

## Forum on the 2011 “Arab Spring”

# Epilogue: The Challenge of Keeping Non-violent Protest Non-violent

Ghazi-Walid Falah

*Department of Public Administration and Urban Studies, The University of  
Akron, Akron, OH 44325–7904 U.S.A.*

At the time when this issue went to press in mid-June 2011, the events of the “Arab spring” had apparently transmogrified into bloody confrontation in several countries. Although the triumph of regime change in both Tunisia and Egypt was achieved with minimum bloodshed, its image—a kind of icon of Arab popular grassroots liberation—no doubt inspired and triggered the other protestors in the rest of the Arab world. It is now clear that the Tunisian and Egyptian models of mass popular protest in the streets cannot be a paradigm of popular revolution for rest of the Arab world. As events unfolded over the past four months in countries such as Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, where violence has become the order of the day, it became clear that each of these countries has its own specific circumstances and ways of “dealing” with its own protesting masses. Can Arab masses calling for freedom (*houriyya*), dignity (*karamah*), and social justice (*‘adalaha ijtimā’iyah*) be allowed to walk the streets and public squares of their respective towns and cities without being subjected to brutal massacre by their own state military and “security” people? The answer to this question is very hard to answer with a simple “yes” and/or “no.” For one thing, it is obvious that in all Arab countries that have witnessed protests, the masses marched, repeatedly shouting the Arabic word *selmiah!*—in English, “peaceful [protest]”—accepting no violation whatsoever of that overriding principle of dissent and solidarity. Many among the protestors who had the chance to be interviewed in front of TV cameras have stressed that they hope to achieve their aims by peaceful means. For many decades, Arab and Muslim societies and individuals have been depicted by the West as irrational fanatics who resort to violence in order to achieve the simplest goals. This Orientalistic reading of the Arab world has been refuted by the events of the “Arab spring,” as demonstrated in Tunisia and Egypt. Yet as the popular call for social change and demonstration continues in other Arab countries, confronting the full might of authoritarian states, we are witnessing an era of unprecedented civil unrest in many Arab countries. Some historians are reminded of the wave of revolution across Europe in 1848; some have compared Tahrir Square and Cairo to the Paris Commune uprising of 1871.

York University political scientist David McNally wrote in February,

Rarely do our rulers look more absurd than when faced with a popular upheaval. As fear and apathy are broken, ordinary people—housewives, students, sanitation workers, the unemployed—remake themselves. Having been objects of history, they become its agents. Marching in their millions, reclaiming public space, attending meetings and debating their society's future, they discover in themselves capacities for organization and action they had never imagined. They arrest secret police, defend their communities and their rallies, organize the distribution of food, water and medical supplies. Exhilarated by new solidarities and empowered by the understanding that they are making history, they shed old habits of deference and passivity. It is this—the self-transformation of oppressed people—that elites can never grasp (McNally 2011).

Yet as scholars and outside observers looking on, at this point in mid-June 2011, we can no longer describe the “Arab spring” with peaceful connotations alone. It has turned into a spring with violent storms and much destruction of life and material property. As we approach the summer, we are more accurately talking about a bloody “violent Arab summer” or “red Arab summer,” if confrontations on the present scale in Syria, Libya, and elsewhere continue between the masses, armed resistance units, and their respective regimes and government.

Look at events from the regimes' perspective. Why would a leader voluntarily step down if he has held the reins of authoritarian power for several decades and strongly believes that he (with his family, his “tribe,” and his political party) is the “architect” of his modern country? The Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi provided a crystal-clear answer to this question. In his most recent speech, he clearly announced, “I am going nowhere, either alive or dead. I am staying here.” High-ranking Libyans have signalled that ceasefire talks are possible, but only on condition that the Colonel stays. The Western “coalition” bombing Libya, which to many observers seems like an imperial adventure, in effect has made “regime change” a precondition for any ceasefire. In earlier speeches Qaddafi stated out that he will not leave Libya to let it be taken over by Al-Qai'da—that is to say, without his leadership, his country will sink into chaos. His daughter at one point said that whoever opposes her father's leadership does not deserve to live; at an early phase of Libya's civil war, his son called on the Libyan people to accept the generous offer of distributing Libya's revenues throughout the nation, in addition to several reforms that would be implemented immediately, in return for stopping the protests and street demonstrations. Otherwise, he said, there is no other option than “*Nahtakem lilselah*”: let weapons be the key factor in resolving the conflict. In saying this, Qaddafi's son did not expect NATO military intervention in the following weeks, nor anticipate how much the United

States and European countries were bent on becoming heavily involved in destroying the military capability of the Libyan government. Libya's "Arab spring" is at this point by far the bloodiest spring in this spring of uprisings, and is likely to continue as long as Muammar Qaddafi remains alive and in Tripoli.

The cases of Bahrain and Yemen are considerably different from Libya's. Violent clashes between protestors and state security personnel occurred in both countries, though less in Bahrain than in Yemen. Both countries belong geographically to the Arabian Peninsula and are neighbours to Saudi Arabia and the oil-producing Gulf countries. It was in the interests of Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf countries to contain the violent events and find an agreeable, peaceful solution in Bahrain and Yemen. It is understandable that Saudi Arabia, Oman, and other countries in the peninsula wish to avoid an "Arab spring" type of protest in their own countries. Hence, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait rushed in, providing generous incentives (mostly monetary) to the populations in the early days of the "Arab spring" in Tunisia and Egypt. At the same time, they were intensively involved in negotiating with leaders, government personnel, opposition parties, and representatives of protestors in these two countries. The current situation in Bahrain is less acute than in Yemen, and there is no real intention toward leadership change in the Kingdom of Bahrain. The country is likely to overcome its upheaval, and social reforms will be implemented, to the satisfaction of the masses; some concessions to democracy will be granted.

Yemen, on the other hand, is at this moment on the brink of leadership change. Saudi Arabia and the United States both have an interest in finding peaceful leadership change in Yemen, replacing the seriously injured President Ali Abdullah Saleh with some successor who will secure their interests in the country and who will ally with them in fighting Al-Qai'da, which has built up a strong base in Yemen. At the time of writing, the Yemeni president is still hospitalized in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, after a rocket attack on his personal mosque wounded him on 4 June; there are conflicting reports about his health and how severe his injuries were. It is also unclear whether he will return to Sana'a in the near future and assume leadership. Meanwhile, his deputy Abd al-Rab Mansur Al-Hadi is in charge. The Yemeni masses are still demonstrating in the streets, celebrating President Saleh's absence from the country and insisting that he not return to office. At the same time, there is heavy fighting in the city of Taizz between the Yemeni army and armed groups who may have some link with Al-Qai'da. In early June Taizz also experienced bloody fighting between supporters and opponents of President Saleh, a kind of proto-civil war.

As noted above, each of these Arab countries has witnessed a mass uprising in recent months and weeks, each with its own dialectic, its own social and

political “ecology” of factors and protagonists, its own geography of revolt. Yemen is very much like Libya in the sense of being a tribal society, but the Yemeni tribes are unlike those in Libya. The Yemeni tribal leaders were involved in the governance of their country in one way or another, and their position was significant. The Yemeni “spring” is witnessing the emergence of a new pressure group, who now have a voice and are likely to have a say in any political and democratic changes that may occur in Yemen in the upcoming weeks and months. These are the *shabab*—the young people who have demonstrated and filled in the streets of Sana’a, like their counterparts in Cairo. The *shabab* position is that the Arab Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia have given the Yemeni president more time and options than necessary to negotiate a peaceful solution, and that this has not yielded any result; they are against external intervention and demand total regime change. Yemen has a high strategic and security value both for the United States and for Saudi Arabia, and it is that they will strike some kind of “deal” with President Saleh and his supporters in order to save the country from civil war.

Syria has reached a sad situation at present. The Syrian masses began their protests and demonstrations by asking for vast reforms, for real elections, for the removal of the emergency laws, for the release of human rights prisoners, for a multi-party system and other democratic reforms (Hagopian 2011). Significantly, they did not initially call for regime change. In the early days of the demonstrations, the protestors did not chant “*Al-sha’b yurid Isqat al-nizam*” (“The people want the downfall of the regime!”). But after the killing of almost over 1 300 civilians during various demonstrations in many Syrian cities, protestors across the country are openly calling for the removal of President Bashar Asad from office. The Syrian government’s official stance on the “Syrian spring” is that there are armed groups nested in various cities in Syria, with support from outside Syria, and that these groups are the ones targeting civilians and Syrian military and security personnel; the government is therefore attempting to “restore order” inside the country. Significantly, they have not allowed any outside journalists to enter. So this is the only space in the “Arab spring” that is not being covered by Western or non-Syrian reporters—there is, in effect, an information blackout from inside the country. Given this stance, what the Syrian government is doing is defending itself by any means necessary. In addition, the Syrian government and their supporters believe that a conspiracy has been forged against Syria by its external enemies.

At time of writing, well over 5 000 Syrians have crossed the border to Turkey, and they are being assisted by the Turkish Red Crescent. Turkey announced that it will open its border to Syrian civilians who are escaping death and the fighting in their cities and towns in the border areas. Elaine Hagopian (2011) notes that “Turkey begged Syria to push through reforms

immediately to salvage Syria's political stability and block chaos in the region, but there was no response." The Turkish government is closely watching events in Syria, and in his most recent speeches Prime Minister Recep Tayip Erdogan has stated that Turkey is militarily and politically ready to face any changes in Syria. How will the Syrian regime be able to overcome the current crises, the growing protests? That is hard to predict. In my opinion, all scenarios are possible. President Assad may bring in radical changes and reforms that will satisfy the Syrian masses and take them off the streets; this could happen with major financial support from oil-rich countries like Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE, or even Saudi Arabia. Still another scenario is a total military clampdown on the population: the Syrian army will coerce demonstrators, impose a long-term curfew, and forbid all demonstrations anywhere in the country. This is likely to last for several months or even years, and international pressure and political isolation will be imposed on Syria in response. But a reaction along the lines of the intervention in Libya is unlikely. A third scenario is an internal coup from within the Syrian Army, culminating in the removal or assassination of President Assad. A fourth scenario is possible, in which Israel (directly backed by Washington) will go to war with Syria and complicate the latter's stability in order to achieve other goals, namely breaking the Syrian-Iranian alliance and weakening both Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. If this fourth scenario comes to pass, the Syrian government's claim that a foreign conspiracy targeting Syria is behind the "Syrian spring" could be true, or, in effect, *become* true in the dialectic of change. There can be no doubt that the Israeli military and Binyamin Netanyahu's government are watching events unfold in Syria with a special interest. As Hagopian (2011) observes,

given the Alawites['] past history in Syria, and their rigid control of Syria under the Assad family, there is no way now that they could expect to have access to power and privilege in a democratic society. Who would vote for them? Given their bloodied hands, loss of power for them implies revenge against them—but hopefully not against innocent Alawites—whether through a judicial system (optimistically) or by violent means. They have written their own sentence which is bound to come if not now, in the near future. The Pandora's Box of protest has been opened, and it will continue to stay ajar until real changes are made in Syria. What happens to Bashar is still a question. Is there a country to which he could escape, or will he meet the fate of Mubarek? Does his political demise also guarantee the demise of the regime or not? There are many unanswered questions. The consensus seems to be that Bashar cannot ultimately survive this protest after so many killings, but will this Lion (Assad) somehow overcome the present crisis?

In conclusion, I can say this: the "Arab Spring" started as a peaceful, non-violent quest and protest for social and political change. In various countries, that process of dissent had been building over the past several years; the

historical record will show this. The Egyptian and Tunisian presidents have stepped down voluntarily, and both countries are now facing major challenges in initiating democratic institutions and the rule of law. There are fears that the revolution may be “hijacked” by particular interests in the country, or by powerful forces abroad. Other countries briefly discussed above—namely, Libya, Yemen, and Syria—are still embattled as we write. Bahrain’s monarchy is likely to find its way forward and accommodate the will of its citizenry, at least over the short term. The only challenge that still faces Bahrain is the continuing Iranian intervention in the country’s affairs. Bahraini society has a large Shi’a component, and Iran sees its moral duty in providing support to the demands of the Shi’a Muslims in Bahrain. Interestingly, the Doha-based Al-Jazeera Arabic TV channel rarely reports on events in Bahrain, as opposed to events in Libya, Yemen, and Syria and, previously, in Tunisia and Egypt; yet the Arabic Alalam TV channel, based in Tehran, is actively covering daily events in Bahrain, and portrays the Bahraini monarchy in starkly negative colours.

There remain several Arab countries that were, and still are, under the shadow of the “Arab spring” but where demonstrations did not escalate into real violence, including Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, and Oman. There were also several demonstrations in Saudi Arabia and Mauritania.

What positive changes did the “Arab spring” bring with it, other than what the participants in this forum have observed? First, Egypt has apparently returned to assume a prominent leadership role in the Arab world, along with Qatar. Second, Egypt’s decision to open the Rafah border crossing with Gaza was received positively by the Palestinians and by all Arab/Muslim people around the world. This action marks a new era in the path toward ending Israel’s blockade of Gaza. Third, there are good reasons that the Arab League will be re-empowered and become instrumental in representing Arab interest in the international arena with the newly named secretary general of the League, Nabil Al-Arabi. (Al-Arabi previously served as Egypt’s foreign minister in the post-Mubarak regime). Fourth, the two major Palestinian political parties, Fatah and Hamas, have agreed in principle to a historic Palestinian reconciliation deal, negotiating to form an interim government and fix a date for general elections within the year. Of course, neither Israel nor the Obama administration will welcome such a reconciliation, since Hamas does not extend diplomatic recognition to Israel in its present configuration as a Zionist state.

Finally, in a significant new momentum, as of this writing, the Palestinian leadership is determined to approach the UN General Assembly in September to seek recognition for a sovereign state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with Jerusalem as its capital. There are already more than 130 UN members who would positively support the Palestinian proposal, including perhaps

France and Spain. The United States and Germany are standing with Israel to block such a move. It is unfortunate, from my perspective, that the West (mainly Western Europe and the United States) is still not able to understand the Arab and Muslim peoples and societies. This Orientalism persists as a kind of inveterate mindset, despite the winds of change that are now sweeping much of the Arab world. It seems that Western geopolitical interests are incontrovertibly bound up with Western rhetorical and material support for and Western intervention in the “Arab spring”—rather than a more fundamental interest in justice for the ordinary masses and in human dignity. For their part, Arab leaders and masses are urged to adhere to non-violent change. There is no just reason for killing a single individual anywhere or at any time in the future. And as Seyla Benhabib (2011) writes, with strong optimism,

We know that the spring of revolutions is followed by the passions of summer and the discord of fall. At least since Hegel’s analysis of the follies of the French Revolution in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it has become commonplace to think that the Revolution will devour its own children.... None of this is inevitable. It is not inevitable, or even likely, that fundamentalist Muslim parties will transform Tunisia or Egypt into theocracies; nor is it inevitable that Iran will gain ascendance and that the Arab states will conduct a new war against Israel. What we have witnessed is truly revolutionary, in the sense that a new order of freedom—a *novus ordo saeculorum*—is emerging transnationally in the Arab world.

One major question is how this will affect the Palestinians at the grassroots, popular consciousness and organizing in the West Bank, in Gaza, inside the Israeli state, and among millions of refugees in their many corners of the Arab world and beyond—the great Palestinian diaspora. Not the impact on some Palestinian “leaders,” but on the masses of ordinary people, especially youth. The 15 May and 6 June protests by Palestinians at Israel’s northern border and elsewhere are one indication of that ferment.

And the impact of the “Arab spring” in other Muslim-majority nations is also a significant question for scholarship, and for citizens of those nations. As Mariam Mokhtar (2011) recently wrote in Kuala Lumpur,

The Arab nations have seen a resurgence and a new vitality in the so-called Arab spring. What about the Malaysians? Are we entering a political Ice Age from which a new political awareness based on transparency, responsibility and accountability will only be evident in the thaw? How long will it take for the Malaysian spring to arrive?

Future research will need to examine the real role played in this season of discontent and change by the social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, and by the specific demographic of an educated urban youth, and by the trade unions (in Tunisia and Egypt) in actually helping to organize the spontaneous mass demonstrations for self-determination (McNally 2011). And how can

“self-determination” and a “just and sustainable future” for the masses be realized in radical ways across the Arab world?

The geography of cyberspace communication at an extremely abstracted trans-territorial scale, leading to mass face-to-face organizing and protest by hundreds of thousands on the scale of central streets in a small, compacted spatial node in the capital and the symbolic “occupation” of a central square, is intriguing in terms of the political geography of space and the changing geographies of political protest and their Internetted instrumentalities, as Mona Fayad, Gerald Webster, Seif Da’na, and Barney Warf touch on in their essays.

Much of this protest has been fuelled by the economic problems of youth and ordinary working people in these countries, a product of the “global slump” (McNally 2010) and of the effects of “globalization” of food markets and much else across the planet. This global crisis has ushered in a period of worldwide economic and political turbulence, whose impacts are now incalculable. Research is needed on these factors as elements in driving the “Arab spring” and analogous protest across many societies. As I write today, this is clear in Greece and Spain, where movements of the “indignants,” inspired in part by the “Arab spring,” are protesting against austerity measures in their own developed economies. This protest has also rumbled across North America. As Benhabib (2011) emphasizes,

New shoots of resistance are sprouting out of the frozen soil even in some American states: in Wisconsin, Madison, public sector workers have been fighting against losing their collective bargaining rights, and similar actions are promised in Indiana, Ohio and other American states. The photo of a poster being held by an Egyptian demonstrator is making the rounds in the Internet: “Egypt supports Wisconsin workers: One World, One Pain,” it reads. A Wisconsinite writes: “We love you. Thanks for the support and congrats on your victory!”

And research is needed on how these developments of popular self-organization for change can be sustained over time. McNally (2011) speaks in terms of the broader dimensions of social transformation from below:

Revolutions are schools of profound self-education. They destroy submission and resignation, and they release long-repressed creative energies—intelligence, solidarity, invention, self-activity. In so doing, they reweave the fabric of everyday life. The horizons of possibility expand. The unthinkable—that ordinary people might control their lives—becomes both thinkable and practical.... Having been at the heart of the popular upsurge in the streets, tens of thousands of workers are now taking the revolutionary struggle back to their workplaces, extending and deepening the movement in the process.

It is this grassroots popular process that social scientists from several disciplines will need to be looking at in the months and years to come.

### References

- Benhabib, S. 2011. The Arab spring—religion, revolution and the public sphere. *The New Significance*, 11 May.  
<http://www.thenewsignificance.com/2011/05/11/seyla-benhabib-the-arab-spring-religion-revolution-and-the-public-sphere/>
- Hagopian, E. C. 2011. Syria's Pandoran box. *Counterpunch*, 10–12 June.  
<http://www.counterpunch.org/hagopian06102011.html>
- McNally, D. 2010. *Global slump: The economics and politics of crisis and resistance*. San Francisco: AK Press.
- . 2011. Mubarak's folly: The rising of Egypt's workers. David McNally's blog, 11 February. <http://davidmcnally.org/?p=354>
- Mokhtar, M. 2011. Malaysian ice age and the Arab spring. *Malaysian Mirror*; 8 June.  
<http://tinyurl.com/6eyga69>