Critical Analysis of Martyrs of the Arab Spring

A symbol can be defined as something representing something else by virtue of an analogical correspondence. It is an instrument in the construction of meaning often used to accomplish a particular objective. Moreover, it is likely to appear not only in many different locations in a particular context but also in a wide range of institutional domains. Finally, it should be noted that the meaning of a symbol may be subjected to redefinition. Although the state has traditionally been the primary producer of meaning, other actors may also create new symbols, or reinterpret existent ones. Indeed, social movements frequently manufacture and contour image discourses that oppose or resist official state ones. An example of a symbol are martyrs.

In Arabic, the word “martyr” derives from shuhada, which may be translated as the act of witnessing, or testifying, and is associated with a person dying as a result to his or her active involvement in a religious or political struggle against injustice and idolatry. Although the characteristics of such struggles have historically evolved to include a variety of contemporary understandings of those phenomena, the connection between suffering and witnessing remains a constant. That relation involves, firstly, a person who relinquishes his or her life with the objective of testifying an unfair condition and, complementarily, other people witnessing his or her suffering. However, in order to analyze the exact notion of martyr in the Arab Spring, it should be examined the peculiarities of those who have been constituted as such by media and popular discourses.

As regards to the purpose of political martyrs, in general terms, they embody state violence and serve as instruments for holding the state accountable. Therefore, they are primarily used to mobilise via the appeal to ideational, generally sentimental notions of justice. In that context, the representation of death, and the identity of the killer and the victim results of noteworthy relevance for the formation of identity and the “othering” of certain actors. Furthermore, they serve as source of inspiration to others, to whom they remind the sacrifices that have been made in order to achieve a better future, and can even be presented as objects of admiration or models of emulation. Finally, martyrs are tools for commemoration, which are used to create, shape, and maintain collective memory. Since the latter constructs and cultivates a particular understanding of a nation´s history, it is highly political.

Although several martyrs were proclaimed during the Arab Spring, Khaled Said and Mohamed Bouazizi constituted the first and most notable ones. For that reason, they have been selected as main subjects of analysis in this paper.

Khaled Said was a 28-year-old Egyptian who died due to a brutal thrashing at the hands of a reduced group of policemen in June 2010, as a consequence of him publishing a video on social media of some officers capitalising on confiscated narcotics. Following his decease, young Egyptians bore signs in nationwide mass demonstrations showing photographs of his disfigured remains in the morgue. Moreover, a Facebook page named “We are all Khaled Said” was established to encourage debates about human and political rights, and to motivate popular responses in the face of state transgressions. That phrase conferred him the status of a symbol of popular victimhood vis-a-vis governmental brutality, since it may be translated as “all of us are common, non-priviledged Egyptians and have suffered protracted, inexcusable abuses by

the state", "we are all potential victims" or even "we do not fear death and we accept it as our destiny if it supposes a change to the current state of affairs". Thus, it can be argued that he became the first Egyptian citizen who represented an oppressed – as well as discontent – new generation.

Said came to symbolise the main accusations and purposes of the demonstrators, namely "to end police brutality, terminate the state of emergency in Egypt [which had been in force for thirty years] and eliminate social inequalities", as well as "the endemic poverty caused by systemic corruption and misconduct of the elite".

Likewise, Mohamed Bouazizi was a Tunisian hawker, who was harassed by the police while selling vegetables as means of sustaining his family and paying his sister´s education. After having his barrow requisitioned, and being humiliated and drubbed by the police, he burned himself alive on the 17th December 2010, thus becoming the main grievous symbol of the Arab Spring by attesting the dreadful practices in the Arab world, where the sovereign power freely determines life and death.

On his regard, Bouazizi´s immolation may be conceived as a symbol of the "vulnerability of the ordinary people" against the regime. His death was considered an act of defiance against the governing elites in North African countries, who were widely considered to be arbitrary governors with substantial economic prerogatives that maintained their domination over the population via violent and repressive security apparatuses. Therefore, it may be imbued with a discourse of martyrdom characterised by "courage, dignity, and resistance against the unjust political system".

As means of identifying shared characteristics with the potentiality of being extrapolated to later cases, it should be noted that, in both cases, the death of these men exemplified a sweeping lack of justice in numerous social strata and frequent police capriciousness towards citizens, a general deficit of employment, and an abysmal discontent with the ruling regimes. Hence, they were considered politically significant at a national level and both of them – Bouazizi and Said – were narrativised as martyrs of the revolution, which required public political responses. Thus, they did not only trigger national protests but also instilled deep significance in the revolts.

It should be considered the connection between new communication platforms, especially social media, and the success of the popular narrative. Indeed, the "nature of networks, speed of information flow and differences of information control with traditional media" facilitated individuals to participate in the manufacturing and dissemination of the media instruments adopted with the aim of creating a discourse of martyrs. Actually, the martyrs of the Arab Spring were ubiquitous in "signs, posters, pictures, online forums, Facebook, slogans, songs, poetry and (…) street art", all of which were controlled by the population. Therefore, the "democratisation of media" constituted a contributing factor to the displacement of narrative manufacturing from official actors, such as the state or similarly centralised institutions controlled by it, towards the hands of the population.

Moreover, it should be noted that social media and new technologies were an essential element to raise awareness of the both physical and psychological abuse inflicted to Bouazizi and Said, whereby terminating the hitherto widespread reservations to discuss and denounce certain state practices.

The meaning and direction of the uprisings are intimately related to the figure of the martyrs: how are they created and remembered, and by whom. Therefore, it should be primarily considered that, as it has been previously mentioned, the martyrs of the Arab Spring, contrary to previous figures, were produced and owned by citizens. A clear exemplification of such popular ownership was the previously mentioned “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page in the case of Said. However, since there were no videos or photographs of Bouazizi´s death, the main representative example of public demand of it is a photograph of him at the hospital, where he died due to the burns, accompanied by the then president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who was supposedly paying him a visit. In the image, it is not possible to recognise the martyr due to the gauzes that cover him entirely. Instead, the focal presence is constituted by president Ben Ali. The latter´s domination of the frame and its publication by the state administration evinces the state´s endeavour to demand agency in order to narrate the life and death of Bouazizi, so it may bestow Ben Ali with a benevolent persona. However, Tunisian citizens did not accept such discursive configuration, refusing to relinquish neither the story nor the conception of the martyr. As a response, they participated in various forms of symbol construction, “from the creation of audio and visual material to physical performances in public space, and circulation of images and text online”.

Therefore, popular reproduction of martyrs´ story and symbolic re-incarnation as heroes provided them with power and agency. This constitutes the first major consequence of Arab Spring´s martyrs. However, such ownership over the narrative did not only impact the effective popular agency, but also the perception of it, which would further fuel popular empowerment.

Secondly, it ought to be considered that such agency was attained by procuring martyrs via a plead to “universal human rights – as opposed to universal victimisation –”, such as “freedom, democracy and dignity”. The allusion to notions of such universal nature enabled the characterisations of martyrs to demand the empowerment of the population sans the mediation of the state and, in opposition to particular concerns, which may be declared political in nature, to present them as figures granted with popular victimhood due to the violence exercised by the regimes and who concurrently campaign for global values while respecting internationally accepted discourses of rights and agency.

Such accentuation on martyrs´ innocency and, consequently, undeserved suffering in the hands of their owns regimes resulted in the third main effect of the martyrs of the Arab Spring: the redefinition of identities. The population, represented by the martyrs, acquired a different identity than the regimes, which were subjected to a process of “othering”. The reason of this is that, whenever individuals empathise with a collective narrative, they tend to develop feelings of affinity and even identification with the principal character, in addition to situate themselves inside such story, which in this case was obtained through the “personalisation of the life of the martyrs”. In conclusion, the iteration of the martyrs´ individual stories generated a perception of collective identity which permitted populations that dwell in countries whose governments generally forbid public manifestations of ideas or opinions contrary to the latter, to sympathise with the martyrs´ circumstances and torment.

Finally, it should be noticed the transnational character of the martyrs of the Arab Spring, since Said and Bouazizi emerged as pan-Arab heroes that would eventually behave as both “symbols and mobilising instruments all over the Arab world”, meanwhile inspiring similar phenomena in other countries and the reinterpretation that their deaths suffered as a result of the evolution of the interests exposed in the uprisings. Actually, although they originally merely exemplified the

abuse and arbitrariness exercised by the states towards their populations, they evolved to symbolise the loss of ordinary people, the little prospects of countries and their youngest generations to prosper due to certain state habits, and, finally, a way to divine redemption via what was believed to be morally dutiful activism, due to the aforementioned self-identification phenomenon.

The symbology of martyrs of the Arab Spring and the ownership over their narrative have been contested issues not only during the uprising but also beyond its termination as it is reflected by their commemoration efforts.

Indeed, the opportunity to mourn the dead supposes an assumption that life is relevant. Just as lives, deaths have different values, and avoiding public expressions of grief is indeed a politically fraught measure. As merely illustrative examples, the corpses of Gadhafi – which was exhibited in the refrigerator of a butchery, transformed into an attraction for tourists – and Bin Laden –who was reportedly ensepulchred at the bottom of the sea in order to prevent memorialisation – should be mentioned.

Due to corpses´ potentiality to bear major symbolism, they are susceptible of being manipulated for political purposes. One of the main examples of attempted appropriation via memorialisation occurred in 2013 when the Egyptian armed forces built a sculpture in the Rab'a al-´Adawiya Square, where it had previously dispersed a peaceful protest of the Muslim Brotherhood. The artwork consisted of a pair of oblique appendages, which represented the police and the armed forces, shielding a silvery sphere, which symbolised the citizens. Succeedingly, the police constructed a circle-shaped sculpture at Tahrir Square with the objective of honouring the deceased victims. Nevertheless, it spurred a public outcry and, as a result, furious protesters destroyed the monument and wrote severe words against the government with paint over the remains. Moreover, they accused the regime of building a memorial to its own carnages.

This appears as a response to present attempts to glorify the recollection of the martyrs of the Arab Spring, indicating an endeavour to transfer power from state actors to citizens. An example of this trend is the replacement of state leaders´ images by those of the martyrs. In Egypt, posters of president Mubarak have been torn and substituted by paintings honouring the martyrs. Likewise in Tunisia, a statue of Bouazizi has been built in Sidi Bouzid. Moreover, an image of him can be seen on some Tunisian stamps. Such manufacturing of martyr portrayals in public space insinuates that the change that is occuring is not circumscribed to a political sphere. Indeed, it is extended to a wider sociocultural domain through popular demands of public spaces for ordinary people.

Therefore, the portrayals of martyrs serve as instruments of collective memory that maintain the memory of the uprisings alive and as popular symbols claiming for the popular ownership of national memory, rejecting state dominion of the narrative. Actually, they provide the possibility to the population of writing its history from its own perspective, thus reacting to authoritarian regimes´ negation of agency to individuals. This provides the population with an identity that defines their past, present, and future, simultaneously inheriting and producing it.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the struggle for martyr´s narrative domination has slightly tilted in favour of the state. Indeed, in the last years, the post-Morsi regime´s rhetoric has increasingly acclaimed members of the security apparatus that were killed in the revolution as martyrs whose deaths convey both political meaning and motivation. According to the

government´s discourse, these individuals were martyred in the name of the state´s integrity and ruling apparatus, against the forces that sought to destabilise Egypt, thus associating the comfort of the state with the will of the masses. Such transformation of the narrative has occurred after a prior depoliticisation of martyrdom via “Martyr Pop”. This phenomenon presented the dead protestors in music videoclips as alienated martyrs, deprived of their political ideas, obscuring thus the genuine political objectives of the protestors and facilitating the inscription of a narrative that favoured the regime. An example of this is the song “I love you, country of mine”, by Rami Gamal and Aziz al-Shafi, which features photographs of Said.

Anyways, what appears to be clear is that “the making and remaking, memorialising and erasing, claiming and reclaiming of martyrs” is thus far persistent.