# Transnational Immigrant Narratives on Arab Democracy: The Case of Student Associations at UC Berkeley

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyses the discourse of Arab transnational student associations at the University of California in Berkeley (UCB) on Arab democratization. It places focus on their narratives during the 2011 uprisings. Its findings, based on interviews and qualitative data, show that these student associations craft a discursive and broader conception of Arab democracy not confined to suffrage and institutions, and extending beyond the borders of the Arab world. They further draw on various indirect mechanisms in their host land to convey their discourses and impact homeland democratization. Still, their agency remains constrained by several structural factors.

## INTRODUCTION

Democracy is an idea that walks upon the earth (Blaug, 1996: 49)

The present article contributes to the underdeveloped literature exploring the linkages between transnational immigrant movements and the construction of democracy in the Arab world. Adopting a transnational[1] analytical frame (Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004), I look at transnational student associations as an important – albeit under-explored – category of immigrant actors[2] acting as diffusers, negotiators and contesters of democratic notions.

Although the relationship between migration and democracy has been examined in various contexts (Rueland et al., 2009), there is little scholarship regarding the impact of Arab migrant communities on eroding authoritarianism. This may be explained by the fact that, until recently, the Arab region was considered unreceptive to democracy (Diamond, 2010). The recent revolts, however, call for "imagining the 'political' otherwise" (El Shakry, 2011). In particular, they draw attention to the role of "ordinary people" in contesting power structures (Bayat, 2011: 386). The agency of Arab youth in these revolts has elicited particular interest (Al Momani, 2011).

This article reports on the results of a case study focused on Arab transnational student associations at the University of California in Berkeley (UCB). The analysis restricts itself to these associations' engagement in the discursive core of democracy,[3] and does not pretend to assess their capacity to impact democratization at institutional levels. Rather, it seeks to explore whether, and if so how, these youth associations circulate notions on democracy, on the one hand, and contest certain political perspectives on the other.

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I focus, in particular, on the transnational democracy narratives that these associations articulate and practice on campus. These are defined as the argumentative discourses negotiated in "student-inhabited transnational spaces" (Gargano, 2009: 332), through which they hope to boost democratization in the Arab world, and impact conceptions of Arab democracy in the United States (USA) and globally.[4]

The article explores the extent to which such transnational flows of democracy, conveyed in the realm of the "weak publics," have a purchase on political reality (Fraser, 2007). The argument speaks to the debate stressing the conception of democracy as a transnational discursive project, extending beyond electoral processes, elites' negotiations, institutions and national borders.[5] Here, Arab democracy need not be framed only as the culmination of transition processes initiated by the dissolution of the authoritarian regime. Nor is it the exclusive domain of Arab legislatures and political elites. Rather, democracy is constructed and practised as a set of complex discursive interactions linking national, transnational, and global spheres. These discourses matter in that they produce and contest knowledge on how democracy ought to be built. In this view, measuring democratization is not confined to procedural criteria but includes the participation of ordinary people in "marshalling public opinion as a political force" (Fraser, 2007:1).

The first part of this article argues for integrating migration agency-driven research in the study of political change in the Arab region. It further elaborates on why transnational student associations are insightful agents for framing transnational democracy narratives. The second part studies the nature and contents of the narratives that UC Berkeley groups articulate. It goes on to frame the mechanisms that they draw on to convey their discourses, and then identifies the different targeted audiences. The third part contextualizes the significance of these narratives.

## ARAB IMMIGRATION AND DEMOCRACY: AN UNDEREXPLORED RELATIONSHIP

For all the discussion on immigration and democracy in developing countries (Itzigsohn and Villacres, 1998), little attention has been paid to the linkages between Arab migrants and the diffusion of democratic norms. One further notes a paucity of research on how migration has remodeled the Arab state and its political system (Brand, 2006). Instead, research has focused on external democracy promotion through the state or non-state organizations (Magen et al., 2009). Moreover, the research agenda on Muslim and Arab communities in the West has downplayed any positive relationship between immigrants and development (Ozkan, 2011: 3). Recent scholarship has called for reframing such research agendas (Brinkerhoff, 2008).

The Arab revolts have evidenced not only that alternative public spheres matter in our analysis of today's transformations but also that transnational and local spheres of contestation are mutually reinforcing (Shiri, 2011). There is increasing awareness amongst migration scholars that the agency of Arab immigrants in these transitions needs to be better understood (Fargues, 2013).

Furthermore, linkages between Arab out-migration and political contestation do not constitute a new phenomenon, but are anchored in a longstanding though underexplored legacy. Recognizing the potential transformative nature of politicized migrant communities, authoritarian Arab regimes have for decades sought to monitor their Diasporas (Fakhoury, 2012). Despite these pressures, Arab immigrant associations channeling discourses of dissent have proliferated in destination countries not directly subject to the surveillance of the Arab state (Tabar, 2010).

## THEORIZING TRANSNATIONAL STUDENT ASSOCIATIONS

Transnational student associations are framed here as border-crossing formations bringing together various student migrant categories, namely second generation immigrants, and international students

(considered as temporary migrants who can potentially become immigrants). As these associations also attract non-migrants and student migrants from different nationalities, it is necessary to high-light their heterogeneity.

Social movement studies have analysed student associations as influential political agents in resisting oppression in various geopolitical contexts (Mashayekhi, 2001; Weinberg and Walker, 1969). Migration scholars have further sought to address the research gap on students as important migrant categories (King and Raghuram, 2013). They have also highlighted student migrants' posi-tive influence on democracy (Spilimbergo, 2009).

Student immigrant transnationalism has been however mostly tackled through the prism of inter-national student migration (ISM). Transnational student associations, which provide a nexus for local, diasporic and transnational linkages, remain under-researched as units of transnational migra-tion and as transnational political actors.

As these associations merge multiple social spaces on campus, they allow for observing how various orientations and power dynamics shape what Seyla Benhabib (2007: 32) calls "boundary-transcending discourses of democratic iterations." As such, they provide a meaningful field to chart transnational democracy narratives.

Mapping the discourses of transnational student association on democracy and tracing their out-puts presents a methodological challenge, as they operate across pluralized sites of interaction, and are rather un-institutionalized. Research has, however, evidenced that migrants diffuse democracy-enhancing transfers at a non-policy level (Rother, 2009). Based on methods such as claim-making and awareness raising, such contributions can spread "counter-hegemonic" conceptions challenging policy agendas (Basok, 2009). Through exchange processes theorized in the social remittances liter-ature (Levitt, 1998), these transfers may acquire far-reaching and multiplying effects.

## CASE AND DATA COLLECTION

The choice of Arab student associations at UCB to carry out exploratory research for this article is based on several considerations. While migration studies focus on the USA as a major receiving point for students (Hazen and Alberts, 2006), the choice to adopt an American university as the site for such an inquiry is based on such universities' traditional role in inducing theory-driven revolu-tions in the areas of ethnicity and migration and social justice (Tölölyan, 1996). UCB stands out as an important theatre for such revolutions, particularly given the favourable context the university provides for the organization of transnational student associations.[6]

Furthermore, Arab student activism – not only at Berkeley but also in similar US institutions of higher learning where levels of activism tend to be relatively high (Lipset, 1971) – remains under-studied. This has occurred even though the USA constitutes a pivotal site for the development of Arab identity in Diaspora (Cainkar, 2006; Salaita, 2005).

The article's findings are built on 40 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2011 and 2013 on the Berkeley campus with key student actors affiliated with relevant associations. While most of my respondents are Arab-American and international Arab students,[7] I also interviewed students from other backgrounds so as to acquire a critical assessment of Arab Diaspora politics on campus. Where available, I analysed these associations' statements and social media posts. I more-over conducted ten on-campus interviews with professors and scholars with considerable knowl-edge of the studied groups.

I extracted the Berkeley associations' narratives on democracy from a series of conversations revolving around Arab politics on campus, immigrant politics, and Diasporic engagement in Arab origin societies. I paid specific attention to their discourses and actions during the 2011 Arab uprisings. I assessed how these associations enact in their discourses the concept of

"democracy", and the notion of "Arab democracy" and "democratization". Then I identified recurrent semantics and storylines they use to construct their argumentative discourses. I further detected the methods they draw on to convey their viewpoints. Last, I identified the audiences they seek to target.

## TYPOLOGIES AND PROPERTIES OF ARAB TRANSNATIONAL STUDENT CAMPUS ASSOCIATIONS

I investigate in this article all student associations at Berkeley,[8] in which Arab[9] transnational communities[10] on campus play a significant role, regardless of their degree of political engagement. These include: the Arab Recruitment and Retention Center (ARRC), the Arab Student Union (ASU), the Egyptian Student Association (ESA), the Lebanese Student Association (LSAB), the Muslim Students Association (MSA) and the Graduate Muslim Students Association (GMSA), the Middle East Arts and Film Association (MEAFA), the Middle Eastern Muslim and South Asian Association (MEMSA), and Students for Justice Palestine (SJP).

While some of these associations define themselves in relation to their country of origin (LSAB and ESA), others, such as ARRC and ASU, are concerned with Arab transnational communities. Although Arabs constitute a significant group in MSA and MEMSA, these associations lump together various ethnicities and geopolitical contexts, highlighting shared features and grievances between Middle Easterners, Arabs, South East Asians, and Muslims. SJP, which rallies for the Palestinian cause, draws support not only from Arabs but also from Americans and Israelis.

Associations dealing with one Arab homeland or with Arab communities are composed of students who define themselves either as Arab-Americans or Arab international students. All other associations are best described as heterogeneous arenas bringing together Diaspora communities (hyphenated Americans), temporarily incoming students, and non-migrants acting on behalf of Muslim or Arab interests.

Except for MSA and SJP, these associations do not define themselves as political. They articulate their political stances under the guise of socio-cultural activities. These associations' leadership and constituencies shift yearly and their representatives can only give approximate membership numbers.[11]

## TRANSNATIONAL DEMOCRACY NARRATIVES

The associations studied here articulate a broad concept of democratization, which they frame as a multi-sited process of change negotiated through enforcement mechanisms and non-institutional flows within and beyond the Arab borders: "Arab democratization is not necessarily a homeland issue but a question raised in international spheres".[12]

In their perspective, their role in democratization is not confined to impacting homeland institutions but extends to altering public attitudes and political agendas towards the Arabs and the Arab world. From this point of view, transnational democratization is a participatory process whereby Arabs uproot mechanisms in the global community impeding democratization in Arab national contexts. All of these groups contend that they make a concrete contribution to their homeland's democratization insofar as they seek to shape a conception of Arab democracy based on empowerment and to impact perceptions and policies in the USA.

To construct the linkages between their host land activities and democratization in their homeland, they posit that the USA is a global actor whose foreign policies have important implications

for Arab politics. As such, their stances towards the Arab world cannot be extricated from their involvement in immigrant politics.

## The claim of empowerment

A core narrative advanced by the Berkeley student associations juxtaposes the achievement of Arab democracy with empowerment. The latter consists of adjusting unequal power relationships affecting Arabs globally. It presupposes that Arabs acquire resources and develop strategies within their homeland and beyond so they could have the agency to shape political processes.

These groups portray their involvement in US immigrant politics as the most practical path to contribute to Arab empowerment. ARRC, ASU, MEMSA and MSA seek to improve Arab communities' representation in the student body and student government, and increase access to resources at UCB. MEMSA has been lobbying for the creation of a suitable ethnicity box on UCB student applications so that Arabs could separate themselves from the labels of "White/Caucasian" or "Other". Approved in April 2012 by the student government, the Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA) checkbox is seen as providing Arabs with a distinct identity dissociated from a colonial understanding of geography, and as disaggregating data so that inequalities confronting these communities could be detected.[13] Through various educational initiatives such as lectures and youth symposiums, associations such as ARRC and ASU seek to provide Arabs in their community with knowledge about their rights and history.

The Berkeley associations portray actions directed towards empowering Arabs as contributing tools to democratization insofar as they allow Arabs to have a say in agenda setting. Such actions posit democratization as a task in which all Arabs, even on campus, may participate.

## Arabs' ability to "own their own narrative"

Another discourse common to UCB associations focuses on controlling the way academic and public spheres reproduce the Arab narrative and narrativize Arab history. This primarily entails debunking colonialist and orientalist perceptions. ASU, MEAFA, MEMSA, MSA and SJP claim that they strive through outreach activities (such as online discussions and lectures) to dismantle misperceptions about Arabs as "terrorists", "un-democrats", and "uncivilized". They moreover stress the necessity of generating "counter-narratives" to the dominant narrative about Arabs in the USA. This consists of altering the mainstream understanding of Arabs and Arab history since the rise of Islam to the post 9/11 war on terror. Some groups even advocate the recruitment of more Arab professors who would bring what is perceived as a "genuine" pedagogical narrative about Arabs to UCB.

Against this backdrop, democratizing the Arab homeland is not only about altering Arab regimes, but also about removing international and historical obstructions that have prevented Arabs from "prospering" and have affected Arab development.[14]

To convey their message to the wider public, MSA and SJP reformulate issues such as the struggle against Islamophobia in the US under the banner of social justice and civil rights narratives. They engage in advocacy work with Mexican and Black-American student coalitions so as to integrate their struggle, within and beyond the Arab borders, with the plight of other communities of colour.

## Recasting the American debate on Arab democracy

Many of the activists I interviewed argue that their indirect impact on Arab democratization consists in renegotiating what Arab democracy means in the US public sphere, and changing the policy discourse on democracy promotion:

> We seek to impact the prism through which Americans understand democracy in the Middle East
> . . .we advocate that Americans have a critical eye on the media so they deconstruct by themselves
> how political agendas frame the dialogue on Arab democracy.[15]

My interviews revealed that many activists seek to spread awareness about an "indigenous" notion of Arab democracy dissociated from the Western concept of liberal democracy. This notion is based on the conception of democracy as "self-determination" or a process from below whereby Arabs, emancipated from external pressures, choose their own leadership.

> Democracy is a word that Arab citizens need to define for themselves. We should be asking them:
> what does it mean to you? And how would you like us to be part of the process? . . .the challenge
> is how to provide foreign aid without influencing politics.[16]

Associations such as MSA and SJP co-organize debates and lectures in which they explain why Arab peoples have a negative perception of pro-western democratic promotion schemes.[17] According to many of my respondents, the recent Arab revolts provide an important juncture in setting the stage in public discussions for a "new era of relations between the USA and the Arab world and for a new US foreign policy".[18] Consequently, they set out to inform their community about how US global political interests impact the course of the uprisings.

A central argumentative discourse that many of my respondents use in their outreach activities consists of advocating a universal understanding of democracy. Here, endorsing Arab bottom-up democratization becomes a global commitment to democratic morality and civil liberties. This understanding of democracy is further extended by SJP and MSA activists to construe a discursive link between universal commitment to democracy and the Palestinian cause: "if you support the Palestinian Resistance, you support all democratization attempts."[19] The groups advocate an "anti-apartheid conception of democracy" rooted in the eradication of racial differences and in the support for the oppressed irrespective of territoriality.

## Debunking Arab authoritarianism

Although many interviewed activists acknowledge that the narratives discussed above draw on convoluted circuits to reach the homeland, they argue that their most concrete contribution to Arab democratization lies in "indirectly debunking Arab authoritarianism."[20] Such a strategy consists in pressuring the American public and elites to stop economic and political support to Arab autocracies.

One of the most efficient means of achieving this end, according to associations such as MEMSA, MSA, and SJP, is to raise awareness about the implications of the "purchasing power." I.e., is money spent on products, tuition fees or taxes being invested in supporting dictatorships? The aim is to create a sense of collective responsibility vis-à-vis any complicity with Arab autocracies by spreading the following messages: "you are perpetuating the problem, you are implicated;" "we need to recognise how we perpetuate power relations and find ways to hold ourselves accountable."[21]

Drawing on the success of the divestment campaign from Apartheid era South Africa in the 1980s, MSA and SJP lobby the University of California to divest from companies investing "into any sustenance of oppression" in the Arab world.[22]

According to many student activists, the Arab uprisings, particularly in Egypt, were an opportune historical moment for Americans to pressure their representatives to stop aid to Arab autocracies, through lobbying at local and state levels.

## Democratizing the homeland? The reluctance to impose prescriptions

While the conception of democracy as empowerment and as a civil rights narrative is salient in their arguments, associations such as ASU, MEMSA, MSA and SJP portray democratization

through transnationalism as a duty of limited interference: "we want to influence the homeland without being colonial."[23]

On campus, the 2011 Arab uprisings spurred reflections on how to support Arab transitions without imposing norms exogenously: "Arab Diasporas on campus have to support democratization in a cautious way so as not to associate themselves with what they frame as 'American imperialism'."[24] Many of my respondents maintain that they make a better contribution to Arab democratization through soft methods such as cheering rather than by seeking to instigate revolts.

Although these student groups are conscious of the limits of indirect engagement, they still contend that they spread democratic practices to their homeland by way of visits, online activism and grassroots partnerships with homeland universities. According to LSAB members, the association plays an indirect role in spreading democratic attitudes to Lebanon by promoting non-sectarian thinking through exchange projects with Lebanese universities. Arab activists in MSA and SJP emphasize their subtle contribution to Arab democratization insofar as they share with their homeland information on human and civil rights through educational and cultural partnerships.

## CONTEXTUALIZING DISCURSIVE ENGAGEMENT IN DEMOCRACY

As underscored above, the Berkeley student associations articulate Arab democracy as a set of discourses centered on empowerment, rooted in civil rights narratives and constructed in a reflexive relationship with the USA. Their discourses are better understood once placed in the broader context of Arab ethnic identity formation in the USA. The groups studied here construct their narratives in relation to Arabs' perceptions of exclusion from socio-political spheres in the US host land. Concurrently, they tie their narratives to the "emergence of the US as a global superpower", a factor central to the articulation of the Arab experience in the USA (Cainkar 2006: 249). In this view, US media and policy discourses have produced particular representations of Arabs in their homeland; this in turn has shaped dominant attitudes vis-à-vis Arabs in US public spheres. Further, the associations' coalition building with other communities of colour on campus cannot be dissociated from the discussion on how Arab activism drew on civil rights movements' narratives to reposition itself in the American context.[25] Their attempt to generate counter-hegemonic narratives on campus is further in line with the ways Arabs in the USA have capitalized on "academic strategies" for "empowerment" and "awareness" (Salaita, 2005: 164).

At the same time, the student groups' ability to advocate and practise democracy-promoting discourses is linked to structural factors in receiving and sending contexts.

These associations' political subjectivities are to a great extent inspired by the empowering "Berkeley effect". The Departments of Ethnic and Area Studies at UCB have throughout the years consolidated a discourse rooted in discrediting oppressive frames of reference. The student associations draw on such academic approaches to construct and spread their narratives.[26]

Their narratives are further practised in various outreach and coalition building activities. Most of the student groups organize community-building activities and participate in social networking events with other student associations across the USA and with homeland universities. Some associations such as ASU, LSAB and MSA seek to establish contact with policy institutions and Arab-American organizations in the USA. While some associations such as ARRC and ASU are involved in community outreach, MEMSA, MSA and SJP have showcased their support for issues affecting Arabs in the USA and in the Arab region in Town Hall meetings and public debates at UCB. Illustrative examples of high-threshold involvement on campus revolve around their support for the ethnicity checkbox, and Divestment[27] campaigns.[28] All of the associations publicize their activities through social media, newsletters, and email groups. Almost all contend that their ideas reach the homeland either through social networking sites, personal or student exchange visits.[29]

The Arab uprisings presented an additional window of opportunity for the Berkeley associations to articulate their political activism. Activists in ASU and ESA describe the insurgencies as watershed events that made them realize that their involvement could transcend celebrating their cultural heritage. As revolts began unfolding in 2011,[30] exchanges with the homeland and with transnational groups through social media became "viral".[31] Student associations actively sought to support the uprisings and raise awareness about their causes and dynamics:

> We organized demonstrations and teach-ins to educate the larger community about what is going on. We explained historical contexts, reality on the ground, who represents those uprisings and who does not. We explained, for example, that the uprising in Bahrain is not just a sectarian-led protest but a movement towards democratization. We refuted various Arab regimes' claims that these uprisings are fuelled by external forces.[32]

MSA and SJP were particularly active in co-organizing protests on campus and in the San Francisco area. Die-ins (in which participants in the protest pretend to be dead) and candlelight vigils on campus served to build momentum around the Arab peoples' struggle during the regimes' crackdowns on their uprisings. Most of the Berkeley associations have co-sponsored lectures, film series and fundraising events related to the Arab uprisings at UCB and in the San Francisco area.

Nevertheless, various constraints limit their engagement. Their capacity to organize is contingent on the availability of motivated leadership. Educational backgrounds, the visa factor and residency status for international students also condition students' levels of engagement.[33] Respondents cite on-campus cleavages as major obstructions. The Israeli-Palestinian student divide emerges as a significant constraint to free coalitional building. Further, the associations display divided allegiances and uneven levels of politicization. For instance, some Arab activists criticise LSAB for its disengagement from Arab politics. Divergences over political viewpoints between Arab-Americans and Arab international students hinder strategic activism.

One central limitation that emerges from my research is that the three most pro-active associations that back their discourses with regular outreach activities are MEMSA, MSA and SJP.[34] These umbrella associations conflate several migrant categories, ethnicities and political agendas. While SJP aims to bring the Palestinian issue to the forefront, MEMSA and MSA rally for Arab, Middle Eastern and Muslim issues. Further, conflating agendas in umbrella associations such as MEMSA and MSA alienates Christian Arabs who do not want to position themselves as Muslims. As such, the transnational lens on campus dilutes Arab Diaspora politics.

All the student groups studied here interpret the US context as a double-edged sword. In contrast with the George W. Bush era, some perceive Barack Obama's accession to presidency in 2008 as propitious to Arab student mobilization. Still, almost all claim that they dissipate energy fighting misconstrued perceptions of Arabs and Muslims since 9/11.

Nearly all stress that their political involvement remains circumscribed by homeland-related drawbacks, namely unresponsive institutions, clashes with the locals over strategies of change, and, in this research context, the uncertainty of the current Arab transitions.

Against the backdrop of these constraints, the limitations of student groups' discourses and actions need to be further problematized. While the concept of Arab democratization in terms of empowerment is dominant, the associations' engagement in articulating a discourse on democratization as part of an Arab World Diaspora political line remains rudimentary. Many construct powerful subjectivities as to how the conception of Arab democracy is to be understood in global affairs. Few however generate concrete insights into the dilemmas of crafting democracies in the post-uprising Arab states or can elaborate on their own agency in the Arab homeland. Part of this confusion stems from uncertainty as to whether emerging regimes would be more responsive to diaspora initiatives. Students, moreover, have divergent visions of the path towards democracy in their homeland and support different political actors, movements, and agendas.

Further, key respondents stress that engagement in Arab politics is mostly efficient when it is reformulated under the categories of social justice, the fight against Islamophobia and solidarity with Palestine.[35] It is also best expressed when these groups build momentum around homeland events, and seek to change perceptions in the hope of impacting US policy towards the Arab world. Yet, the dimension of pro-active political strategizing remains absent.

Many student activists felt a strong sense of engagement after the relatively easy fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian dictatorships in 2011. Ensuing complications, such as the derailed Bahraini revolt, Western involvement in Libya, and the Syrian crackdown on its uprising, made the students conscious of their limited means in backing local democratization. It soon became obvious that activism could no longer be limited to cheering the Arab uprisings as a monolithic event, but had to be adapted to different national contexts. In the second half of 2012, while some activists emphasized a feeling of powerlessness vis-à-vis the homeland, others invoked the difficulty of strategising from the USA. They conceded that they have to settle for humanitarian style activism. The Syrian uprising is cited as a major disenchanting factor:

> With Egypt, there was a clearer link. The USA has always supported the Mubarak regime. So it was easy to educate people that dictatorships should not be upheld. But in the Syrian case, the USA and the Syrian regime have never been on good terms. It was not possible to draw any connection. So we decided to take the civil society route by raising awareness and funding. This was the obvious route ... this was practical activism.[36]

## WHAT CONSEQUENCES FOR DEMOCRATIZATION?

Although I do not intend to generalize my findings to other contexts,[37] the present case shows that, within their academic space, student associations at Berkeley nurture democracy-oriented discourses, and negotiate and revise conceptions of Arab democracy. Their discourses and actions yield some consequences for local democratization, through influencing non-migrants' political orientations in both origin and destination countries. By way of advocacy and awareness raising, these associations bring authoritarian abuses in their homeland into view, and criticise any indirect support of Arab authoritarianism in the West. Most of my respondents stress their agency during the Arab uprisings in diffusing Arab protesters' demands in the USA.

At the same time, their agency as effective democratizing agents remains rudimentary. Several limitations – related not only to their homeland but also to their unstructured and monolithic organization on campus and to the wider problems faced by the Arab community in the USA[38] – put the brakes on their actions.

Open to the charge of normativism, can their narratives be of practical use in both democracy and migration studies? I argue that the narratives studied here have some implications for research and policy.

For a long time, research on liberalization in the Arab world privileged the role that political elites play (Perthes, 2002). Regime change in the region (Brynen et al., 2008) has further been approached through the transitology paradigm (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986), framing democratization as a sequential process. Although these approaches remain important, research on democratic contributions negotiated in peripheral spheres has recently gained importance.

In this article, I attract attention to the Berkeley student associations' engagement in crafting democracy narratives as one relevant analytical tool that contributes to a deeper understanding of change in the region. At the core of my account is that transnational flows shape a new understanding of how democracy is to be approached in the Arab world, and spur debates on how democratization is to be measured. These narratives escape, in various ways, the perspective of democratization as a

process that takes place within national borders. The storylines I studied conceptualize the achievement – and definition – of Arab democracy as a collective endeavour, spanning the gulf between local and transnational spheres, and in which Americans, Diasporans, and Arabs are enlisted. According to this case study, democratising the Arab world through transnationalism is not restricted to sending democratic remittances to the homeland. Rather, it draws on discursive strategies and convoluted routes: altering ubiquitous viewpoints, "democratizing" the conversation on the Arab world, and transnationalizing in the US multicultural space the discourse on Arab rights, in the hope of mitigating subversive effects stemming from the post 9/11 global context.

Following such a line of inquiry, we are faced with the question of whether national elections and institutions are sufficient indicators to measure the support for Arab democracy. It appears necessary to gauge other indicators – such as civic engagement and social awareness of rights – "irrespective of whether these rights are enacted or not."[39]

Such observations hold suggestions for transnational migration studies. Diffuse flows relying to a great extent on non-institutional strategies beg the question of whether and how democracy narratives, that build consensus in transnational public spheres that "autocracy is not reasonable,"[40] actually play out in the local context of democratization. Migration studies still need to devise methodologies to track these outputs in the Arab context.

Although various case studies emphasize that migrants transmit democratic norms to their "less democratic" homelands (Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow, 2010: 119), a paucity of literature delves into the conceptions of democracy that migrants channel. The present case study shows that democracy narratives at UCB take a critical distance from the understanding of democracy diffusion as the circulation of values from Western industrialized democracies (Johnson, 1992). These narratives are better understood by resorting to the notion of "simultaneity" to trace how immigrants channel multi-sited flows in two or more countries (Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004). Many of my respondents contend that by seeking to impact a better understanding at the local level, they not only affect their homeland, but also spread democratic attitudes on campus and within the USA.

Although the influence of their discourses at institutional and macro levels remains minimal, some policy implications can be sketched out. The narratives studied here help frame the global conversation related to the question of Arab democratization, a conversation that local actors do not necessarily integrate in their agendas. As such, they hold insights to policymakers and civil society activists interested in an inclusive debate on democracy building in the region.

One compelling question is whether, and if so how, these associations could bring their narratives down to earth and lend them a more effective dimension. As underscored above, student associations claim that their narratives spread through exchanges with non-migrants and institutions in receiving and sending contexts. Some even contend that the impact of their narratives need not be quantified as their power lies in "making a statement". These narratives are to be perceived as argumentative principles they draw on to affect public attitudes.

In the context of the homeland, however, these student associations could have impact only if they move away from monolithic approaches to student immigrant categories, and if they design with other student movements in the USA and with sister universities in their origin societies a meso-level network in which they engage governments. Only then could these groups harness the political power of transnational spheres.

## NOTES

1. Transnationalism refers to the ties that people, associations and institutions weave across borders.
2. For an account justifying the integration of students in migration systems, see Li et al. (1996).
3. Discursive democracy argues that public deliberations should be maximized so as to guide the establishment of democratic procedures.

4. I draw on Whitehead's understanding of democracy as an "open-ended outcome" and of democratization as a "complex" and non-linear trajectory (Whitehead, 2002: 3).

5. While Juergen Habermas (1996) has an undoubted legacy in problematizing discursive democracy, I borrow from John Dryzek, who factors in the relevance of transnationalism in discursive democracy. Dryzek (2006: 102) defines "transnational discursive democracy" as a democratic conception not "institutionalised in formal organizations." It is based on the notion that "discourses and their interactions are consequential in producing international outcomes through their influence upon and constitution of actors."

6. Student groups in Berkeley have been active in significant protests contesting repression (e.g. US policies in Vietnam in 1964 and Apartheid in South Africa).

7. Arab-Americans and international students I interviewed come from Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen. Although I made sure that they are mixed in terms of origin countries, gender and disciplines, the accessibility of these individuals, their visibility and leadership status in these associations were decisive factors in identifying them as key respondents. Their views are representative of these associations' stances but not of individual student voices.

8. I examined student associations active during the academic years 2010/2011 and 2011/2012.

9. Since there is so far no appropriate checkbox that allows for disaggregating data on UCB applications, the Office of Planning and Analysis cannot provide exact counts of Arab students on campus. Interview with UCB officer, 15 April 2011.

10. Arab transnational communities on campus are understood as groups who are of Arab origins and who maintain more than a peripheral connection with their homeland. They include Arab-Americans, and Arab international students. They may be part of student associations that qualify themselves as Middle Eastern, Arab, Muslim or community-based. They may be simultaneously members of several associations.

11. While MEMSA, MSA and SJP have each an estimated number of 400 members for the academic year 2011/2012, ASU has 100 members and LSAB fifty members. The lack of institutionalization prevents knowledge transfer and exact counts.

12. LSAB member, 5 March 2011

13. Senator in Student Government, 24 August 2012.

14. ARRC, ASU and SJP activist, 20 April 2011.

15. MEAFA member, 12 August 2012.

16. MEMSA and MSA activist, 28 August 2012.

17. MSA and SJP activist, 28 March 2011

18. MSA activist, 26 August 2012.

19. SJP activist, 6 April 2011.

20. MSA and SJP activist, 26 July 2012.

21. MSA activist, 28 April 2011

22. SJP activist, 6 April 2011.

23. MEMSA activist, 18 March 2011.

24. UCB professor, 25 July 2012.

25. UCB professor, 21 August 2013.

26. MSA and SJP activist, 18 March 2011.

27. The Israel Divestment Bill in Berkeley fell one step short from being adopted in 2010 but was adopted in 2013.

28. Email communication with former MEMSA senator, 25 October 2013.

29. LSAB has ties with the American University of Beirut. SJP has exchanges with Birzeit University and civil society associations in Palestine.

30. The climax of these associations' engagement in the uprisings was the Egyptian revolt. Less engagement has been noted during the Libyan and Syrian uprisings.

31. MSA and SJP activist, 28 March 2011.

32. MSA and SJP activist, 26 July 2012.

33. Graduates are less politically engaged than undergraduates. Respondents note divergent perceptions of political activism between social science students and students enrolled in other departments. Interview with GMSA member, 7 April 2011.

34. While MSA and SJP have chapters in the USA and Canada, student associations such as ASU and LSAB rely on motivated students, and fall prey to divisions.

35. MSA and SJP activist, 18 March 2011.

36. MSA activist, 26 July 2012.

37. This study calls for extending this area of inquiry through a comparative research design to other contexts so as to avert the selection bias of single case studies.
38. UCB professor, 18 March 2011 and 25 July 2012.
39. UCB professor, 11April 2011.
40. UCB researcher, 25 April 2011.

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