

<b>Institution:</b> University of Oxford		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 25 Area Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Connecting University and Society in Post-authoritarian Tunisia Through Policy and Community Engagement		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2012-2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Professor Mohamed-Salah Omri	Professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature	January 2010-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> April 2014 - 31 December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Mohamed-Salah Omri's collaborative programme of research and public engagement – <i>Arab Revolutions and New Humanism</i> (ARNH) – started in 2013 and ongoing throughout the REF period, provided new perspectives on post-authoritarian practices of knowledge exchange, education and civic engagement in post-revolution Tunisia. ARNH contributed to: 1) collaboration between regional and metropolitan universities, benefitting local civil society associations and cultural policy makers; 2) informing and enabling cultural practitioners in a deprived region of the country; 3) co-development of new modes of governance committed to interactive learning anchored in explorations of themes of local and global relevance; and 4) practical collaboration between British and Tunisian universities in the areas of capacity building and policy.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Prior to 2011, the study of the Arab World was conceived largely within two frameworks: 1) a space of dominant authoritarian rule with no possibility of democratic change; 2) a presumption that the region's societies were considered already known, and not seen as producers of knowledge. These perceptions were rooted in orientalist and colonial paradigms that are much criticized yet still influential across fields of knowledge. In relation to the first theme, Omri's research focuses on two strands. The first is uncovering a culture of resistance and protest to authoritarian rule in Tunisia. The second is sustained critique of the patterns and dynamics governing the traffic of knowledge within Arab societies and their relationship to the "West". With regard to the first strand, Omri published essays on the politics and culture of memory (<b>R1</b>), torture and literature (<b>R2</b>), transitional justice and memorialisation (<b>R3</b>), and the long history of resistance in Tunisia (<b>R4</b>). In relation to the second strand, the key term in his research is <i>tarafud</i> (glossed in English as "confluency"), a concept he coined initially to describe relationships among world literatures, away from hierarchy, domination and one-dimensional influence. <i>Tarafud</i> has applications beyond the field of literature. Omri uses it to discuss intersections between labour activism, revolution and cultural production in Tunisia, and a critical relationship of knowledge between what we may call centre and periphery (<b>R5</b>). In his publications he also explores the need to reclaim local history and subjectivity, and the decolonisation of knowledge about Tunisia.</p> <p>In the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, Omri initiated a programme of research and public engagement – <i>Arab Revolutions and New Humanism</i> – and began collaborating with political philosopher Mohsen ElKhouni (University of Tunis al-Manar), sociologist Mouldi Guessoumi (University of Tunis), and comparative literature scholar Ronald A.T. Judy (University of Pittsburgh). ARNH was conceived as an intervention in what Frantz Fanon identified in <i>The Wretched of the Earth</i> (1963) as a need to express emergent perspectives on humanism. Fanon advocated awareness of cultural diversity, multiple sources of subjectivity and critique of power</p>		

relations in the production and circulation of knowledge. ARNH sought to respond to the frameworks mentioned above (that the Arab world is intrinsically authoritarian, and that it will always be a receiver of knowledge, never a producer of it) by putting into practice alternative dynamics for the traffic of knowledge between university and society. This includes underpinning principles drawn from Fanon's thought and Gramscian practices of counterhegemony. These are laid out in Omri's contribution to the book *University and Society in the Context of Arab Revolutions and New Humanism* (R6).

The book is characterised by its multidisciplinary and multilingual framework, with 24 essays from the fields of humanities and social sciences written in Arabic, French and English. It brings together perspectives from Tunisia, Latin America, North America, Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa into a common academic and practical frame, which included labour unions in post-authoritarian societies, transitional justice and the role of universities in democratising societies. The project was largely funded by the German Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and two local research laboratories in Tunisia.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

*All items are authored by Omri, unless otherwise stated.*

- R1. [Journal Article] 'A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry' *Boundary 2: an International Journal of Literature and Culture* 39:(1) (2012), 137-165. DOI: [10.1215/01903659-1506283](https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-1506283)
- R2. [Chapter, listed in REF2] 'New Humanism in Times of Torture' in *University and society in the context of Arab revolutions and new humanism*, (eds. Mohsen ElKhouni, Mouldi Guessoumi and Mohamed-Salah Omri (Tunis: Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, 2016, 300 pp.), pp. 83-97. ISBN: 9789938149876.
- R3. [Chapter, available on request] « Justice (poétique) transitionnelle: écriture et démocratie en Tunisie » in *Esribir al democracia. Literatura y transiciones democráticas*, eds. A-L Bonvalot, A-L Rebreyend, Ph. Rousseau (Madrid: Collection de la Casa de Valazquez, 2019), 247-258. ISBN 9788490962213
- R4. [Journal Article, available on request] 'The movement Perspectives: Legacies and representations' in *EuroOrient*, 38 (2012), pp. 149-164.
- R5. [Chapter] 'Min ajl nadhariyah fi al-tarafud al-adab' (Towards a theory of literary confluency) in *The comparative lesson and the dialogue of literatures* (Tunis: Bayt al Hikma, 2015), pp. 13-52. ISBN 9789973491596. Available at <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:dc2bebc8-2615-4a6d-9e95-8c409cb64dc2>
- R6. [Edited Book, available on request] *University and society in the context of Arab revolutions and new humanism*, (eds. Mohsen ElKhouni, Mouldi Guessoumi and Mohamed-Salah Omri (Tunis: Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, 2016, 300 pp.) ISBN: 9789938149876.

### Grants and Awards

Omri (PI), 'Arabic Literature and authoritarianism'. Leverhulme Research Fellowship of GBP42,477 for 2015-2016. Grant number RF-2015-049.

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

#### **Facilitated local partnerships in rethinking education and cultural participation**

After the launch of ARNH a study day and one international conference were held with the aim of establishing collaboration between regional and central universities in Tunisia, particularly in Kasserine, the poorest region in the country. Kasserine has a population of c.500,000 and possesses rich agricultural assets and a substantial proportion of the country's ancient ruins, which have not been effectively leveraged to bring in tourism. The study day (on 2-3 April 2015) brought together project leaders with local academics and policy makers, as well as civil society

associations. It resulted in a major international conference, University and Society in the Context of New Humanism, held in Kasserine (12-14 April 2016). The Regional Representative of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in the Governorate of Kasserine said: "Our work with Professor Omri started by analysing the cultural reality in the region, diagnosing and identifying shortcomings, and seeking to find a participatory approach that is inclusive and brings all parties to the table to search for solutions and allocate responsibilities. The main focus was the university's role in breaking the cultural blockade on the local community." (E1) The participants included members of Amal ("hope") Association for Solidarity, Development and Knowledge, a local NGO, as well as local cultural policymakers and cultural producers. They were put in productive dialogue with academic experts from the Institut Supérieur des Arts et Métiers of Kasserine and University of Tunis al-Manar. The local participants learned how to organise seminars, present ideas to a varied audience, collaborate with diverse of stake holders, and set local priorities in breaking the isolation of the region from institutions of knowledge production. The Amal President explains: "We had the honor to work with Professor Omri on most of his activities and projects in the city of Kasserine as equal partners which was in itself a new initiative that impacted positively.... Such collaborations involved overseeing the project from its very inception through to its design and its implementation in an interactive and participatory manner... In addition, [the work] breaks the city's knowledge isolation by opening a space for local activists to benefit from experiences and knowledge not only from various parts of Tunisia but also from South America and Europe. Such a methodology contributed to breaking the ice between the public institutions, on one hand, and the local authorities and young people, on the other, whose interactions have often been marked by rigidity and a lack of trust. Equally, it extended an interactive bridge between regional actors in our Association-run projects which, in turn, established relationships that continued beyond these conferences, making the educational institutions in the region and the local authorities' *actual* partners in most activities". (E5)

**Informed debate on heritage management; improved relations between institutions of culture and university; reconnected Tunisians with their history and local identity.**

Stage 3 of ARNH addressed isolation of the Kasserine region through collaborating with local actors in the *Kasserine Forum for University and Society: Knowledge between the Local and the Global* (28-30 September 2018). (E4) The event featured academic presentations designed for a diverse public, aiming to provide a safe environment for discussing the work of local artists with elected local officials of the municipalities of Kasserine City and Kasserine Ennour and archaeology conservators and local cultural authorities. The full evaluation of the event's impact by both Amal and through a survey designed in Oxford revealed that of 250 people attending over three days, 49% were female and 51% male, with 24% under 20, 45% between 20 and 40 and 31% over 40, demonstrating both gender balance and youth participation. Several responses to the survey stressed how much the event changed participants' perception of art and the role of culture in combatting radicalisation. (E3) One high school student said: "I presented a poem for criticism and learned a lot from the comments". (E2) An activist from the city of Sousse said: "I hope this initiative will be emulated in other parts of the country". (E2) Some of those involved in the event continued their own projects afterwards, notably a children's writing workshop led by writer Mohamed Hizi and an annual symposium on sculpture using local material by partner artist Mohsen Jelliti. The Amal President notes: "Relationships were established and lasted beyond these conferences. Educational institutions in the region and local authorities became real partners in the activities of local associations". He highlighted two specific projects undertaken by his association as a result of this: a) Ittisal, a project implemented by the Amal Association in 2019, in partnership with the University of Tunis, aiming to supervise young people who show violent behaviours by offering them, alongside their families, psycho-social therapy; and b) an advocacy campaign held in 2019 to enact a law regulating social security economy in full partnership with the Higher Institute of Arts and Crafts in Kasserine. (E5)

**Co-production of new governance and pedagogy at the University of Tunis al-Manar.**

Omri facilitated reform of higher education in Tunisia by raising public awareness through widely circulated media essays. For example, his interview on higher education in Tunisia in the newspaper *al-Maghreb* was viewed more than 3700 times. (E6) Omri contributed to improving

support for postgraduate training and improving governance at the Higher Institute of Humanities (ISSH). The Director of the Institute, which has 3,100 students, wrote: "Our cooperation with Professor Omri focused on the transfer of experiences in relation to the university's participatory management and its outreach strategy". (E9)

Omri also contributed to modes of teaching and interactive learning through multiple disciplines. The first of two study days, titled "Carthage: History and Place," was held on 7 April 2019 and benefitted 80 students. One student considered it "a revision of methods of communication: the university outside its walls, the university in society". He highlighted the opportunity to connect theoretical academic knowledge with a physical space, which constitutes a personal and national value to the students. (E7) One female student commented: "By leaving the closed environment of the classroom, we found ourselves more at ease to learn". (E8) A male student said: "The student realises that the course is related to his own life, not just a means to a job". (E8) The Director of the Institute explained in a written testimony: "These pedagogical activities have been well received by students and researchers and are part of renewing research and teaching methodologies at the transitional period for the university and the country as a whole." (E9)

#### **Facilitated and contributed to a new UK-Tunisia Joint Commission**

The UK-Tunisia Higher Education Joint Commission was established in January 2018, following a suggestion made by Omri to the deputy British Ambassador in December 2017. (E10) The Commission provides a framework for universities in both countries as well as other stakeholders to make a "step-change" in cooperation in research and teaching by 2021. The British Council Director and Cultural Counsellor at the British Embassy in Tunisia writes: "The Commission has had the good fortune to count Professor Omri as one of its most committed and knowledgeable members. In addition to playing an active part in the initial setting of the aims and shape of the Commission, Professor Omri has carved out a major role in serving as bridge between the two educational cultures, having had education, management and teaching experience in both systems... In addition to providing general advice to the Commission he has focused particularly on mobility [between Tunisia and the UK] and capacity-building and has been crucial in orienting the work of the commission at its six-monthly meetings in Tunis and London." (E11) One outcome of mobility was the organisation of an Arabic Year Abroad option for University of Oxford students at the Bourguiba Institute in Tunis; arrangements have also been made for students from the University of Exeter to study at the Institute. (E12.v) Another outcome was the increased success of the Chevening scholarship programme for Tunisians to study in UK universities (E12.iv); a third was establishing cooperation between the UK and Tunisia in the area of quality assurance (E11).

#### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

*Some evidence sources are in Arabic. Where these are quoted in section 4, translations have been used.*

- E1.** Letter dated 5 November 2020 from the Regional Representative for Cultural Affairs in the Governorate of Kasserine, endorsing Prof. Omri's work and confirming its impact in breaking isolation and promoting local talents.
- E2.** A selection of testimonies extracted from the Kasserine video released 30 December 2019, corroborating the impact of the Kasserine Forum; 13 mins, MP4. Available on request.
- E3.** Summary of questionnaire responses from September 2018, showing the significance of the Kasserine Forum's impact on people's perception of art and culture and its role in combating radicalisation.
- E4.** Selected media coverage of Kasserine Forum's opening day
  - i) Radio Gafsa, 28 September 2018.
  - ii) Nessma TV, 28 September 2018.

iii) Mosaique FM, 1 October 2018.

**E5.** Letter sent 3 August 2020 from the President of Amal Association for Solidarity, Development and Knowledge in Kasserine, confirming the long-lasting impact Prof. Omri's work had on the organisation.

**E6.** Selected media coverage on Higher Education

i) Al-Maghreb, 26 October 2018.

ii) Al-Maghreb, 21 January 2020.

iii) Hypotheses, 14 November 2020.

**E7.** Review of study days by a student from 9 May 2019 published online on Ahewar.org.

**E8.** Documentary on Study Day Carthage and Memory from 21 June 2019.

URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaJX8-](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaJX8-Ju7M&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR2LljJWk6rfCqzeS0lwARRBj1x9WFGTLvkkH4cYMFdjc uHbDYcpUrC0cUo)

[Ju7M&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR2LljJWk6rfCqzeS0lwARRBj1x9WFGTLvkkH4cYMFdjc uHbDYcpUrC0cUo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaJX8-Ju7M&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR2LljJWk6rfCqzeS0lwARRBj1x9WFGTLvkkH4cYMFdjc uHbDYcpUrC0cUo)

**E9.** Letter sent on 10 August 2020 from the Director of the Higher Institute of Humanities in University of Tunis Al-Manar, confirming Prof. Omri's contribution to new governance and pedagogy programmes.

**E10.** Email dated 3 July 2018 from the Deputy Head of Mission (Job-share) at the British Embassy Tunis, confirming Prof. Omri's support in establishing the Commission.

**E11.** Letter dated 10 July 2020 from the British Council Director and Cultural Counsellor at British Embassy Tunis, confirming Prof. Omri's role in the UK-Tunisia Higher Education Commission (HEC).

**E12.** Documents and correspondence relating to the UK-Tunisia Higher Education Commission (HEC), confirming Prof. Omri's claim of an extensive cooperation between Tunisia and the UK

i) Invitation to join HEC.

ii) Schedule for meeting of HEC on 21 June 2018.

iii) Minutes of meeting of HEC on 29 July 2019.

iv) Minutes of meeting of HEC on 23 January 2020.

v) Correspondence with Director of Institut Bourguiba des Langues Vivantes, Tunis.

vi) HEC implementation plan.