradigm, and to identify cultural continuities within this process, if any.

**Keywords:** archeology of concepts, cultural continuities, *al-‘amma*, *al-ḥāṣṣa*, popular culture, Arab street.

## 1. Introduction

The fall of the authoritarian regimes in the Arab countries, mainly in Egypt and Tunisia, besides the surprise caused by the political gesture *per se*, has brought back to the public attention an older issue about the specificity of the political system/ systems in the Arab-Islamic space. “Break or continuity” is the key question for the commentators of the historical moment called “The Arab Spring”. Traditional categories that set up the political systems in the Arab-Islamic world are easily identified, and also identifiable, in the contemporary development of events. This study, which resorts to the archaeology of concepts, is trying to look into realities and conceptual frameworks which are said to condition the current political developments in the Arab space.

The cases presented in this analysis refer to several social and political aspects related to the events that led to the toppling of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, among which the return to the forefront of the Arab street’s public life of religious forces and also the return to the role which the army continues

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\* University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Department of Arabic, lauramariana.sitaru@g.unibuc.ro.

to have in Egypt, perpetuating, as certain researchers believe, a classical tradition related to the organisation of the state in the cultural space defined by Islam, or simply defending its own interests as a caste or group to the detriment of another well known category of classical Islam, namely the *al-maṣlaḥatu l-ʿamma* (the general interest), that has been described by the authors of the medieval political treaties. A continuous polarization of social forces, accompanied by a biased redefinition of political options are other descriptions which commentators use especially when referring to the situation in Egypt, which has a great potential for unpredictable development.

Speaking in terms of the cultural and political heritage, the analysis can be extended, in order to strengthen the general framework of the research, towards the developments following the Libyan revolution, with recrudescing fragmentations of the tribal type, or towards the mainly denominational revolutionary conflicts in Bahrain or Syria. For each of the abovementioned situations one can provide reasons or conditionings of the “culturalist” type, as often occurs in studies and commentaries, just as they can be accounted for by a game of local and regional<sup>1</sup> political forces that are abruptly faced with a new social and political reality, with an often unpredictable evolution.

## 2. Excluding the Community (*umma*) from the Exertion of Power Equation. A Constant of Political Life in the Arab-Islamic World?

Talking about the modern history of the Islamic space, historians such as Mohammed Arkoun draw at least one continuity line between past and present. He says that one of the constants of the framework in which the political life in the Islamic space developed / is developing is the permanent exclusion of the community, *umma*, from the exertion of power<sup>2</sup> equation. It has always been marginalized, submitted to pressure and tyrannies of all kinds, left to the whims of the local power mechanisms, which, in time, led to a regeneration of pre-Islamic solidarity, mostly of the tribal type. The people, designated by words with a negative connotation similar in meaning to the French phrase *le menu peuple*, has never been recognized as a possible partner in the governing process. According to the political theories written during the Muslim Middle Ages, the community is the one that gives legitimacy to the leader, but actually the leader

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<sup>1</sup> We agree with the observation made by Willis (2012: 11): “it is likely that whilst most of the political landscape of the modern Maghreb has been produced by longer-term historical processes, parts of it are the product of much more recent developments”, thus trying to avoid any exaggeration when attaching to historical influence a more important role than that it actually played in the unfolding of the events analysed, while being fully aware that remarks of the historical and cultural/ culturalist type are often overrated.

<sup>2</sup> Arkoun (1986: 54).

has a divine mandate. The leader is not questioned; he plays the role which the heart has in relation with the other organs of the human body<sup>3</sup>;

*manzilatu-hu ka-manzilati Allāhi min al-<sup>c</sup>uqūli wa s-sā'iri l-mawğūdātī<sup>4</sup>*  
 'his role is that which God has in relation with the creatures endowed with reason and with the rest of His creation'.

The leader is a model in society and

*sukkānu l-madīnati <sup>c</sup>alay-him 'an yasīrū <sup>c</sup>alā girāri ra'īsi-him wa yuṣbiḥū sūrat<sup>m</sup> min-hu<sup>5</sup>*  
 'the city inhabitants have to follow the model of their leader and become his image'.

Al-Māwardī<sup>6</sup> (972-1058) however admits that the leader can be removed by the community on account of several reasons (*ğarh<sup>m</sup> fī l-<sup>c</sup>adālati<sup>7</sup>* and *naqs<sup>m</sup> fī badani-hi<sup>8</sup>*), because the community cannot be mistaken, as they are guided by Muslim clerics who, in turn, are inspired by the divine law.

It is interesting to notice, in the context of the ongoing developments in the Arab world (the so called “Arab Spring” and the post-revolutionary events) that the political principles formulated, at the level of ideas, in the Middle Ages of the Islamic civilisation have functioned, quite surprisingly and, most probably spontaneously, in the historical moments we've mentioned. The classical power pyramid with the community leader at the top is questioned by the very base of the pyramid- the people- who, as it did not happen very often in the political history of the Arab Islamic space, are now speaking out their minds.

The slogan that animated the uprising in Tunisia *aš-šā'bu yurīdu isqāta n-niẓāmi* 'the people wants the fall of the regime', taken over by the Egyptians in the Taḥrīr Square, and the protesters in Bahrain, Yemen and Syria, marks also at a linguistic level the unprecedented denial of an order considered unrepresentative and illegitimate. *Aš-šā'bu yurīdu* 'the people wants' – is a sentence that semantically rules out any ambiguity. Moreover, the slogan, said to have become a symbol of the Arab uprisings, was concocted, purposefully or accidentally, in the literary Arabic language – although, as is known, it started being used in Tunis – and not in a dialect of the Arabic language which everybody would have expected from a people's uprising. The slogan has provided the Arab world with a desideratum which was turned, at least in the case of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, into a historical reality.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Fārābī in his work *Al-Madīnatu l-fāḍila* refers to the city leader using these words, comparing him with the heart and the role it has in the human body, cf. Wafī (n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> Wafī, (n.d.: 30).

<sup>5</sup> Wafī (n.d.: 30).

<sup>6</sup> Al-Māwardī (1996: 29-30).

<sup>7</sup> When he is unfair in the governing process (literally: when he violates the idea of justice).

<sup>8</sup> When he has a physical impairment (preventing him from governing in good conditions).

The common reaction of the “Arab street” in 2011 came to confirm an evolution which experts explain today by means of the phrase “generational transformation”<sup>9</sup>, a change and re-setting of the concept of “Arab public sphere” that occurred especially after 2000, which was associated with the mass media development and the freedom of expression made possible by the virtual space of talk shows and forums<sup>10</sup>. Without a doubt, the mass media covering the pan-Arab world, such as the Qatar-based *al-Jazeera* TV channel, have contributed to the popularisation and “Arabisation” of certain national events or events with a national impact, such as the Palestinian issue, the protests organised in Egypt by the *Kefāya* Movement and the protest movements in Lebanon that followed the assassination of Rafīq al-Ḥarīrī. Television, a form of manifestation of the *popular culture* type, became, starting with the 1990s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and mainly after 2000, one of the vectors forming an identity, claiming the right to represent the reality. News as well as commercial TV channels adopt what experts call a *transnational approach* favouring the emergence of a “hybrid-culture”<sup>11</sup> within the Arab world, of a pan-Arab<sup>12</sup> media. The liberalisation of the public expression medium produces, as Kraidy (2012: 59) put it, “a shift in Arab public discourse toward free-market ideal, and economic neo-liberal values”.

This “new Arab public sphere”<sup>13</sup> stems from the national-type conditioning imposed by authoritarian regimes as well as from the regional stakes and clashes in which they were deeply involved, taking a common stand and having a common reaction, as a think-tank at Arab level. Therefore, the attempts of the acting regimes to explain the protest movements they are faced with on their national territories through all sorts of scenarios involving foreign “interference” in the society development are immediately disapproved of and sanctioned by this “new Arab public sphere”. The accusations levelled against Iran in the case of the Bahrain uprisings by the Gulf states did not go unsanctioned by the revolution generation, just as Asad’s discourse about the denominational nature of the conflict in Syria did not persuade anybody. Lynch (2012: 21-22) talks about a regionally integrated narrative, about a unification of the Arab public space which, although it is not completely new for the modern<sup>14</sup> period, is more intense than ever before. Thus, the concerted action

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<sup>9</sup> Lynch (2012: 12-15).

<sup>10</sup> *The new generation openly mocked their leaders on Al-Jazeera talk-shows and forums.* See Lynch (2012: 12).

<sup>11</sup> Designated as such by Kraidy (2010: 13).

<sup>12</sup> An October 2007 Gallup survey shows that in Saudi Arabia, one of the most problematic media-consuming markets, 93% of the population watches pan-Arab TV channels in order to keep abreast of the latest developments. See Kraidy (2010: 97).

<sup>13</sup> A phrase coined by Lynch (2012: 16).

<sup>14</sup> Lynch (2012: 33) discusses the large scale street movements of the 1950s and 1960s, when masses were mobilised by the idea of pan-Arab unity whose initiator, Egyptian president Gamāl Abdel Nasser, used the radio station “The Voice of the Arabs” to air his ideological

taken by the Arab street in the run up to and during the uprisings against the authoritarian regimes in 2011 can be associated with the ideological mobilisation of masses which the Arab world experienced during what historians call the “Arab Cold War”<sup>15</sup>, but we believe that a distinction should be made, which is related to the unity of a generation that provided a common response to authoritarianism, irrespective of its ideological nature. From Morocco to Bahrain, from Egypt to Syria, people denounced the idea of authoritarian leadership and not the form of government that exerted this type of authority.

In the context of the talk about power and its projections in the Arab-Islamic space it’s worth mentioning the fact that the good governing principles carefully drafted by the medieval theoreticians of the Muslim political system have always represented a desired, ideal order, and consequently an utopian order, which permanently clashed with the necessary order. The theme of chaos (*al-fawḍā*) and disorder (the philosopher Al-Ġazālī is the author of the famous sentence which became a governing principle: a bad, even unjust governing is better than disorder and anarchy) has served, during the history of governing in the Islamic system, as a faithful ally of the necessary order principle to the detriment of legitimate order or governing.

Returning to the conditions in which *umma*, the community conceived of as the base of power, could use its right to remove its leader, the classical political treaties write about the lack of *adāla* or treating the community while trampling over the principle of *equity* or *social justice*. According to classical authors, the leader has to pay attention to the *maṣlaḥa*, the interest of the community and its progress, ensuring the existence of social equity as a principle underlying the functioning of the *umma*. In his work *Al-Madīnatu l-fāḍila* (‘The virtuous city’) Al-Fārābī<sup>16</sup> the virtue of social and attitudinal equity and justice is almost redundantly used:

*’an yakūna muḥibb<sup>m</sup> li-l’adli (...), ’an yakūna ’ādil<sup>m</sup> fī aḥlāqi-hi, fa-lā ifrāṭa wa lā tafriṭa*<sup>17</sup>  
‘to love justice..., to be fair in his behaviour, to neither exaggerate nor neglect’.

Economic and social polarisation has reached a very high level in the contemporary Arab space dominated by authoritarian systems, but this is not something new for the political system discussed. The gap between elites and

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convictions, in a similar or comparable way to that in which the *Al-Jazeera* station is today used sometimes for airing political messages or for supporting regional political actions.

<sup>15</sup> The phrase refers to the period of the 1950s and 1960s, when two ideological blocs emerged within the Arab world, the pro-Soviet bloc ideologically dominated by the pan-Arab doctrine and the pro-western bloc made up mostly of the regional monarchies, with spectacular shifts from one side to the other, depending on the internal developments in certain Arab states (Iraq and Egypt for example).

<sup>16</sup> Abū Naṣr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Fārābī (872-950), an Arab philosopher.

<sup>17</sup> Wafī (n.d.: 33).

masses, clearly and undoubtedly marked at the level of the related Arab linguistic terminology, is a constant of the Islamic cultural world, which has propagated a well-defined separation of social roles through customs, not necessarily through treaties or laws, a separation which is more precise in comparison with other political systems. The popular masses (*al-ḥāṣṣa*) have developed, in time, a system of values parallel to the official system, represented by the state (through the caliph) and the clerics' Islam, thus engendering a people's Islam, an Islam of brotherhoods and religious orders, a mix of *ṣarī'a* and local traditions. We should also mention that radical Islam is partly a manifestation of people's Islam, as it is well known that the leaders of the Islamist movements reject everything that is related to exegesis and the theological interpretation effort, since these are not part of their reference Islam.

The secular Arab republics instated after WWII have developed a legitimizing discourse based on the consensus of the *umma*, of the national community, defined through the word *šā'b* 'people'<sup>18</sup>, but political practice, just like in the historical past, imposed another type of reality. Be they republics or monarchies, the Arab states continued to govern by granting power, in a discretionary way, to a caste, either we speak about military or religious regimes. What is relevant is the fact that, while the ruling political regimes were concerned with putting the blame for the protest movements against them on external causes and regional or international power games, a whole generation representing the despised category of the Arab street (*al-ḥāṣṣa*) was developing a unitary revolutionary rhetoric which contested the *madīnat az-zulm* ('the city of injustice') and its practices. We find in the unitary/common reaction of the Arab street a revival of the principle of the Arab unity, as a founding identity principle and especially as a reconfirmation of the existence of a gap between political elites and the *umma* ('the city people', in the words of Al-Fārābī). The people are becoming once again aware of their right to take action and to participate in the city affairs and they understand their role of *ḥāfiẓ* ('guardian') of the good behaviour of the leader. The examples offered by the *new Egyptian public sphere* ready to react to each gesture of the power that is deemed a deviation from the just behaviour are from now on a prototype of social participation.

### 3. Classical Principles, Current Contexts

In the context of the Arab uprisings, the word *adāla* has been brought up again in discussions by various commentators who underline the importance of establishing a transition balance, a balance between social classes in the period following the overthrow of authoritarian regimes. Invoking the concept of

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<sup>18</sup> Sitaru (2009: 35-106).

*‘adāla intiqāliyya* and guaranteeing the implementation of the transition balance is a *sine qua non* for preventing social chaos and the almost unavoidable sliding towards a civil war<sup>19</sup>. Reforming institutions is in the opinion of Arab commentators a priority of the present historical moment, because, as they put it, the state institutions have inevitably been associated with the oppressive actions of the political regimes recently ousted from power. Social equity or justice should not be mistaken for vindictive actions, neither should it be the appanage of one social category or another, and especially it should not be politicized. The Iraqi society, after the removal from power of Saddam Hussein’s regime, offers a counter-example to the social equity model in a post-authoritarianism era. Another possible such example is given by Bashar al-Asad’s Syria whose evolution towards denominational and political vendetta actions is already a fact. Libya is in a slightly similar situation, where tribal-type segregation, this time coupled with a precarious situation of the central institutions, creates the framework for social developments with high potential for conflict.

Again, we are far from Al-Fārābī’s ideal virtuous city, this *al-madīnatu l-fāḍila* which is defined by opposing it to other possible cities and types of social organization:

*al-madīnatu l-fāḍilatu muḍāddātu-ha al-madīnatu l-ḡāhilatu, al-madīnatu l-fāsiqatu, al-madīnatu l-ḡāllatu, al-madīnatu l-mubaddalatu*<sup>20</sup>

‘the virtuous city is defined by comparison to its contraries: the ignorant city, the city on the wrong path, the city that lost its way, the *rotten* city’

and where the inhabitants’ participation in the life and destiny of their city seems to be an immutable principle:

*‘afrādu l-madīnati murīdūna wa muḥtārūna*<sup>21</sup>

‘the people of the city express their will and have the right to elect’.

The model described by Al-Fārābī in the 10<sup>th</sup> century is not far from the claims of the revolutionary Arab generation – the new Arab public sphere – as they were formulated during the people’s uprisings of 2011 and 2012. The philosopher Al-Fārābī explains in detail the principles underlying the *al-madīnat al-fāḍila* and which characterize the latter as the opposite of *ẓulm* (oppression, injustice, authoritarian system), these two principles being *al-‘adl wa-l karāma* ‘justice and dignity’. *Ḥuriyya wa karāma* ‘freedom and dignity’ are the two

<sup>19</sup> According to Ibrahim Sharqiya Farihat in his editorial *Al-‘Adālatu l-intiqāliyya fī duwali r-rabī‘i l-‘arabiyy* (The transition balance/ equity in the countries of the arab spring), published on www.aljazeera.net, and read on June 1, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Wafī (n.d.: 72).

<sup>21</sup> Wafī (n.d.: 41).

fundamental concepts based on which the regional common *narrative* of the Arab uprisings was formed, and which have been mentioned by Lynch (2012: 21).

The organisation into “clans” of the Islamic world, actually a continuation of a particular form of organisation dating from the pre-Islamic period, is another constant of the political history of this space which can be seen even today and which has materialised in what is mainly known as a conflict of denominations. In order to permanently support our arguments on the Arab theoreticians of the political and social phenomenon, we mention the observations of the historian Ibn Khaldoun (1332-1406) referring to the fact that Islam, which tried to offer Arabs a supra-tribal identity, has failed in its attempt, because the clan spirit (*‘aṣabiyya*) continued to mark the destiny of this space. On the other hand, there are many examples in the history of Islam when ideologies (of religious inspiration or not) were subordinated to and used by the political factor, as Ferjani (2005) remarked. He said that the religious history of Islam is made up of a long series of circumstantial doctrines that use religion to serve strategies and options that were actually chosen without taking into account any religious<sup>22</sup> views. Mentioning Ibn Khaldoun once again, the evolution of dynastic powers has nothing to do with religion: they were carried to power by a *da‘wa* ‘message’, that served a *‘aṣabiyya* ‘clan’ in order to instate a type of *mulk* ‘royalty’<sup>23</sup>.

Much debated was the denominational<sup>24</sup> side of the Syrian revolution, frequently called “the Syrian Sunni revolution”, referring to the fact that most of the people who contest the Asad regime are from the majority population of Sunni orientation (75% of the total population). At the same time the confessional side has become more visible, which makes the Syrian uprising different from the uprisings in the other Arab countries. The official discourse of the Asad regime resorts to many such arguments, accusing the “Sunni” opposition of sectarian tendencies and of trying to undermine the Syrian unity. This is a card whose stake the Asad regime understands very well, a card successfully played in the past by the stakeholder-power, France. In his most recent work, Haddad (2012) explains the power network around president Asad, built on strong economic interests and which gathers around the president’s family not only elites of the Alawite minority but also elements of the Christian and Sunni bourgeoisie of the Syrian big cities, thus doing away with the arguments in favour of a strictly denominational explanation of the conflict. In this context, the observers of the Syrian situation draw attention to the fact that the opposition is not made up of only one denomination, but it actually attracted

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ferjani (2005: 141).

<sup>23</sup> See Sitaru (2009: 35-106).

<sup>24</sup> The theme was approached in the article “Turning the Syrian political discourse denominational” in 22, on February 28, 2012, <http://www.revista22.ro/confesionalizarea-discursului-politic-sirian-13587.html>.

Christian, Druze and Alawite elements around itself, because the ruling regime, although it is part of the last minority above mentioned, does not exclusively serve its interests.

Another constant of the political history in the Islamic space, which is at the same time a source of permanent tension in the political organisation and, especially, a very topical issue, is the role of the military power in organising the city. This is an aspect noticed by Oriental studies scholars and also by the Egyptian reformer of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, ‘Alī Abderrāziq<sup>25</sup>, who writes that Islam was set up as a cultural and political system as a consequence of the military and war power, stemming from the Imperial adventure and not from the prophetic revelation. The army is, in the classical hierarchy of the Muslim power, one of the pillars supporting the state (*dawla*), frequently crossing over the demarcation line imposed by its theoretical role. Of course, at present, armies such as that of Egypt, which are a micro-state in their own right, and also the extremely comprehensive security apparatuses developed along decades of governing by authoritarian political regimes, as was the case of Syria but also of Algeria and Bahrain, to give but a few examples, have a decisive role in the political developments of the moment. In the case of Egypt, after decades of military governing, after decades of anti-monarchy and military revolution (1952) which entailed, among other things, the rise to the forefront of political life of some figures coming from the army (as was the case with the last three presidents of the Egyptian republic), it is obvious for any knowledgeable observer that the current fight, including the electoral fight, is not waged between general categories such as the religious or the lay categories; we are actually witnessing a clash between a military and militarized system, on the one hand, and a civil society that is now taking shape, on the other hand<sup>26</sup>. Neglecting or disregarding the power of the army in ensuring internal political and social peace could have disastrous consequences for Egypt in the coming years. The dismantling of Saddam Hussein’s army, after the US troops entered Iraq, caused an extremely aggressive response from the military elements, one of the obvious causes of the state of chaos in terms of security in which the country was plunged for quite a long period of time. Actually, the militarization of the political power and of the governing act per se was happening in almost all the Arab countries, except for the monarchies, in the 1950s.

*Coups d’etat* or military revolutions mark, in mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, a change of the political class, an upside-down move in the power hierarchy, and also in the social hierarchy of the Arab states. Revolutions bearing the label of “the young officers” or “the free officers” do not change only one political regime but the image of an entire society which reconsiders its own functioning norms.

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<sup>25</sup> Abderraziq (1994).

<sup>26</sup> *The Economist*, “The presidential elections in Egypt: Egypt’s second republic”, May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

At the same time there emerges another type of political narrative which is significantly different from the pre-revolutionary themes, a product of the Egyptian upper and middle classes<sup>27</sup>. Actually, as is well known, a legitimising discourse should accompany the political gesture or action. The message which the Egyptian military system propagates among its representatives, for instance, and conveyed to the receiving-masses capitalises on elements taken from a collective political imaginary/mind where the fear of chaos and insecurity are two essential elements.

The role which the army and the military-type structures have in the Arab states that have recently witnessed revolutionary events could be co-related more with the changes of the 1950s, when the series of regime collapses brought the army at the top of the power hierarchy, rather than with a historical tradition in which military castes turned dynasties<sup>28</sup> have governed Islam for many centuries<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Voll et al. (2012).

<sup>28</sup> The Mamluk dynasty that ruled in Egypt between 1250 and 1517 is just the best known example of military who gained the power, not to speak about the tradition of the influence of military castes on the state leadership, which resulted, among others, in the emergence of the function of *sultan* in mid 11th century, who, together with the caliph, led the Arab-Islamic caliphate for centuries. Cf. Hitti (2008: 301).

<sup>29</sup> The role of the military in the organisation and functioning of the Abbasid Caliphates, and also of the states that emerged against the backdrop of its fall, is well expressed in the titles the military have or that have been attributed to them. Therefore, titles such as *rukn ad-dawla* (the pillar of the state or governing), *mu'izz ad-dawla* (the one who strengthens the state), *ʿadud ad-dawla* (the arm of the state) or *'abnā' ad-dawla* (the sons of the state), show the uncontested importance of the military in Islamic polity, especially after the 10th century. Cf. Turner (2004: 1-22).

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