Think Locally — Act Globally? 
Cultural Framing and Human Rights 
Movements in Tunisia and Morocco

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This article applies a concept from the political science and sociological theory of social movements to the comparative study of indigenous human rights activism in two North African countries in the 1980s and 1990s. Specifically, the idea of cultural framing is used to explicate why social mobilisation around the rhetoric of human rights was most successful in Tunisia and Morocco during a particular period. Drawing on interviews, documents and secondary material about a prominent human rights movement in each society, the study argues that transnational human rights norms were adapted for local use in these two Arab Islamic societies with fairly little difficulty. The article concludes with discussion of the connection of human rights activism in each country and the divergent path each has taken with respect to contemporary political liberalisation.

Social science, and political science and sociology in particular, have begun in recent years to apply items from their methodological toolkit to the study of human rights. Social movement theory, as developed by Anglo-American social scientists, has especially interesting potential application to human rights; it offers the prospect of positing explanations for when and how human rights activist movements are successful in comparative terms.

One of the major contributions of contemporary social movement theory to comparative politics is the hope that general approaches often considered incompatible can be combined fruitfully. In political science generally, and in scholarship on particular regions such as the Middle East, works that treat structure and works that discuss culture are at apparent loggerheads. A powerful recent statement of this dichotomy can be found in a debate between two leading senior Middle Eastern politics specialists over whether studies discussing culture can contribute useful insights to political science of the region. Michael Hudson and

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Lisa Anderson appear indeed to take opposite points of view on the utility of studies of Middle Eastern politics that focus on culture. Yet a close look at their supposed opposition uncovers essentially the same theoretical prescription – *studies including political culture must be focused and take into account structural factors relevant to their target of analysis.*

Social movement theory offers ideas that seek to fill this prescription. The origin of the ‘new social movement’ approach in a variety of macrostructuralism defused from an excessive concern with social class ensures a theoretical preoccupation with diverse understandings of social structural factors. But efforts to clarify social mobilisation have also brought cultural issues into the mix, resulting in a number of interesting and innovative approaches that promise methodological satisfaction both to careful culturalists like Hudson and cultural analysis sceptics like Anderson. The thrust of these approaches is to specify the way in which elements of political culture and structure converge to capacitate or constrain social mobilisation.

This article is a preliminary attempt to apply and assess one of these insights linking culture and structure to a particular type of social movement – indigenous human rights groups in North Africa. More than 50 years after the promulgation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the remarkable success and growth of organised human rights advocacy throughout the world was one of the unique political trends of the late twentieth century. In broad terms, human rights advocacy has moved into a second stage of development. In the first stage, which dates from the founding of Amnesty International in 1961, advocacy was centred around a handful of international non-governmental groups headquartered in Western countries. In the second stage, which has been building since the mid-1980s, non-Western countries have themselves been the birthplace of indigenous, increasingly active human rights organisations.

These dual trends of the general increase in influence for human rights organisations and the particular development of such organisations within non-Western states are fertile ground for social scientific theory building. For instance, the penetration of human rights norms grounded in Western individualist values into regions with repressive governments raises questions about what influences the liberalisation of regimes and how political values translate across cultures. The growth of local human rights organisations brings up issues relating to social mobilisation and the development of civil society.

The question I consider here is the connection of structures and culture in the successful internalisation of international human rights
advocacy in Tunisia and Morocco. My argument is that the influence and power of local human rights organisations can be analysed in terms of a mixture of macropolitical structural and cultural variables, but the timing of the peak influence of social mobilisation around human rights norms has depended on a cultural adaptation process grounded in important popular cultural themes. This process is known as ‘framing’ in social movement theory and is an explicit link between structural and cultural analysis in the study of comparative social movements.

The Middle East has been subject both to the general trend of the influence of human rights advocacy and to the increased relevance of human rights organisations within Middle Eastern countries. Not only have some of the countries targeted for frequent criticism for their human rights records shown marked improvement in this area; a few of these countries have developed their own native human rights movements. Among the latter countries are the North African cases of Morocco and Tunisia.

Morocco and Tunisia have a number of important characteristics in common. Both nations are Muslim with no sizeable religious minority. Both have a strong sense of national identity, due in part to a history of relative autonomy from outside political control. Both gained independence from French colonialism in 1956 through an anti-colonial movement that achieved its goals with relatively little violence. Both had leaders after independence who had symbolised their citizens’ national aspirations during the anti-colonial struggle. Both experienced non-violent, orderly processes of leadership succession from these initial leaders. Both regimes have looked at least as much towards Europe as towards the Middle East to define their identities and their geopolitical roles. Both economies have depended on trade with Europe, primarily in terms of the export of primary goods. Both governments continue to place a strategic priority on increased integration with European economies. Both nations are situated on one side of war-torn Algeria, which serves as a dire model of what they hope to avoid for themselves.

Tunisia and Morocco also share an important recent history of the spread and internal organisational development of human rights norms. In Tunisia, indigenous groups defining themselves around human rights issues date back to the 1970s, and became a significant political force starting in 1977 when the Tunisian League of Human Rights (LTDH) emerged as a legal political quasi-party movement autonomous from the state. In Morocco, though groups interested in human rights date to a similar time, the significant period of indigenous human rights activism began in the late-1980s with the formation of the non-partisan
Moroccan Organisation of Human Rights (OMDH). Significantly, each of these periods was one of general political liberalisation.

While this and other structural aspects have been undeniably important in the growth of indigenous human rights movements in these two countries, the appeal and timing of these movements in each society have been grounded in the content of human rights norms and other features of elite political culture. This proposition is discussed below, after I describe the specific dynamics of the comparative history of local human rights activism in the two countries. I follow this with a discussion of connections between these movements’ success and relevant structural and cultural factors in their respective societies. As this article is an exploratory analysis, this latter discussion is meant more to stimulate thought about how the cultural framing of a social movement is connected to broader aspects of culture and structure than to posit a causal model. I precede all of this with a brief survey of the relevant recent political history of Tunisia and Morocco.

TUNISIA AND MOROCCO IN A NUTSHELL

The similarity of Tunisian and Moroccan experiences with French colonialism and the anti-colonial struggle for independence makes the two North African cases ripe for further comparisons. Both Arab states were spared the entrenched, protracted domination that the French reserved for their near 150-year occupation of Algeria. The French took control of Tunisia from the decaying, distant remnants of the Ottoman Empire in 1881; they established their Protectorate over the indigenous ‘Alawi Moroccan dynasty in 1912. If, as John Entelis puts it, Tunisia experienced an ‘instrumental colonialism’ with more direct French political control than Morocco’s ‘segmented colonialism’, both were essentially a combination of French economic exploitation and limited political structural transformation. Thus, it is not surprising that in Tunisia the independence movement coalesced around the Neo-Destour political party which had Ottoman roots in the Young Turk nationalist movement. In a similar connection to pre-colonial political institutional history, the Moroccan struggle against colonialism was led by a party – the Istiqlal – that made the dethroned ‘Alawi ruler Sultan Muhammed its central rallying symbol.

The Tunisian Neo-Destour succeeded the earlier Destour – or Constitution – Party, and fused the earlier organisation’s emphasis on pushing for equality and limited autonomy for Tunisians with an increased willingness to use confrontationist tactics and to attempt mass mobilisation. Whereas the Destour’s membership was largely confined to
members of old elite families from the big cities, the Neo-Destour had partisans from nearly every area and element of Tunisian society. The party was well organised and oriented towards a goal of incremental Tunisian independence without complete disruption of Tunisian connections with Europe.

This orientation was masterminded by Habib Bourguiba, a lawyer and journalist whose organisational and personality skills stood out among the numerous Tunisians to receive advanced educational training at elite French universities. Bourguiba combined in himself a deep commitment to help build an independent Tunisia that embraced Western modernism with a desire for unshared political power. This latter ambition allowed him to emerge as the natural leader of post-independent Tunisia and to retain his highly centralised presidency for over three decades. His deep belief in emulating those aspects of French society he admired encouraged him to push Tunisia to a greater extent than other Maghrebi nations in the direction of rapid educational improvement and selective secularisation. Bourguiba is remembered particularly for outlawing polygamy and giving women more equal rights in marriage and divorce than they had in other Arab Islamic countries.

The Socialist Destourian Party (PSD), the renamed Neo-Destour organisation, reinforced Bourguiba's authoritarianism. Over time, many Tunisians were disappointed by the contrast between the expectations Bourguiba encouraged for the Destour as one of a number of political organisations that would speed Tunisian political liberalisation and the reality of the party's lack of meaningful freedom from the President's control. Bourguiba paradoxically embodied both a genuine belief in liberalisation and a deeply authoritarian governing style. He therefore fostered the development of a diverse, well-educated cadre of political activists who lacked the ability to express pluralistic ideas within the President's highly centralised and personalised system.

Thus, Tunisia found its political fortunes hindered by the very factor that had been so important to their earlier success - the force of Bourguiba's personality. The same man who helped his country achieve independence from the French with relatively minimal disruption and steered Tunisia towards social and educational improvements became an unyielding autocrat whose growing senility inspired policy paralysis and colourful palace cabals. By the 1980s, members of Bourguiba's elite, well-educated system outsiders and many ordinary Tunisians hoped that something would happen to remove the President for Life from the presidency before the end of his life.

That something was the bloodless, orderly coup of Zine 'Abidine Ben 'Ali, Bourguiba's Prime Minister who replaced him in November 1987
and has ruled as President ever since. Ben ‘Ali, came from a military background that valued discipline and order above other values. He rose to become Bourguiba’s most prominent aide by running Tunisia’s secret police in an uncompromising manner. The chaos and stagnation that Tunisia experienced towards the end of Bourguiba’s reign were sufficiently intolerable to a wide range of Tunisians that Ben ‘Ali’s efficient coup was welcomed, particularly given its bloodlessness.

The first years of Ben ‘Ali’s presidency brought a genuine liberalisation of Tunisian public life, during which elites and civil society that had lain moribund under Bourguiba resurfaced. Ben ‘Ali reformed the old PSD, renaming it the Constitutional Democratic Assembly (RCD), and allowed several other political parties to operate legally. He freed thousands of political prisoners, guided Tunisian ratification of several international human rights instruments and abolished a number of Tunisia’s most repressive institutions.

However, Ben Ali’s early political liberalisation also loosened the reins of the bête noir of contemporary secular Arab politics, a popular organisation advocating an entirely new system based on the revival of Islam in politics. After its first few years, the story of Ben ‘Ali’s regime has been increasing repression ostensibly justified by a determination to show no tolerance towards Tunisian Islamist activism such as en-Nahda, the aforementioned popular organisation. At the same time, Tunisia’s staunch determination to remain open to Western tourism and economic interaction has generated relative international quiescence to Ben ‘Ali’s authoritarianism, a quiescence only amplified by Western fear of Islamist government. Ben ‘Ali’s repressiveness has extended well beyond Islamist groups to include almost all would-be outspoken or independent elements of civil society, including human rights movements.

Thus, contemporary Tunisian politics is a paradox. The country’s institutional legacy and diverse range of political and civil groups based in a well-educated, relatively affluent population have made it the Arab state most often predicted to become democratic by Western political scientists. Yet its regime, like the one it ousted, is increasingly wont to mistrust and mistreat these very groups that may be critical to Tunisia’s future.

Morocco is an interesting case for comparison with Tunisia, for contemporary trends seem to be moving in a very different direction, despite the traditional, perhaps even archaic, features of Morocco’s political landscape. Because of the ‘segmental’ pattern of the French during colonialism, institutional capacity and diversity in Morocco were prioritised much less than efforts to control different segments of the local population by playing them against each other. This segmentalism
did not deter the Moroccan independence movement, the Istiqlal, from mobilising the entire nation around the symbol of the traditional 'Alawi Sultan Muhammed, whose support of Moroccan independence led the French to depose and exile him. The Istiqlal used this affront to Moroccan sovereign capacity to galvanise thousands of Moroccans to force the French to return the Sultan to Morocco in 1955. This, in turn, presaged full Moroccan independence in 1956 with the same relative lack of violence in the climax of the anti-colonial struggle as occurred in Tunisia.

If the Istiqlal was happy to have Sultan Muhammed as a powerful symbol of Moroccan sovereignty, the organisation was not prepared for Muhammed to become the ruling sovereign. But the 'Alawi Sultan, now King Muhammed V of independent Morocco, succeeded in using segmentalism to bolster his own authority vis-à-vis the natural fissures in the independence-movement-turned-party Istiqlal. The result was a proliferation of smaller political parties, including some from within the Istiqlal, which left the party without the concentrated force or popularity to challenge the political pre-eminence of the monarchy. When Muhammed died in 1961, his son Hassan inherited a young post-independent political system with a variety of parties and a relative dearth of effective political institutions.

The young king Hassan II relied on a variety of political strategies to remain the uncontested, uninterrupted ruler of Morocco from 1961 to 1999. One of these was the encouragement of a wide array of political parties and quasi-party organisations to prevent the development of a single institution that could challenge the king's popularity. Another was the orchestration of major and routine politically symbolic events to attempt to recapture the popular mobilisation that took place when Muhammed returned from his French exile. Elsewhere I have made more elaborate arguments about the importance of this symbolic politics to Moroccan stability, but it generally has revolved around Moroccan nationalism and Islam. Hassan's symbolic politics was at its most obviously effective in 1975 when the king coordinated a caravan of 350,000 Moroccans from throughout the country, known as the Green March, that demonstrated the country's overwhelming desire to incorporate the former Spanish Western Saharan territories into Morocco.

Three other strategies of Hassan's rule have engendered the scepticism of social scientists as to the regime's likelihood to survive or lead to a democratic transition. First were the king's attempts to make the military the major institutional support of his regime. This strategy, most prominent in the late-1960s, proved tenuous when the king barely survived two military-orchestrated attempts to overthrow him in 1971
and 1972. In light of these events, Hassan took strong measures to reduce the autonomy of the military, as well as to keep its leaders occupied with the task of capturing the Western Sahara territories from residents intent on keeping it independent from Moroccan control. A second strategy of questionable value was a tendency on the part of the king to keep much of Morocco’s political elite outside of real power sharing, although since the late-1980s he has been gradually incorporating a growing segment of the most politicised elite. Hassan’s reliance on the military and centralising tendencies led to a third political strategy that was the target of repeated Western criticism – severe political repression of and human rights violations against critics of the regime. The special prisons set up for political opponents of the regime in the 1960s and 1970s were matters of constant concern to international human rights organisations.

Given what seemed to be an inflexible, archaic political system that lacked diverse political institutions and mechanisms for political inclusion of the elite, Hassan’s monarchy defied expectations by surviving intact for over 38 years until the king’s recent death. Moreover, now that Morocco’s Prime Minister is from the largest opposition party which had strong success in previous parliamentary elections, and Hassan’s son Muhammed succeeded to the throne with apparent popular support and no controversy, the country looks closer to a gradual political opening than any other Arab regime, with the possible exception of the comparable monarchy of Jordan. Since the late 1980s, Moroccan civil society has expanded tremendously, while the country’s human rights situation has improved markedly.

In short, Morocco’s recent political evolution is an interesting contrast with that of Tunisia. Morocco was ruled and remains ruled by a king whose dynasty dates from the seventeenth century and whose political system lacked the institutional diversity that characterised Bourguiba’s early presidency. Despite this fact, or perhaps because of it, the contemporary Moroccan system shows a burgeoning civil society and a level of political pluralism the likes of which have been pushed underground in Tunisia.

A TALE OF TWO HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENTS

The Tunisian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LTDH)

Any discussion of the Moroccan Organisation for Human Rights (OMDH) and the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH), each country’s most important human rights’ movements, should start with the obvious fact that each has seemed at its most influential during its
country's period of most obvious political liberalisation. In one way, this is not surprising, as both organisations are independent of their nation's governments, and have been subject to the ups and downs of governmental tolerance to operate. But I also believe that the timing of the success of these movements has something to do with the appropriateness of human rights as a cultural frame for social mobilisation, at least among the educated elite, during a stage of gradualist political liberalisation. The Moroccan OMDH and especially the Tunisian LTDH have been strongest when the prospects for incremental political liberalisation have been greatest in their countries.

The LTDH has had a particularly noteworthy history as the first significant indigenous human rights movement in the Middle East and North Africa. It dates back to 1977, when Bourguiba legalised the organisation that was mostly made up of a group of disaffected members of the official PCD party. That many of the LTDH members were made up of pre-existing members of the political elite certainly facilitated Bourguiba's toleration of the group. The group's initial legalisation was in part based on the fact that it consisted of known political figures who were willing to constitute their organisation as non-partisan. In fact, the way one knowledgeable scholar describes the LTDH's formation, its initial self-definition as a human rights movement may have been undertaken as much for political palatability as for unwavering devotion to championing human rights. It also did not hurt the LTDH that its president through the end of Bourguiba's regime was Sa'adeddine Zmerli, the Tunisian President's personal physician. According to one knowledgeable Tunisian, Bourguiba refused to take Zmerli seriously as anything more political than his medical doctor, which perhaps hints at the lack of presidential concern for the LTDH more generally.

Not only was the LTDH the first human rights advocacy organisation in a North African nation, it distinguished itself in other ways as well. From the start, it was independent from the government, no mean feat in itself as Bourguiba's system became increasingly inward looking. Second, the LTDH grew into a movement that genuinely represented the diversity of Tunisia's politically active, educated population, from PCD members to secularists to even Islamists. The LTDH was a mirror of Tunisia's political class. Third, the LTDH had sections throughout the country that were run in a quasi-democratic manner. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the organisation had made the transition from construing human rights as a framing device for defending the rights of its political friends to a mode of discourse relevant to targets of repression more generally. As the LTDH's secretary-general during this period, Khemais Chamari, put it:
For the whole period from 1977 to 1980 (the League) wasn’t able to free itself from the idea that human rights meant the rights of particular groups of political prisoners in specific situations. Of course, that left it open to the accusation that it was politically motivated that it would defend only prisoners with the ‘correct’ political position. But since about 1980, a couple of very important ideas began to make inroads: first, that not only political prisoners have rights but also the notion of rights can be applied to all citizens in their daily lives; and second, that rights are universal – this is the problematic of 1789 and the French revolution – they apply not only to my friends but also to my enemies. These wider ideas began to take hold because the League had made a great effort to change its profile: it made a conscious effort not to be too closely identified with any particular political group, to diversify its recruitment and to take on people from many different socio-economic classes, and to have important members who hadn’t broken with the establishment.16

This transformation of the LTDH to orient itself towards a range of human rights violations is evident in its emphasis on its diverse array of causes in its publications from the 1980s, which included advocacy for Egyptian women’s rights, the defence of Islamic activists, condemnation of an attack on a Tunisian synagogue and efforts to mediate between secularists and devout Muslims during the fasting month of Ramadan.17

These four characteristics of the LTDH led to a fifth; by the mid-1980s, it was the most vital and viable political group outside of Bourguiba’s system. Just as the old president’s grip on power was getting so arbitrary and tenuous that Tunisians made no secret of their desire for a regime change, the LTDH was emerging as the most legitimate, effective independent component of Tunisian society. As the organisation grew in prominence, it faced a major challenge; it had to decide how precise it could be and wanted to be about its scope and mission.

This challenge to the League of deciding on how much and what sort of detail it would elaborate about its purpose was an obvious instance of cultural framing. According to Sidney Tarrow, social movement framing work consists of

inscribing grievances in overall frames that identify an injustice, attribute the responsibility for it to others and propose solutions to it... In all but the most sectarian movements, organizers relate their goals to the predispositions of their public. They are thus in a sense consumers of existing cultural meanings as well as producers of new ones... But movement entrepreneurs do not simply adapt
frames of meaning from traditional cultural symbols either – if they did, they would be nothing more than reflections of their societies and could not change them. They orient their movements’ frames towards action, and fashion them at the intersection between a target population’s culture and their own values and goals.  

This latter process is referred to as ‘frame alignment’.

Clearly, the LTDH’s 1985 move to develop and ratify a Charter stemmed from a need to formalise a frame alignment process as it considered how political and how broad-based its membership and activities should be. As recounted by former LTDH president Muhammed Charfi,

The idea of the charter arose from two events. First of all, there was the challenge to the Jewish candidate for the executive committee. This convinced many of us that something had to be done to ensure that members all adhered to the same basic principles. The second event? ...In the last few years the League has acquired...strong credibility in Tunisia, a certain status on the political, social and cultural chessboard... So now, everyone wants to belong to the League. And this is now our big organisational problem: everyone wants to become a member. This includes, for example, people who are known to believe in a one-party system, people who are rigid Marxists, people who behave on the university campus like little Pol Pots, and Islamists who believe in amputating the hands of thieves. All these people want to become members of the League, because the League has obtained this kind of credibility and because, for some of them, the League is a prize worth winning, because it is an open space that has to be occupied. So, with all this success and with all these people wanting to join us, we began to ask ourselves the question, ‘Are we really among people here who believe in human rights, or are a lot of people just using us to promote political goals?’ Up until that point all we asked was that prospective members believe in human rights and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But that is pretty loose. So we thought, ‘Perhaps we should elaborate a charter, a Tunisian charter. Let’s put the dots on the i’s with regard to the Tunisian situation and Tunisian problems.’

‘Dotting the i’s’ with respect to Tunisia was by no means a trivial issue for the LTDH. Any charter that the organisation passed had to face three inter-related critical issues of (1) how populist it wished to be, (2) how it would reconcile possible conflicts between internationalist human rights
discourse and local Tunisian mores, and (3) how likely it was that it would remain tolerable to the government. This first issue was posed because of the importance of the LTDH in Tunisian political life. As Charfi observed:

the League in Tunisia isn’t at all the equivalent of a human rights league in France or in the United States or in England. In those democratic countries, political parties fill the political stage, and the human rights organisations are marginal – they busy themselves with the particular cases of individuals whose rights have been violated. Here, because our freedoms are so weak, our political parties are weak too. They don’t fill the political stage, so the League is called onto this stage too. Now, when the UGTT [a Tunisian labour union] is attacked everyone turns to the League and wants to know what the League’s position is. So, the League is pushed into a role that is much more important than what its fundamental role should be.20

Nonetheless, the leaders of the LTDH made the clear decision to keep the organisation focused on human rights, rather than to transform it into a broader political party, even though this change might have increased the organisation’s popularity. The League reflected a desire of its leaders to limit its membership to individuals who truly accepted the idea of working through human rights norms and discourse.

Given that the LTDH intended its charter to reflect a continued orientation towards human rights, it became a clear model of issues involved in internalising international rights norms into an Arab society with a Muslim majority. The document’s preamble itself presaged this possibility by stating that the concepts and ideas for the LTDH’s mission came from ‘the liberating principles in the values of our Arab-Islamic civilisation’ and ‘the universal aspirations for the safekeeping of human rights as they have been formulated in international declarations and conventions regarding human rights’.

Issues of conflict between human rights norms and Tunisian cultural and social practice did indeed come up during the LTDH charter drafting process. Not surprisingly, these issues centred on religion. Basically, bitter debate occurred over language endorsing unequivocal and total equality of religion. LTDH charter drafters started their efforts with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, attempting to base their document on UDHR language whenever possible. But many LTDH members were wary of proposed language for Article 9 of the Charter, which would have listed as a basic human right the ‘freedom to change one’s religion’. Because Muslims traditionally believe that converting out
of Islam is a grave sin, this provision was modified to read ‘freedom to choose one’s religion’. This change was contested strongly by many of the core LTDH leaders, but ultimately prevailed.

The change in Article 9 is a good example of the difficulties involved in adapting international human rights norms that were formulated in a secular context to a society in which one religion dominates and is a prime determinant of identity. And yet, what is remarkable about the LTDH charter drafting process is how confined in scope such difficulties were. Although watered down from what some LTDH members wanted, Article 9 still is a strong endorsement of religious pluralism. Furthermore, Article 8, also on religious pluralism, was debated but left intact in its original broad form. It reads: ‘Men and women, at reaching adult age, have the right to freely choose their spouse and raise a family according to their own personal convictions and conscience.’ This provision allows for a certain amount of interpretation that might please some religious conservatives as well as more secular-minded LTDH members. But what is noteworthy is the relatively unproblematic adaptation of general human rights language from Article 16 and 18 of the Universal Declaration of human rights to the Tunisian context.

Indeed, the LTDH charter experience ultimately demonstrated that, at least in Bourguiba’s Tunisia, Arab-Islamic identity and international human rights discourse could be reconciled. The charter debate had included some polarisation on whether the LTDH was correct to subscribe to so-called Western-inspired rights, particularly as they suggested conflict with a position explicitly or implicitly privileging Islam. Sensing the potential that this polarisation might rip apart the strongest independent political force at the time, the government even encouraged official newspapers to play up the human rights versus Islam position. But, in the end, the League recovered its unity at a meeting of its national council, at which its core advocates asserted that the UDHR was not merely Western, but a compromise among human rights norms throughout world civilisations. After this council meeting, the LTDH succeeded in passing its charter, which, compromises and all, strongly pointed the organisation towards continuing status as a movement genuinely devoted to a level of human rights activism in congruence with the UDHR.

To Muhammed Charfi, the charter episode had important specific and general relevance. According to him:

One of our major accomplishments in the course of all the discussion over the charter was to affirm the distinction between law and religion. ...The charter discussion was very useful because now, even if many people don’t share our ideas, at least we are
accepted for what we are, without too many misunderstandings....
Now things are clear: we are not anti-Islam, we are not against
Islamic civilisation, we are not pro-West. We may have a way of
looking at things that is not the way of the majority, I don’t know.
But in spite of that, we’re willing to cooperate with everyone, and
we’re accepted with our differences.  

In short, Charfi and his associates who formed the LTDH’s centre
explicitly chose to work to frame the organisation as a human rights
movement that conformed both to international ideals and Tunisian
society whether or not this would augment the LTDH’s popular appeal.
Undoubtedly, this choice had something to do with the third issue
that was critical to the LTDH during the charter process – the
organisation’s toleration by the regime. Again, in Charfi’s words:

Of course, we can’t avoid acting politically, but we don’t want to
act in the narrow sense of the word ‘political’. In any case, what I
think is important, and what is one of the possible explanations for
the League’s importance, is that the government party doesn’t want
competitors, so it refuses to allow opposition political parties to
operate. We, on the other hand, just put forward ideas. We aren’t
competitors for power, and they let us operate. That’s our strength.
If we become competitors for power we’ll lose both our identity
and our field of free action.  

Clearly, using the charter as a strong means of framing itself as a non-
partisan, non-contentious organisation was the LTDH’s leaders’
judgement of their best hope of maintaining the group’s field of
operation as its strength grew.

However, the LTDH’s non-partisan mandate did not shield it from
political attack during the final period of Bourguiba’s presidency. The
months before Ben ‘Ali took over Bourguiba’s position were chaotic,
with significant agitation by covert Islamist groups. Ben ‘Ali, as
Bourguiba’s Minister of Interior and former head of secret police,
cracked down severely on these groups. When the LTDH followed its
mandate as a human rights group and protested against the regime’s mass
arrests and secret detention of Islamists, Ben ‘Ali attempted to curb the
organisation’s activities. He directed a letter to LTDH president Zmerli,
alleging that the organisation violated the spirit of Tunisia’s law of
associations and even human rights laws by failing to allow any
individual open access to joining the League.

The obvious purpose of Ben ‘Ali’s letter was to discredit the LTDH
externally through public opinion and internally through forcing it to
open itself up to having its membership stacked by government loyalists
who would undermine its independence. Ben 'Ali's letter was disseminated throughout the Tunisian press, along with open complaint letters by supposedly independent rejected applicants for LTDH membership. Even more ominously, former secretary-general Chamari was arrested and put on trial. The LTDH learned that its non-partisan shield from governmental pressure did not extend to its protests on behalf of the rights of Islamist political movements.

Yet the government itself changed in 1987, making the new regime more tolerant of the LTDH for a limited time. Ben 'Ali staged a bloodless coup to replace the doddering Bourguiba that November, and found himself in need of both political allies and legitimation. Under these new circumstances, Ben 'Ali courted the LTDH, because of its prestige and relative autonomy as a Tunisian political organisation that had been above politics.

The period of Ben 'Ali's bloodless seizure of power and early presidency stands as the LTDH's moment of greatest triumph, which nonetheless paved the way for its decline. The triumph was easy to see. Ben 'Ali openly spoke of the purpose of his succession to power as the preservation and expansion of Tunisian human rights. And, in fact, the first year of his presidency was a time of unusual political liberalisation. Many political prisoners, including the head of Tunisia's largest Islamist group, were released or had their sentences commuted. Amnesty International was allowed to organise a local Tunisian chapter. Ben 'Ali passed a number of laws easing restrictions on trade unions, journalists and political parties. In what seemed like a clear step towards democratisation, a Tunisian national pact was put together with input from new parties and other elements of civil society now operating openly. All of these reforms were laced with extensive human rights discourse, and reflected the agenda of the LTDH, many of the leaders of which were invited into Ben 'Ali's new government.

As uplifting as all of this was for the LTDH and Tunisia in the short run, the organisation and the country's liberalisation prospects began declining thereafter. In part, the LTDH was a victim of its own success. By co-opting its rhetoric and leadership, Ben 'Ali's new government deprived the LTDH of both its uniqueness and its agenda, throwing it off balance. This was concretely the case given that the LTDH's rules prohibited its leaders from serving in the government, thus necessitating an election in 1989 for new leadership of the organisation. By the time Dr. Moncef Marzouki emerged as the LTDH's new president, the organisation had been relatively inactive while Ben 'Ali was garnering international attention, and even awards, as a champion of human rights.
A longer-term problem for the LTDH was the unwillingness of Ben 'Ali to cede his status as a human rights advocate to any group or individual that might claim to know better. Since 1989, the President proved that his lack of tolerance for League efforts to defend the human rights of Islamists in early 1987 was not simply a one-time occurrence. In the wake of continued anti-regime agitation by Islamic activists who were not permitted to participate in politics legally, Ben 'Ali began a pattern of political repression in 1989 that has continued and intensified to the present. The League responded by reprising its mission and protesting the regime's police excesses.

This, in turn, effectively ended the marriage between the League and Ben 'Ali. As the President's repression of Islamic activists increased, the LTDH clarified its opposition to this repression. Ben 'Ali then began to turn his police power on the League itself. Ben 'Ali struck his first blow in 1992, by renewing with more vigour the same tactic he used against the league in early 1987. Amid a chorus of protests from international human rights groups, Ben 'Ali amended the law of associations creating different categories for legal groups in Tunisia. The LTDH would fall under the category of 'general associations', which, under the amendments, were required to open their membership to anyone. This was a stronger version of Ben 'Ali's 1987 effort to allow the LTDH to be infiltrated and over-ran with government supporters and spies, in order to cripple the League's capacity for independent action. The League, rather than submit to the government's efforts, dissolved itself in June 1992.

In 1993, in part because of the attention the League's dissolution received in the international human rights community, the League and the government reached a compromise. It was temporarily exempted by court order from application of the law and it resumed operation. Amid internal problems and under pressure to eventually apply the amended Law of Associations, the League changed its leadership and structure at its fourth congress in 1994. A lawyer with close ties to the government, Tawfiq Bouderbala, became the League's president, and members on good terms with the government or the ruling RCD party dominated the leadership structure.

These changes did not succeed in turning the League into a government toady. Its membership and even leadership remained representative of Tunisia's entire political elite, as the League continued to defend political prisoners of the regime. The LTDH's attempts to reassert its independent voice have cost it dearly, however. As has been consistently documented by a variety of international human rights groups, the crackdown on the League has moved from legalistic
measures to active governmental and police harassment. The very organisation that helped define and legitimise the human rights orientation of Ben ‘Ali’s early presidency has now become one of Tunisia’s most frequent targets for human rights abuse. As Ben ‘Ali’s efforts to co-opt and make use of human rights rhetoric continue, the reality of Tunisia’s growing human rights problem has essentially shut down the earliest and most consistent example of autonomous human rights activism in the Arab world.

Nonetheless, the League’s historical place in Tunisian civil society means that it may survive its current repression to play a role in the country’s political future. One former LTDH activist insists that the group remains the only truly representative body of Tunisia’s entire political class, noting the legitimacy it has earned by so consistently defending Islamist targets of Ben ‘Ali’s wrath. Yet human rights discourse is much more commonplace in Tunisian society than it was a decade ago; Islamism seems to be a contemporary social frame for opposition to Ben ‘Ali, and one that is far less accommodationist than the LTDH as well.

The Moroccan Organisation of Human Rights (OMDH)

Unlike the situation in Tunisia, the Moroccan Organisation of Human Rights was neither the oldest indigenous human rights group nor the strongest non-governmental political force in the country. However, like the LTDH, it was the first human rights organisation independent of a particular political party and the regime when it was founded in 1988. For this reason, like the LTDH, it was its country’s affiliate of the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH).

That the OMDH was not Morocco’s first or only human rights organisation is typical of Moroccan politics, which has always had an array of parties and other groups, often overlapping in purpose. Where the Tunisian government has generally not tolerated explicitly political organisations that have tried to criticise it, the Moroccan monarchy has actually permitted the development of opposition political groups, as long as they have targeted government ministers and policies, rather than the monarchy itself. The Moroccan king Hassan II has generally used this plethora of political groups to play off one against another and to bolster his regime by claiming it has democratic features.7

Thus, it is not surprising that the OMDH arose in a context of pre-existing Moroccan human rights groups and may be as significant for revitalising these groups as for its own accomplishments. In fact, the impetus to start the organisation came from members of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) party, the most vital of Morocco’s two
major non-governmental political parties in the late 1980s and 1990s, which had already established the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH) organised from among its membership in 1979. The USFP members who wished to form a new organisation were motivated by a desire to have an indigenous Moroccan human rights group that seemed pro-active, rather than merely responsive to government actions mostly directed against the USFP.28

Undoubtedly aware of the LTDH’s prominence in Tunisia in 1987, the circle of Moroccan political elites interested in a new human rights movement that year attracted a diverse group of potential leaders committed to working on behalf of internationally-defined human rights in an explicitly non-partisan context. As the Executive Committee put it: ‘The OMDH wasn’t a political party, an opposition movement, a union, a cultural association, a group of intellectuals or a discussion forum. The OMDH wanted only to be a place bringing together sincere activists who wish to promote the cause of human rights.’29

The fledgling organisation went through much of what the LTDH had experienced in 1985 when it attempted to set out a charter for itself before it actually began functioning. Specifically, it faced the same dilemma as the Tunisian League regarding how to reconcile the secularist tone of international human rights organisations with the Arab-Islamic identity so prominent among Moroccans. As noted above, Morocco differs from Tunisia in its lesser extent of secularising reform and in the way in which the monarchy has linked itself explicitly to Islamic and Moroccan historical continuity.

This difference manifested itself in language that the OMDH adopted that is readily distinguishable from the LTDH in two ways. First, the OMDH makes more obvious rhetorical reference to Moroccan and Arab political history. For instance, the beginning of its Constitutive Platform specifies that the cause of human rights in Morocco

finds its roots in the traditions of Moroccan society and our Moroccan patrimony. Furthermore, the independence struggle led by the Moroccan nation, King and People, illustrates the profound tie that exists between national liberation and the promotion of citizens’ rights and their individual and collective liberties.30

The organisation’s founding documents used equally politically-charged language with respect to an external Arab issue at the beginning of its Consultative Commission’s Final Declaration:

The Consultative Assembly of the OMDH reconvenes in Rabat on 10 December 1988, the day of the fortieth anniversary of the
UDHR and a year after the launching of the heroic Intifada of the glorious Palestinian people who bear the most odious possible assaults on the rights of humans and peoples and who are writing the most beautiful pages of their history with the blood of their children.31

The obviously partisan nature of the OMDH’s statements would certainly be at odds with an analogous document from an international human rights organisation, and differs from the tone of Tunisia’s somewhat more Westernised human rights elite as well. Given this, a second divergence in language between the two North African human rights movements is not surprising. Namely, the OMDH in its Constitutive Platform does not spell out a specific list of guaranteed human rights derived from the UDHR along the lines of the LTDD Charter. Instead, the new organisation focused on its general goals of defending human rights and the idea of the rule of law in Morocco and spelled out the non-violent general means it would pursue to foster these goals.

That the OMDH was more overtly nationalistic and less precise about the content of human rights norms than the LTDD reflects a difference in frame alignment strategies rooted in divergences in the Moroccan and Tunisian cultural arenas of the political elite. The extent of the stress on the Intifada in the Moroccan document can be understood to some extent given the timing of its publication; furthermore, some of the vagueness about particular human rights norms vis-à-vis the Tunisian model makes sense since the OMDH was in the process of formation, rather than consolidation.

Yet, the two organisations resolved essentially the same dilemma of balancing human rights universalism and Arab-Islamic specificity in unique ways that corresponded to their elites’ political socialisation. In Tunisia, where legal reform, limited secularisation and low regime tolerance for politically contentious organisations characterised the political cultural arena, the LTDD defined itself in relatively apolitical language based on adapting the Universal Declaration. In Morocco, where the king’s symbolic centrality, nationalist and Islamic solidarity and relative regime tolerance for contentious political language framed elite life, the OMDH described itself in a less specific, more ideological manner that stressed specific bases of identification with Moroccan and wider pan-Arab rhetoric.

Nonetheless, as interesting as the different manner in which the OMDH portrayed itself from the LTDD are the similarities between the two organisations which are equally striking. Each organisation was, in the end, rather easily able to reconcile its local context with a clear
human rights activist mission quite consistent with that of international human rights groups. Each organisation clearly understood the importance of being independent of the government and non-partisan. Like the LTDH, soon after its organisation the OMDH began to use its non-partisan independence as legitimisation for direct criticism of its government’s human rights abuses.

According to one knowledgeable expert, in early 1989, suffused with social energy, OMDH members ‘worked feverishly..., living and breathing the cause of human rights’. The organisation worked successfully with international media and human rights groups to call attention to specific situations. Quite impressively for a Moroccan group, the OMDH issued statements calling for investigations of Morocco’s most long-standing and taboo human rights problem, the hundreds of ‘disappeared’ political prisoners. Taking on this particular issue certainly raised the OMDH’s respectability in Morocco and abroad. That a new political organisation with a novel mandate had succeeded in bringing up an issue that was usually swept under the carpet was not lost on Morocco’s political actors, including the regime itself.

Yet, as with the LTDH, success was not entirely beneficial to the OMDH. As a result of this success and consistent with the fissiparous factionalism of Moroccan politics, the country’s other human rights groups revitalised themselves and new ones arose. The strongest alternative to the OMDH, the much older AMDH, eventually established itself as independent. Furthermore, as was the case in Tunisia, the regime attempted to co-opt human rights rhetoric. In part in response to a crisis in his image in France brought on by a very critical book on Moroccan human rights, Hassan announced in a major speech in May 1990 that a high-level official Moroccan Advisory Council on Human Rights (CCDH) would be created.

Thus, in a short time, the OMDH had managed to be a catalyst for putting human rights discourse more broadly on the Moroccan political map. But having done this and seeing other governmental and non-governmental groups attempt to co-opt its role, the OMDH leadership fell into a crisis. For the rest of 1989 and much of 1990, the new organisation played a subdued role and had to reorganise itself.

Nonetheless, the OMDH recovered from this crisis and succeeded in re-asserting a role for itself as Morocco’s first independent indigenous human rights movement. But, once again consistent with the multiplicity of extant political organisations in Morocco, the OMDH shared its prominence as a crusading human rights organisation with other groups, especially the AMDH. Even the CCDH became an important piece of the Moroccan human rights picture, acting as a mediator between the
palace and other human rights groups, as well as taking on its more expected role of publicising the king and Morocco's human rights situation in the most favourable possible light. If the OMDH stood out, it was in its combination of continued political independence and better financial resources than the AMDH and other similar organisations.

Human rights trends in Morocco in the 1990s have been moving in the opposite direction from Tunisia, towards unprecedented liberalisation. The OMDH has been part of a synergy of political change, in part due to a combination of the country's desire to be close to Europe, Hassan's interest in preparing the way for his son and the relative lack of threat posed by political Islamists. The king promulgated new constitutions in 1992 and 1996, each of which slightly decentralised the authoritarian concentration of power in the king and his ministers. More strikingly, Morocco's infamous political prisons have been closed, remaining political prisoners were released in 1994, and the government in 1998 finally admitted and started accounting for political prisoners who had disappeared in the past three decades.

The OMDH's part in this story has been to keep the regime under fairly constant, albeit, respectful pressure to realise and concretise this human rights progress. To this end, it has added a yearly report on problems and progress in Moroccan human rights, similar to that which is put out by international organisations, to its biennial book-form compilations of its communiqués and statements. It has increased its number of sections and members in recent years. It retains its ties to the FIDH, and makes use of this international connection to call attention to both its concerns about particular individuals and more general political problems. Like a variety of other organisations, the OMDH has made itself a player in the Moroccan game of constant give-and-take between the monarchy and the politicised elite for marginal amounts of political authority in preparation for the total reshuffling of the political deck that is taking place now that King Hassan has died.

With over a decade of uninterrupted existence behind it, the OMDH certainly has much to celebrate as an independent group publicising human rights concerns in Morocco. Whether or not it can stand out in Moroccan political life the way the LTDH did in Tunisia before its recent repression, it continues to be on the relatively uncompromising side of reforms that it has championed consistently and that have transformed the human rights landscape of Morocco. Even in the wake of Morocco's unprecedented recent investigation by the CCDH and acknowledgement of past political 'disappearances', the OMDH issued a surprisingly critical report, calling attention to still unsatisfied concerns it has on a matter about which it has constantly agitated. In so
doing, it has shown how similar it truly is to international human rights groups, even if its uniqueness in Morocco’s complex political mosaic is less clear.

ACCOUNTING FOR THE LTDH AND OMDH

The above histories of the LTDH and OMDH show both interesting convergence and divergence. Both movements grouped a diverse range of their political elites under an explicitly pro-active human rights banner that was quite consistent with that of international human rights movements, in contrast to what facile stereotypes of Arab-Islamic culture might suggest. Both movements succeeded in remaining independent of the government and political parties and in building respect for themselves as genuine local watchdogs of their regime’s human rights violations. Moreover, both movements succeeded in making human rights rhetoric much more pervasive in their respective elite political cultures, to the point of seeing their discourse, if not their genuine rights activism, co-opted by other local organisations with governmental sponsorship. Yet the LTDH has itself become a victim of an increasingly repressive Tunisian political system, while the OMDH is one of a group of burgeoning human rights organisations able to operate in a climate of Moroccan political liberalisation.

What do the similar and distinct experiences of these two organisations suggest about how political institutions and culture influenced specific social movements in Tunisia and Morocco? First, there is no doubt that international and domestic structural factors were crucial to the development of these two organisations. As I suggested above, the study of indigenous human rights groups in non-Western societies has the potential to elucidate a variety of social scientific issues, including the relationship of international and domestic actors. One way in which the recent histories of both the LTDH and the OMDH illustrate the importance of institutional and structural factors to social movements is the organisations’ evident reliance on the interplay of international and domestic institutions to begin and carry out their activities.

The LTDH and OMDH each depended on a web of international and domestic institutional and other structural connections that is common to both Tunisia and Morocco but not necessarily present in many other Arab and non-Western countries. For one thing, the dependence of the two non-rentier states upon Europe for the trade and tourism that is so vital to their economies has opened both up to a high level of scrutiny from Western government and non-governmental monitoring groups.
When French journalists popularised the Moroccan king’s human rights abuses or Amnesty International put the Tunisian president’s repression of the LTDH on a global media agenda, as occurred in 1990 and 1992, respectively, the two Maghrebi leaders could not afford the potential repercussions to trade and tourism that this might bring.

Thus, the strong ties of Morocco and Tunisia to the countries in which the best-established human rights NGOs make their homes have opened these states up to having these NGOs serve as a backstop for the development and defence of local groups like the OMDH and LTDH. Irrespective of other issues, it would be harder for Western-based NGOs or governments to foster the functions of indigenous human rights movements in societies with regimes, such as Libya’s, that are less sensitive to Western approval than Tunisia and Morocco.

Other structural factors have been important to the success of the two human rights movements. Much of what has led analysts to consider Tunisia fertile ground for the growth of civil society in general has supported the development of the LTDH and the OMDH in Morocco. Specifically, both states are characterised by the subordination of the military to the regime, a well-developed educated elite and a middle class that is the result of the regimes’ consistent economic ties to the West and growing privatisation. All of these factors have been favourable to human rights organisations that, given their legalism and political diversity, are the essence of the idea of civil society. The spread of mass education and literacy is particularly critical to the expansion and transformation of political discourse in these societies. Furthermore, these structural factors coupled with Tunisia’s and Morocco’s broader connections to the West have increased these countries’ links to contemporary satellite and Internet technology, which in turn may have a kind of multiplying effect on the intra-national and international communication of political ideas.

Although there are many institutional and structural factors in Morocco and Tunisia that have facilitated the development of the OMDH and the LTDH, other factors have encumbered the two human rights groups’ efforts. Most obviously, the determination of these country’s regimes to concentrate political power in themselves and use their extensive subordinate military and police to that effect have made it nearly impossible for the two movements to operate without government approval. The current problems and weakness of the LTDH are mostly a result of the way that Ben ‘Ali’s increasingly intolerant regime has harassed and repressed its members.

Of course, regime crackdowns do not occur in isolation, but are linked to rulers’ perceptions about the political manoeuvring room
which their societies afford them. Both Morocco and Tunisia, and their
governments, are sitting on a potential political time bomb, with more
than 70 per cent of the population under 30 at a time when slow
economic growth has led to very high unemployment. King
Muhammed and President Ben ‘Ali no doubt fear the large groups of
unemployed youth who have little reason to respect their governments
and who have the time to work on behalf of Islamist movements that
promise radical social and political change.

This constrains indigenous human rights movements indirectly and
directly. The indirect effect is that the large group of unemployed youth
outside of the system has given the Tunisian and Moroccan regimes less
room to tolerate LTDH and OMDH activism. More directly, because the
legalistic, professional, even-handed and relatively depoliticised nature
of human rights movements generally attracts more educated adherents
and generally appears most efficacious vis-à-vis relatively open
governments, it is hard for the LTDH or OMDH to have mass appeal in
their countries’ current socio-economic climate.

If the above institutional and structural factors have influenced the
ability of Tunisian and Moroccan human rights organisations to develop
indigenously, particular shared elements of the two countries’ public
political culture have also been crucial to the story. First among these is
the strong sense of national identity that both Morocco and Tunisia have
shared, both because of the relative continuity of their autonomous
histories and the long period of political stability since each achieved
independence from the French in 1956. A second element of Tunisian
and Moroccan political culture that has been a necessary condition for
the birth and growth of the LTDH and OMDH has been the idea that is
generally shared among elites that values and approaches are not
inherently suspect or incompatible with Islam simply because they stem
from the West. The supposed prima facie incompatibility between Arab-
Islamic and Western values is undoubtedly over-stated by some
polemicians from both traditions with respect to nearly every Arab
society. Still, the relative ease with which the approach and even
language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adapted to
the needs of the LTDH and OMDH makes sense in a cultural context
where elites have significant knowledge and appreciation of European
and American norms as has undoubtedly been the case in Tunisia
and Morocco.

Finally, the similar ways in which the Moroccan and Tunisian rulers
have tried to frame their regimes have rewarded the human rights
orientation of the LTDH and OMDH. On the Morocco side, King
Hassan, like his father Muhammed before him, consistently looked to
the relative pluralism, albeit controlled, of the Moroccan political landscape to label his regime democratic in official media. By constantly asserting the language of democracy and pluralism, the Moroccan regime has facilitated a discourse of rights and the rule of law that could be taken up by groups like the OMDH. Similarly, in Tunisia, whatever the excesses of his leadership, Bourguiba’s independence movement and presidency were premised on the idea of a modernist, tolerant Tunisia that improves its citizens’ status through education and legal reform. This message, too, has led logically to an emphasis on the rule of law and the moderate progressivism characteristic of a human rights advocacy movement such as the LTDH.

So far, I have laid out a number of structural and cultural factors in Tunisia and Morocco that have allowed the LTDH and OMDH to function in their respective societies. It is beyond the scope of this article either to test the relative weights of these general factors or to compare them to other non-Western cases in which they are absent and in which human rights movements are also absent, in order to attempt to develop more causal propositions about where indigenous human rights movements can flourish in general. Both of these follow-up types of analysis would be very useful to adding concrete data to the important broad issue of the basic adaptability of human rights movements to diverse settings in the Middle East.

But the broad structural and cultural issues discussed above say little about the timing of the greatest success of the two movements, which in the case of the LTDH was in 1987–89 and the OMDH, 1989–92. During these similar periods of time, each movement successfully managed to (1) establish significant domestic and international respect for itself as an independent political movement, (2) help bring the issue of human rights much more broadly into the government’s political radar and rhetoric, (3) spur the development of other human rights organisations within the country and (4) contribute to a climate of political liberalisation. The divergent later history of the LTDH’s current weakness and the OMDH’s current status as part of a synergy of groups contributing to ongoing Moroccan human rights reform is probably due to the structural and cultural issues discussed above. But why were the movements as successful as they were during basically similar time periods?

I believe that the answer to this question is suggested by the emphasis that contemporary social movement theory places on cultural frame alignment. To be relevant to their societies, movements must find a way to align their goals to pre-existing elements of popular political culture. As Sidney Tarrow puts it: ‘Out of a cultural toolkit of possible symbols,
movement entrepreneurs choose those that they hope will mediate among the cultural underpinnings of the groups they appeal to, the sources of official culture and the militants of their movements—and still reflect their own beliefs and aspirations.\textsuperscript{39}

In the late 1980s, the likelihood of success for a social movement that chose human rights as its particular cultural frame in Morocco and Tunisia was based on a number of factors particular to this time period. These include the following:

(1) The neutral, fair process-orientation of human rights discourse could be particularly effective at a time when a regime was contemplating or attempting to gain support for incremental political liberalisation.\textsuperscript{40}

(2) International human rights groups were enjoying a period of substantial growth, in which their efforts were beginning to become well known in the two countries.\textsuperscript{41}

(3) As noted above regarding Morocco, but also true for Tunisia, where the PLO was headquartered, the Palestinian Intifada called popular attention to the rhetoric of indigenous human rights in an emotionally charged manner.

(4) The example of the decay and collapse of Eastern European regimes through largely pacific social movements encouraged Moroccan and Tunisian political elites to seek alternative, legalistic frames for social mobilisation.\textsuperscript{42}

(5) Human rights was an appealing cultural frame primarily for political elites at a time when both governments had a strong interest in finding new ways of broadening their support base through elite co-optation.\textsuperscript{43}

(6) Within Morocco and Tunisia, and especially the political elite, human rights discourse was becoming familiar, but was not so pervasive as to minimise the novelty of an effective indigenous human rights group.\textsuperscript{44}

This conjuncture of particular shared features of Moroccan and Tunisian structure and culture in the late 1980s facilitated the success that the OMDH and LTDH enjoyed in using the cultural frame of human rights for elite social mobilisation.

Studying these two social movements in terms of their specific cultural frames validates the relevance of movements' actual human rights norms to their political success. The content and consistency of application of the OMDH's and LTDH's formally elaborated principles and goals derived from international human rights discourse mattered to
Tunisian and Moroccan elites at a particular political moment. Furthermore, these organisations' experience suggests a variety of connections between cultural and structural factors more generally and Tunisian and Moroccan social movements. In fact, looking at the details of the history of the LTDH and OMDH clarifies the importance of disaggregating general, less transitory aspects of the two countries' politics from the more specific factors that explain why the two movements were most influential during a particular period. In sum, a study of these two organisations informed by a focus on cultural frames seems to satisfy the theoretical prescription with which this article started that studies including political culture must take into account structural factors relevant to their target of analysis.

CONCLUSION

Experienced scholars of Arab nations, such as Lisa Anderson, who are sceptical of political cultural analyses, rightly worry about atemporal essentialism that tends to reduce all people of a particular society to an often condescending set of images at odds with the tremendous flux and diversity actually present. This concern is especially important when the United States and other advanced industrial countries react to the spectre of violence against civilians carried out by extremists who happen to be Muslim Arabs. But veteran scholar Michael Hudson's 'modified rapture' at the return of political culture to the study of Arab politics is founded in a sense that culture can be looked at specifically and in relationship with structural aspects of politics.

Because social movements are themselves structures that motivate their members on the basis of particular cultural frames, they are obviously conducive to analyses that connect structure and culture. I have tried to use this fact to discuss and account for the general and particular success of Tunisia's and Morocco's leading independent indigenous human rights movements in a way that underscores the linkage of institutional structures and particular elite cultural norms. Given the limited scope of this analysis, I recognise that many of my conclusions are more suggestive than dispositive. Nonetheless, the very success of human rights framing with Moroccan and Tunisian political culture is itself worth underscoring, for it belies easy stereotypes about the incompatibility of transnational human rights norms and Arab Islamic societies.

In general, my discussion has centred on similarities between the two cases. Yet I have alluded to a major contemporary divergence between the LTDH in Tunisia and the OMDH in Morocco. The former is a major target for human rights abuse by an increasingly intolerant regime, while
the latter is part of a complex array of activist groups that are contributing to an ongoing process of political liberalisation. While a broad account of the current political systemic contrasts between Tunisia and Morocco deserves extended treatment, I believe that the dynamics of the rise and respective regime treatment of the LTDH and OMDH offer some guidance about socio-political mobilisation in their countries.

One of the reasons that the two human rights movements were most influential in the late-1980s to early-1990s was the relative novelty of human rights discourse as a cultural frame for social mobilisation in each society. Both the Moroccan and Tunisian governments responded to these movements' success by attempting to co-opt the discourse and purported advocacy of human rights more solidly for themselves. But, with this co-optation has come an erosion of the uniqueness of the human rights message, as it has become one of many slogans firmly enshrined in the official discourse of each society.

A focus on the cultural frames for social movements in North Africa highlights the challenge faced by non-co-opted political activists trying to find relatively novel ideas that can mobilise others without making them appear beholden to the regime. As the Tunisian and Moroccan governments, like many others, have tried to claim these cultural frames for their own to appear to be most things to most citizens, this challenge becomes increasingly difficult. Since every society has some limits to what ideas can be effective cultural frames and since social movements represent, by definition, potential challenges to state authority, it is perhaps logical that rulers might believe that trying to restrict the gambit of cultural frames in turn restricts popular mobilisation.

The rulers of both Morocco and Tunisia have attempted to undermine the uniqueness and integrity of social movements' cultural frames with a political component. Yet King Hassan showed more willingness in the last years before he died in office to try this without actually repressing the relevant political group itself, in the way President Bourguiba has done with respect to the LTDH. The latter strategy has its dangers.

Morocco's new king Muhammed VI came to power in 1999 with a reputation for political liberalism during a period of expanding Moroccan opportunities for political framing. With much greater socio-economic challenges than Tunisia, Morocco under the new king has seen a continuation of its recent tendency towards more diverse social movements framing increasingly specific political messages, including in the area of women's rights and trade unions. Thus, while umbrella human rights organisations like the OMDH may find their message muted and their cultural frame less popular, this is in part because
Morocco's general human rights climate has improved and human rights discourse has become embedded enough that indigenous rights movements are more focused in their clientele and goals.

Meanwhile, Ben 'Ali presides over a political process in Tunisia that has engendered little optimism about its potential to increase the regime's pluralism. Is it likely that frustrated political participants will become quiescent when they are deprived of effective social mobilisation opportunities around a cultural frame, such as human rights, that is not entirely at odds with their government? Or will they eventually adopt cultural frames that are much more politically volatile? Ben 'Ali may yet find that the legalistic LTDH was a much more tolerable thorn in his government's side than the more antisystemic, populist, independent voices which may well supplant it.

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NOTES

3. Compare Hudson's epistemological lessons about political culture (ibid., p.73) with Anderson's insistence on specifying the limits of cultural analysis (ibid., p.90). While Hudson's emphasis on the importance of culture in political theorising on the Arab world is a counterpoint to Anderson's stress on the reductionism and methodological sloppiness of many cultural analyses, both argue in effect that culture is important but needs to be much more carefully specified and linked to structural variables.
5. E.g., B. Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London and New York: Verso 1991);
7. Although Morocco continues to have an important and influential Jewish community,
it numbers less than 30,000 of a population of over 28 million and in no way threatens the country’s strong Islamic identity. The Catholic populations in both countries are almost entirely foreign.


15. Redissi (note 13).


21. Ibid., p.177.

22. Ibid., pp.179, 181.


26. Redissi (note 13).


42. Zartman (note 26), p.209.


44. Ibid., p.165.

45. L. Anderson (note 2), pp.78–81, 88–90.

46. Hudson (note 2), p.73.

47. David Meyer and Tarrow define social movements as ‘collective challenges to existing arrangements of power and distribution by people with common purposes and solidarity’: D.S. Meyer and S. Tarrow, ‘A Movement Society: Contentious Politics for a New Society’, in Meyer and Tarrow (eds.) The Social Movement Society (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p.4. Despite the claims of LTDH members above that their movements were not specifically political, I believe that the clear changes that the full implementation of the LTDH’s and OMDH’s sweeping agenda would entail and their consistent challenges to their respective governments have merited their consideration as social movements within this definition.
