

When Life Imitates Art: The Arab Spring, the Middle East, and the Modern World

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Abstract: *What was the intellectual vision that led to the Arab Spring and what are its roots? This article investigates how that vision took shape in the years immediately before the Arab Spring through the work of poets and popular Arab singers like Hamza Namira and Maher Zain. It argues that the vision in art and politics mirrored the desire of many Arabs and Muslims to find new ways to solve the challenges plaguing their societies. The vision also reflected a) how the downturn in the global economy after 2008 combined with major environmental changes to galvanize millions to act in the Arab World b) how social media and new communications tools helped to mobilize dissent and to limit the ability of governments to effectively repress their populations. More than two years after the Arab Spring began in late 2010 the movements it spawned are radically reconstructing societies in the Middle East. They are also undermining some of the basic assumptions of the international system, many of which have been in place since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.*

Keywords: Arab Spring, Egypt, Hamza Namira, Maher Zain, Social Media, and Syria.

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Introduction

In 2003, the University of Arkansas Press in the United States published *Angry Voices: An Anthology of Off-Beat Poets*. In the book's introduction, Muhammad Enani, a scholar at the University of Cairo, seeks to explain the factors motivating young Egyptian poets and why their work has become controversial in Egypt and the larger Arab World over the past quarter century. Enani settles on one concept, the notion of order:

The voices in this collection are not “angry” in the sense of being enraged. Rather I have dubbed them ‘angry’ in the sense of rebellion. In one way or another, each of these poets is rebelling against deeply entrenched customs—linguistic, metrical, formal, or social. The amount of anger directed at these poets for “breaking” taboos and rules in our society is astounding. They stand as it were in the eye of the hurricane. Their main innovation is breaking with established order. The notion of order, in fact, is at the heart of the matter.¹

While Enani's words deal directly with the experiences of a group of “rebellious” poets and how others perceive their work, his words also provide a powerful framework for understanding the events which have reshaped the Middle East and the wider world. Just as challenging the concept of order is central to the young poets featured in *Angry Voices*, challenging ‘the notion of order’ is ‘at the heart of the matter’ for the political activists who have led the Arab Spring and subsequent changes in the Arab World and beyond. In literature and politics, young activists focused on the order (or nizam in Arabic)—the political and social hierarchies that govern Arab society and culture. One can see the importance of nizam in the chief slogan used during the Arab Spring: “ash-sha'b yurid isqat an-nizam.” While this phrase is often translated as “the people want to overthrow the regime,” the sentence could be understood to include order. The dualism of the word nizam can be interpreted under an equally plausible meaning other than regime, as a society's hierarchies of power or its governing ‘system’ or ‘order’.

Therevolutionary political events that shattered the nizam derived from both tensions which had been brewing beneath the surface of Arab states for years and the newfound ability of Arab populations to respond to these tensions. While technological changes undermined the state's ability to manage the flow of information, it also gave individuals greater freedom to choose what to believe, bind together with new communities who share their beliefs, and to act. In addition, these new technologies and social linkages showed millions that others shared their anger with the inability of Arab leaders to meet many of the population's basic expectations. This included free societies without corruption which could compete with the development of Turkey and Asian nations. It was this anger that drove, and continues to drive, millions of young Arabs to organize and demand new leaders and governments both offline and online.

By 2010, many young Arabs had concluded that the order that had been in place at home and abroad in the Arab World since the First World War was the chief barrier to realizing a brighter future and to regaining their dignity. In their eyes, the new nizam, and its leaders, could not conform to either the al-Qaida promoted nizam or the popular authoritarian and materialistic one promoted by most governments in the region. Instead, Arabs sought a new nizam: a successful modern society in which individuals could be pious, live up to their God-given potential, and in which national leaders could not use the West or Islam to justify autocracy. Within this new milieu, political change would not originate through terrorism, religious movements, or military coups led by junior officers as it had in the past. Instead, political change would occur through collective action—peacefully if possible but also by force if national leaders chose to resist with violence.

This article explores the roots of this intellectual vision behind the Arab Spring, how it was utilized by protestors and suggests where it may be leading. It shows how this vision took shape—even when it was not immediately visible. In particular, this vision appeared earliest in the work of artists like Hamza Namira and Maher Zain. It reflects a desire among many Arabs and Muslims to employ fresh approaches to tackling socio-economic and political crises that have remained unsolved for decades. This paper also argues that the downturn in the global economy and environmental change after 2008 galvanized millions to act, while the social media and communications revolution mobilized dissent and limited the ability of a government to effectively repress it, including within its own security forces. Finally, this paper will argue that the Arab Spring is radically transforming societies in the Middle East and, in the process, undermining assumptions about national sovereignty and the state's monopoly over the use of force that has been in place since the seventeenth century.

Roots of Revolution

For decades, the Arab states appeared to be among the most stable governing systems in the world. Their internal political systems were largely unaffected by the Iranian revolution, the Camp David Accords, the end of the Cold War, the rise of democracy globally after 1989, the emergence of Asia's dynamic economies, and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. They appeared able to withstand external and internal shocks, making only minor adjustments when necessary. Many of the Arab heads of state in 2010 had been national leaders in the 1970s or were related to the men who led their states at that time. Well integrated security structures reinforced the governing system. For example, Syria has at least fifteen security services alone with 50,000 employees in a country of just 20 million people.²

But the political systems of the Arab World faced environmental and social challenges that even the most ferocious security forces could not address. The most important challenges were tied to water and population growth. Only ten percent of the Arab World is arable, while Algeria, Iraq, Morocco, Tunisia, and the UAE use more water than they receive in rain or snowfall.³ It is expected that within the next six years Yemen's capital, Sana'a, will run out of water⁴ while drinking water in many mountainous areas equates to less than one quart per person per day.⁵ Iraq, Syria, and Jordan faced another daunting problem: they depend on water sources controlled by their militarily powerful neighbors: Turkey and Israel. For instance, reduced water on the Euphrates River as a result of dam construction in Turkey severely impacted farming communities in northern Iraq and Syria along with Iraq's southern marshes in the decade before 2011.⁶

The historic drought between 2006 and 2011 combined with poor government policy magnified the impact of reduced water flows, especially in Syria. 100,000 Iraqis were displaced, 800,000 Syrians lost their livelihoods and two to three million Syrians fell into a state of extreme poverty.⁷ They abandoned over a hundred villages, some of which had been continuously inhabited and cultivated for 8,000 years.⁸ In Syria's ethnically mixed northeast, 75% of farmers suffered complete crop failure, while herders lost nearly 85% of their livestock.⁹ Hundreds of thousands sought new homes in makeshift camps around Aleppo, Damascus, and Der'a without running water and electricity. Syria's water resources dropped by half between 2002 and 2008.¹⁰ Even the capital was not always spared: Damascus provided its residents with only four hours a day of fresh drinking water in 2002 and 2003, forcing many city residents to use supplementary water tanks. Further intensifying the drought's impact were poor government policies, which had subsidized large farms growing water intensive crops like cotton and wheat for export markets in areas that reduced supplies of water.¹¹ The Syrian government also permitted the overuse of ground water wells—a practice which reduced the country's water table and degraded the quality of remaining water supplies.¹²

Even in years of normal rainfall, most Arab states have had to import substantial quantities of food and are sensitive to fluctuations in the price of wheat and other global commodities. For years

they have struggled to import enough food to meet the needs of their burgeoning domestic populations. Egypt's population nearly tripled in size between the mid-1960s and 2011, while other Arab states witnessed exponential annual population growth. Yemen underwent a comparable level of population growth and has had to import between 80% and 90% of its food in recent years.¹³ In fact, three of the fastest growing national populations in the world in 2012—Qatar, the Gaza Strip, and the UAE—were in the Arab World.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the movement of millions of Palestinian, Iraqi, and other refugees into Arab states has exponentially heightened pressures to successfully allocate resources in these nations. Jordan, a nation of a little over six million, has welcomed 2 million Palestinians, three quarters of a million Iraqis, and tens of thousands of Syrian refugees.¹⁵ One Syrian refugee camp, Zaatari, grew to a city of 150,000 residents in less than a year.¹⁶ When global food prices rose in 2010 and consequently pushed daily staples out of reach for many Arabs, Jordan and many other Arab states lacked the resources to use and prevent a spike in domestic food prices. The result was a series of riots erupting throughout various Arab states.¹⁷ Riots in one of those countries, Tunisia, set the stage for the Arab Spring.

The ability of these riots in Tunisia to shape the perceptions of people living in nations from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean demonstrates the powerful effects of a strong sense of common cultural heritage and social space throughout the Arab World. Over the previous forty years, millions have fled rural areas and sought better livelihoods in cities or large towns, some of which are among the most densely populated in the world. Today, more than half of the Arab world lives in urban centers.¹⁸ Many non-Muslims in the Arab World also utilize Arabic in their liturgy and in houses of worship. The shared heritage created powerful bonds that transcended traditional political boundaries. These linkages have been intensified by movies, radio, and, most recently, satellite television networks. One of the most popular personalities on Egyptian radio in the 1950s was Umm Kulthum, a famous Egyptian singer. Her success is widely attributed to her immense talent and the fact that her work reflected the aspirations and revolutionary ideals of Arabs across the Middle East during that time.¹⁹

Over the last fifteen years, Arab satellite television has tapped into the same trans-Arab identity that Umm Kulthum and Egyptian radio did. These networks modeled themselves on the success of the American satellite television news network, Cable News Network, during the Gulf War in 1990 and 1991 and competed with existing state-controlled radio and television networks. They undermined the ability of states in the Arab world to regulate the flow of information. The new media pursued their own agendas and were sometimes funded by governments or organizations that differed considerably and contested the traditional voices of Arab governments.

By the late 1990s, Qatar's Al-Jazeera television became the most important and influential of the new Arab satellite channels. Its decision to hire Western-trained Arab journalists initially set it apart from CNN and other Western news organizations in the Middle East, many of whose correspondents and producers rarely spoke local languages and depended on staffs of local translators and guides. By contrast, Al-Jazeera staff could follow a story no matter where it led—whether it was Bin Laden or Bush. The network's lively discussion call-in shows and on air personalities touched on a host of long taboo subjects in the Arab world: family planning, religion, political power, gender issues, and corruption.²⁰

Fortunately for Al-Jazeera and the other new Arab satellite television networks there were many stories that their viewership wished to see. While typical political issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, US support for Israel and autocratic Arab governments, the War on Terrorism, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were covered, it was the social issues that were most important. The publication in 2002 of the *Arab Human Development Report* revealed what many Arabs had known for years: their nations were underdeveloped socially, were unable to meet either the social or economic needs of their populations, and had fallen behind Asian nations that had once been their equals economically and socially speaking. Those who lacked *wasta* (socio-economic and political

connections) were shut out of educational or employment opportunities and had little chance for advancement—a process that produced massive differences between classes. Close to 40% of Egyptians lived below the poverty line and struggled to afford daily necessities.²¹ By contrast, the elites of Cairo and other Arab capitals were often unaffected by socio-economic or climatic crises. During a national drought in 2006, one million individuals in Syria lived comfortably, while nineteen million lived in urban slums.²² The issue of waste reinforced popular anger on three other critical issues: a) the widespread perceptions of systemic official corruption and favoritism b) the fact that most Arab leaders were old and lacked clear younger successors; c) a general feeling that the Arab governing system humiliated Arabs individually and collectively as nations.²³

Within this environment, a widespread sense of despair emerged among the Arab youth. Blocked from advancement at home, many Arabs tried to find work abroad in America or in Europe—a process made far more difficult by the 2008 global financial crisis, which curtailed employment opportunities for Arabs in the West. Those who remained in the Arab World either did not find work or had to accept wages below the cost of living, especially in the region's densely packed cities. Many had to work multiple jobs and depend on their families well into adulthood. Those fleeing droughts were worse off. As a former farmer told the *New York Times* in October 2010: “we are at less than zero—no money, no job, no hope”.²⁴ Urban educated professionals had to supplement their income or postpone marriage for years. Students could not pass classes at public schools or universities without tutors, many of whom were educators who needed to supplement their meager salaries to make ends meet.²⁵ Even worse, it was difficult for men to buy homes in urban areas or have enough funds for the mahr, the dowry paid by the groom to the bride.²⁶ These socio-economic pressures institutionalized corrupt practices throughout society, from the heights of business and government to the most basic social interactions, such as a policeman's request for a bribe from a motorist to resolve a routine traffic stop.

Another implicit criticism of the Arab order came from Turkey: Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party, or A.K.P. First elected to national office in 2002, the A.K.P. doubled Turkey's per capita in five years and pursued a balanced policy in foreign affairs. Ankara kept close ties to the West while establishing unprecedented cultural and commercial links with traditional Turkish enemies: the Arab states, Greece, and Russia. Turkey's refusal to aid the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the A.K.P.'s spirited defense of Islam and democracy against apparent threats from Turkey's secular and military elites, and Erdoğan's denunciation of Israeli policies in Gaza solidified his and Turkey's position among Arabs. Arabs visited Turkey in unprecedented numbers and became voracious consumers of Turkish products and media. Turkish exports to Iraq, Syria, and other Arab states skyrocketed. For many Arabs, Turkey became a potential new model for a Muslim society in which citizens would no longer have to make the choice between modernity and Islam and where neither Islam nor the West could be used to justify autocracy, including military rule.²⁷

How to deal with these problems remained a challenge for many Arabs. While the actions of al-Qaida inspired some to embrace religious extremism, others articulated grievances through technology or art. In Egypt, a generation of internet activists challenged the order of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak online, while young Egyptian poets rebelled against the order and entrenched customs—linguistic, metrical, formal, or social in Arabic writing. A good example was Mohab Nasr's ironically named poem, “_____.” It investigates a lonely woman's desire to buy a dog for companionship. However, the dogs she finds at a pet store with names linked to human qualities (like Casanova, devil, and saint) present a dilemma for the store's owner—a dilemma that speaks volumes about Mubarak's Egypt:

How could he guarantee her
That it will be a real dog

Without reminding her of someone she knows?²⁸

Nor were poets and internet activists alone in exploring such dilemmas. Commentary online along with literature, movies, and music undermined the social order in many Arab countries and gave opportunities for young people to search out alternative voices and avenues for both self-definition and action. This process was aided by the introduction of cell phones and especially smart phones, which dramatically expanded access to the internet. Overall internet usage grew in Egypt alone from 4% in 2004 to over 24% in December 2010.²⁹

Social networking took off after Facebook launched an official Arabic version of the website in March 2009.³⁰ A year later, 4.7 million users had joined Facebook in Egypt.³¹ The political repercussions of this new technology clearly emerged after the June 6, 2010 death in police custody of Khaled Said, an internet activist who had posted a video of police officers dividing the spoils of a drug bust. It galvanized the emerging Egyptian Arab online community, especially Google executive Wael Ghonim. He founded a special Facebook page to bring Khaled's killers to justice, "Kullena Khaled Said" ("we are all Khaled Said"). The page worked in tandem with Arabic and English sites and grew to 400,000 followers, including members of the security forces.³² Critically, Ghonim kept his role as the Facebook page's administrator secret. This choice made it harder for Egypt's security forces to disrupt the page or threaten Ghonim but it also reflected his vision for social change in which everyone—not just a heroic leader or savior—would participate. Indeed, he would later write in his memoirs, *Revolution 2.0*: "This was the Revolution 2.0 model: no one was the hero because everyone was a hero."³³

Although Ghonim hoped that everyone would take ownership of his social and political movement, he continued actively working to make the page a success and to direct its followers in certain directions. Over time, he learned that facts and statistics produced mass outrage and a sense of community online in Egypt, Tunisia, and the wider Arab world.³⁴ But it was far harder to convince people to voice their outrage in the streets. Ghonim addressed this problem by creating a new video that combined a series of images of the first protests linked to Said set to the words of "The Resurrection of the Egyptians," an Egyptian nationalistic song. The results were electrifying:

More than 50,000 members of the page watched the video in the next few days. People found the fusion of images, lyrics, and music inspiring and moving. It was different from the regular practice of lawyers and human rights defenders, who used facts and statistics to garner support. Instead, the video created an emotional bond between the cause and the target audience. Clearly both are needed.³⁵

An important psychological bond had been forged. Members on the page "expressed their desire" to participate in new demonstrations, "especially after seeing the images and video."³⁶ The subsequent public events were hugely successful: both the number of participants and the locations of events increased significantly.³⁷ It was now clear that a music video could motivate individuals online to take mass collective action.

Awakening Records, Hamza Namira, and Maher Zain

Few artists would be better at helping Ghonim and other leaders of the Arab Spring generate collective action than the Egyptian Hamza Namira and the Lebanese-Swede Maher Zain. They were popular among students and young professionals in Cairo and were both promoted by Awakening Records, a pan-Muslim record and media company based in London and Cairo. Together, their music offered

complimentary messages—one secular and one based in Islam—that provided caustic and sincere criticisms of contemporary Arab societies, a vision of what that society might look like, a pathway to get there, and hope that such a vision could eventually be achieved. Equally compelling was the two singers’ sincerity and personal commitment to their art and to upholding their values.

Two of Namira’s songs on his debut album, *Ehlam Ma’aya (Dream with me)*, would play a key role in the Arab Spring and particularly in Ghonim’s actions. The first, “Dream with me,” is an uplifting song that promises that a better future is possible and that all people can fulfill their dreams if they work together. Throughout the song, Namira plays a guitar and repeats:

Dream with me
Tomorrow’s coming
And if it doesn’t come
We will bring it ourselves....
All our steps will lead us to our dream.
No matter how many times we fall
We can always get up
We can break through the darkness
We can turn our night into a thousand days.³⁸

Significantly, while the official video for the song chronicles the attempts of a boy growing up in a seaside village to build a boat and leave home, many Egyptians saw the song as an allegory for their own dreams to metaphorically or literally escape the “darkness” of contemporary Egypt and its political and social constraints.

The political and social themes in “Dream with me” are even more evident in the second song, “Ya Tair” (“O Bird”), an Arabic folk song set to drums and several other traditional Arab instruments. The song’s subject is an “imprisoned bird” who wishes to fly away “till things get better”—an image that many young Egyptians could easily identify with.³⁹ Namira calls on the bird to “sow a few seeds” that will “grow in the heart of the free.”⁴⁰ In the chorus, he predicts that the seeds will grow from twenty to millions. In a passage that foreshadows the events in Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011, Namira says:

Oh my broken heart
Don’t spend all your life mourning
You might not be a great leader
But you have millions of people behind you
If your seeds grow
Salah al-Din might rise.⁴¹

Equally importantly, the song’s words articulate Ghonim’s vision of a revolution in which everyone is the hero and there are no saviors. The final line’s reference to the rise of the twelfth-century general

and statesman, Salah al-Din (Saladin), is especially important. He is revered by many Egyptians and other Arabs as a great hero who presided over an unparalleled era of national vitality. By referring to Salah al-Din's rise, Namira is not promising that the seeds will bring the famous general back to life. Rather, he suggests that they will produce a historic period of reform and revival in which Egyptians will regain the national greatness that they had in earlier eras.

While Namira channeled the anger of the youth in Egypt and the rest of the Arab World, the work of Maher Zain revealed an equally important aspect of the Arab Spring: the vision of what a new Arab World, and Islamic World generally, might look like in the future. His work has provided him the opportunity to emerge as the Umm Kulthum of his generation. His 2009 debut album, *Thank You Allah*, was a surprising commercial success in the year before the start of the Arab spring uprising and outshone albums by more established Arab singers. On the album's cover, Zain wears jeans, a black jacket, and a dapper cap appropriate for a rhythm and blues concert but is seated in quiet Islamic prayer. That combination is emblematic of the core messages of the album, much of which is in English: faith in Islam, God, and personal dignity are the answer to the systematic challenges facing modern Muslims. It was critical for twenty-first century Muslims to take "ownership" of their problems and to resolve them. In addition his mastery of online promotion paired with his creation of frameworks for his fans to "associate" with him and act -in this case by buying his album. Not surprisingly, Zain was the first Muslim artist to reach one million fans on Facebook; today he has 7.8 million. YouTube videos are also integral to his marketing message and he dominated foreign album sales on Amazon.com in 2009.⁴²

In both his videos and his songs Zain consciously goes against the traditional formula for popular songs and videos which glamorize and revolve around the singer. Instead, Zain portrays himself to be an ordinary person who is no big deal except for his talent, which of course is given to him by Allah, whom he regularly thanks. But his faith is not founded on a complete renunciation of the West. In "Awakening," Zain calls on Muslims to reform themselves and not to fault others for their shortcomings: "yes, it is easy to blame everything on the West when in fact our focus should be on ourselves"; the chorus then goes on to ask, "Is Allah satisfied?" Collective social action in Ghonim's model of everyone serving as a hero is also an important aspect of his message. In his videos, viewers see him singing in various situations where there are problems but where people other than Zain address them. Indeed, everyone in Zain's video is a hero.⁴³

Equally importantly, Zain encourages individuals to take ownership of their problems and to confront injustice but not to do so with violence. Strikingly, in the video for the album's third song, "Insha Allah," one sees pictures of dark and menacing riot police chasing innocents and even violent torture, as Zain sings that one should never lose hope or despair because Allah is always on your side. Even more astonishingly, in "Palestine will be Free," viewers see a schoolgirl holding a stone in front of an Israeli tank—an image meant to invoke a very famous picture of a Palestinian child from the 1987 Palestinian Intifada holding a rock high to throw at a nearby Israeli tank. But the girl drops the rock, stands defenseless in front of the tank, and implicitly puts her faith in God that her personal will is stronger than the mighty Israeli tank. Her faith is rewarded, as the tank withdraws.⁴⁴

Life Imitating Art: The Arab Spring

Within months of the release of *Thank You Allah*, millions of individuals in the Arab World had gained the confidence to challenge their nation's governments and even their tanks. Beginning in Tunisia in December 2010, political protests over the price of food transformed into much larger events in which protestors followed a strategy remarkably similar to the one laid out in *Thank You Allah*. Protestors challenged their governments through the sheer size of their demonstrations and forced police to withdraw in a manner similar to how the girl forced the Israeli tank to leave in "Pa-

Lebanon Will Be Free.” Crowds took on personal ownership of their movements and implicitly “seized” critical symbols and holidays for themselves.

Nor did the protestors blame the West for their problems. They put the blame (and the responsibility for change) at home: “ash-sha’byuridisqatan-nizam.” From the start, Tunisians defined the meaning of that phrase. When President Ben Ali left Tunis for Saudi Arabia on January 26, Tunisian elites hoped that a new president would lead to the end of the protests. Instead, demonstrations grew bolder. By taking this approach, Tunisians sent a clear message: the leader was only a symptom of the problem; it was the ‘nizam’ that had to change.

Ben Ali’s departure, in Ghonim’s words, “changed everything”.⁴⁵ For the first time, he and other Egyptians felt free to criticize their leaders in public and to imagine that it was possible to topple their governments. A groundswell of support emerged to turn protests on January 25, 2011—ironically Egypt’s National Police Day—into a rally against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo’s Tahrir Square. Ghonim attached a link to “Dream with me” to his final post on “Kullena Khaled Said,” the night of January 24, 2011, the day before the rally. He hoped the song to be “a call to everyone to dream of a better tomorrow that we would share in making”.⁴⁶

It worked beyond his wildest dreams. Millions responded in Tahrir Square and in other urban centers in the Arab World. For many, social action now involved viewing or attending rallies in person or virtually through the click of a mouse. It also involved exchanging information on Facebook on how to avoid tear gas or secure interviews on Western television networks. When computer networks were either slowed or blocked, activists utilized other ways to record and distribute information: SD chips, thumb drives, CDs, miniature recording devices, and cell phones. Al-Jazeera and other television networks put these images on air—usually unedited and without verifying their veracity—to prevent their competitors from airing images from the biggest news story in decades.

This analysis, incidentally, is not meant to suggest that either Hamza Namira or Maher Zain’s songs caused any demonstrations: it only suggests that their work reflected a wide-spread feeling of discontent, a desire for a different future, and collective vision for how Arabs could reach that future. Both artists’ awareness of that discontent and of the need for hope was an element of their popularity.

Ironically, social networking functioned as a tool of opposition to state authority even when it was not specifically used by individuals wishing to topple the regime. After the coups of the 1950s and 1960s, Arab leaders focused on the political makeup of their militaries and solely promoted officers to positions of authority who were seen as unquestionably loyal to the regime. Certain of the army’s loyalty, Egyptian officials deployed it to Cairo and elsewhere to deal with the large crowds when the police forces failed to restrain protesters. But they faced an unforeseen problem: young enlisted men and junior officers were just as linked to social networks as Arab demonstrators were and showed no desire to use force against them. In fact, the co-administrator of “Kullena Khaled Said,” Abdul Rahman Mansour, was serving in the Egyptian Army when the January 25, 2011 revolution began.⁴⁷ Under these circumstances, Egypt’s top military leaders—the Supreme Council of the Egyptian Armed Forces (or SCAF)—chose to force President Mubarak to leave office instead of issuing an order that might be ignored and thereby jeopardize the chain of command.⁴⁸

Although SCAF assumed control of Egypt after Mubarak left office and started an influential Facebook page with 2 million members,⁴⁹ the junior officers and the men under its command did not forget their role or their new relationship with the top leaders, like Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi. While they supported many of Tantawi and SCAF’s policies they did not support SCAF’s attempts to prevent Dr. Muhammad Morsi, an Islamist without military experience, from assuming power after winning free presidential elections. Shortly after taking office, Morsi tied his historic proclamation of civilian control over the military forces to the retirement of Tantawi and other senior generals, which opened the way for a massive generational shift in the Egyptian military.⁵⁰ Strikingly, these officers, many of whom are secular and distrust Morsi’s allies such as the Muslim Brotherhood, steered clear of

domestic politics for much of 2012 and the first half of 2013. Only after it was clear that the economy was near collapse and that millions of Egyptians would take to the streets to call for Morsi to leave office, did the army intervene against him. Critically, the head of the Egyptian military, fifty-eight-year-old General Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, met the young activists leading the mass protests against Morsi and “adopted their blueprint” for reform before taking action.⁵¹ Despite Egypt’s socio-economic challenges since the end of the revolution, the military’s public withdrawal from national politics for nearly a year and its close coordination with civilian groups when it took political action in 2013 could signal a significant change in a nation that has been under effective military rule since 1952.

While Ghonim and other Egyptian bloggers have received well-deserved credit for their role in overthrowing Mubarak, their counterparts in Libya were even more impressive. On Facebook and other platforms, Libyans mobilized a global network online to promote the revolution that began in Benghazi, raise funds, negotiate future oil contracts, and provide professional expertise to rebel leaders and fighters. They also bought the rights to key internet domain names—such as *Libyafeb17.com* or *feb17.info*—before the actual start of the Libyan revolution: February 17, 2011.⁵² Dr. Tarik Yousef and other Western-educated Libyans tirelessly defended the revolution on Al-Jazeera and other international satellite channels, transforming the image of Qaddafi’s government from an indispensable Western ally into an outlaw organization that had carried out horrific war crimes and threatened Europe’s security. In response to this public pressure, the United States and its European and NATO allies swiftly secured United Nations approval for NATO military intervention in Libya, which helped the Libyan rebels overthrow Qaddafi’s government in August 2011. A year later Yousef’s father, Mohamed Yousef el-Magariaf, became Libya’s interim president.⁵³

The new model of Arab social activism which originated in Tunisia and Egypt, faced far greater obstacles to achieving its goals when it encountered a unified elite and security forces with few direct ties to the population or where opposition protestors could not win outside military intervention. In these contexts, governments could employ deadly force with impunity and not worry about security forces refusing to obey orders. But the record of these governments at suppressing mass dissent has proven to be little better than Egypt—despite significant financial and military assistance from regional and global allies. Although government opponents cannot storm the centers of power in these states, they can stage large demonstrations, attack key targets, and have made it virtually impossible for leaders to govern as they did before 2010. There are many examples of this process but this paper will conclude by talking about the one which will have the most impact on the international system: Syria. The nation’s importance reflects its military and political assets, strategic geography (it shares borders with five nations), international alliances, and the success of the armed rebellion within its borders.

From the vantage point of regional experts in the spring of 2011, the prospect that Syria’s government would be in such a predicament would have seemed absurd. At that time, large demonstrations modeled on those in Egypt had only begun in secondary Syrian cities, such as Homs, as the country’s two key cities, Aleppo and Damascus, remained firmly in government hands. The government’s forceful responses to the demonstrations drew on its capable intelligence service and its sizeable and well-funded military. Large portions of Syrian society seemingly accepted the government’s legitimacy and gave it broad power to suppress the rebellion. It had produced decades of stability and many Syrians feared what might replace it. There was the precedent of 1982, when President Hafiz al-Assad’s military forces repelled an Islamist uprising that had spread to a number of cities and had reestablished its authority over insurgent areas. His son and successor, Bashar al-Assad, had two added strengths in 2011 that his father lacked thirty years earlier: a) personal and family ties to the West and b) youth. The younger Assad had been schooled in London, while his wife, Asma, was a British national who had worked for J.P. Morgan as an investment banker. At age 47, he was decades younger than the other Arab leaders who had faced revolts and were seen as ‘out of touch’ with their youthful populations.

By contrast, the opposition lacked the cohesion and determination of its counterpart in Libya and began with demonstrations composed of only a handful of people. For much of 2011, it focused on peaceful demonstrations, as it took months to develop military forces. Division occurred over minor issues and the opposition's leaders lacked the national assets that their colleagues in Libya had effectively used for diplomatic gain. Absent a large foreign military intervention or an unexpected division within the Syrian government, the opposition's prospects looked no better than those of the rebels in 1982.⁵⁴

Further boosting the Syrian government's position was its alliance with Iran and Hezbollah, both of which were committed to providing substantial financial and military assistance to Damascus.⁵⁵ For its part, Iraq's government was also willing to allow Iran to use its airspace to help Syria.⁵⁶ Russia and other states were determined to prevent Western nations from using the United Nations to authorize a military intervention in Syria analogous to the one that had taken place in Libya.⁵⁷ Syria's neighbor, Turkey, showed little interest in opening its bases to NATO forces, as Italy had done in the war against Muammar Qaddafi, and Ankara was unwilling to use its own military assets, even after Syria's military shot down a Turkish reconnaissance plane. In addition, Syria's central position in the Middle East meant that instability there could spread to Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and Turkey. Consequently, Western governments would have to think twice before authorizing the use of force against Damascus.

This assumption not only reflected the advantageous position of the Syrian government in 2011 but also guiding principles of the global political system. Since the Westphalia Settlement in 1648, national governments have been allowed to exercise sole sovereignty within their territories, a right usually cloaked in the mantle of popular sovereignty. While neither national nor popular sovereignty have always been respected, governments have generally stayed in power and enjoyed broad freedom to organize internal affairs if they a) maintained a virtual monopoly over force domestically, b) enjoyed domestic legitimacy and, c) avoided conflicts with stronger states. On this basis, Russia vetoed proposals for international action in Syria in 2011 and 2012, confident that it had blocked the one avenue for the West and the opposition to topple the Syrian government.⁵⁸

For all of this, the Syrian opposition and its nascent military force, the Free Syrian Army, has seized large portions of the country and killed thousands of Syrian soldiers and members of the security forces. The rebellion has garnered strong backing and many recruits in regions affected by the 2006-2011 drought and the neighborhoods of large cities where rural populations had sought refuge from it.⁵⁹ The rebellion has also made President Bashar al-Assad's government increasingly unacceptable internationally—not only in the West but also in institutions where the West had little influence and where Damascus has long enjoyed unquestioned legitimacy: the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation.⁶⁰ In addition, as of August 2013, rebels controlled much of Syria's richest farmland and had forced government officials in a year of solid rainfall to drain the nation's strategic wheat stockpile, seek funds to import wheat from abroad, and to abandon a key national priority: achieving self-sufficiency in wheat production.⁶¹ Ordinary Syrians have shown for the first time that a national population with minimal outside assistance can dismantle a modern state and prevent it from achieving its core objectives, even if the leaders are determined to maintain power by force.

Conclusion

In the long run, the achievement of the Syrian people may be one of the most significant legacies of the Arab Spring for two reasons. First, it calls into question the norms that have governed the international system since the seventeenth century, namely the assumption that military power, broad political legitimacy, and the absence of serious external foes are more than enough for governments to maintain authority. Governments must now take seriously the possibility that a national population

can dismantle a modern state on its own. Second, the events in Syria suggest that other national populations may be tempted to try, and possess the ability, to topple far more powerful states in the future. This ability should worry national leaders across the globe, especially in nations with social and environmental conditions similar to those in the Middle East, including some of the wealthiest and most powerful nations in the world.⁶²

The example of Syria also points to a paradox in the Arab nations that made their political transitions without significant violence. Although the chief goal of the 2011 revolution was to overthrow the order, Egypt and many other Arab political and socio-economic systems were unaffected by the departure of Mubarak and other leaders from office. While a handful of prominent exiles returned and resumed public life, there was never the mass exodus of people like those which accompanied the French Revolution, the 1917 October Russian Revolution, the Cuban Revolution, and the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Nor was there the redistribution of either wealth or power or the mass public trials which usually accompany historic revolutions.

Equally importantly, the leaders of the new governments in the Arab World are all aged sixty and above. The candidates for Egypt's presidency in 2012 represented the political divide of this generation and in the country since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War: secular "state" authoritarianism (Ahmed Shafik) versus Islamic political activism (Mohamed Morsi). As important as Morsi's election and his assertion of civilian control over the military was in 2012, it rested on divisions within the military. Despite the hype about Tahrir Square and the Twitter and Facebook Revolution, it would be difficult to classify the final results of these protests as a true revolution in the modern sense of the word.

Nearly two years after Mubarak and other leaders left office, few of the economic, political, and social issues that drove millions into the streets have been addressed, and much less resolved. Arabs continue to wait patiently for a better future but they will not wait forever. The clock is ticking. In November 2012, there were mass demonstrations in Tunisia to protest the country's deteriorating economy—demonstrations that were so large that they required the government to deploy the army and forced the president to issue a public apology which promised better economic conditions.⁶³ The killing of both opposition politicians and Tunisian soldiers further destabilized the country's politics in 2013.⁶⁴ Some youthful leaders who guided the revolution in 2011 have grown restless at the pace of change. During the confrontation between secularists and the Muslim Brotherhood over a new constitution for Egypt in late 2012, a secular political activist in his twenties named Mohamed Abo-Elgheit posted a passionate note on Facebook in which he dismissed leading politicians aligned with the government and the opposition—Mohamed El-Baradei, Hamdeen Sabahi, Morsi, Essam El-Erian, and Mahmud Gazlan. He characterized these men as old, weak, and unable to relate to the youth. Unlike young Egyptians, these leaders had not shouted in public for the fall of military rule. They had not experienced the sensation of being alongside their friends at the forefront of mass protests, responding to bullets with stones. Nor had they felt the transformation of their fear of death into anger and great fury at the old regime. Abo-Elgheit concludes his post by calling for the expulsion of all of these men from politics.⁶⁵

History provides a potent guide for what could happen should Abo-Elgheit and others finally lose patience and act. Previous generations have had similar goals to live in a better world and have concluded that the only way to achieve them is to obliterate their governing system—a point made forcefully nearly a century ago by the English poet D.H. Lawrence in "The Latent Desire." In the poem, Lawrence writes that the "latent desire" of all decent men today is for a "natural" and "decent" society where they can live "without being a slave" to "earning his living" and "getting on." But the only way they will achieve this vision is by "smashing the present system of grab and devil take the hindmost." In the long run, if social discontent among Arab youth merges again with a renewed political consciousness among soldiers and junior officers, Egypt and other states may face a more dangerous revolutionary situation than it did in 2011 in which the present system will be "smashed".⁶⁶

Here a key event in Lawrence's lifetime may be instructive. While we often talk of the Russian Revolution in 1917 as a single event, it was in reality a series of revolutions, the first of which took place in 1905. That revolution brought millions to the streets demanding social justice and a new governing system. But the revolution did not result in the fundamental changes to the Russian system that the masses desired and paved the way for the October 1917 Russian Revolution which did. The leader of that revolution, Vladimir Lenin, would later write that "without the 'dress rehearsal' of 1905, the victory of the October Revolution in 1917 would have been impossible".⁶⁷

Given the Arab World and the globe's political and socio-economic dynamics, it is increasingly likely that the Arab Spring may also be viewed in the near future as the precursor to a far larger revolutionary event as significant as the one in Russia which "shook the world" in ten days in October 1917.⁶⁸

Notes

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