

JOURNAL OF RESISTANCE STUDIES

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All contacts regarding the content of the journal: [jorgen@resistance-journal.org](mailto:jorgen@resistance-journal.org).

All contacts regarding subscriptions: [orders@resistance-journal.org](mailto:orders@resistance-journal.org)

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Craig S Brown, Sparsnäs 960, 66891 Ed Sweden

## EDITORIAL

# Ten Years Since the So-Called Arab Spring

Craig S. Brown *UMass Amherst & Journal of Resistance Studies*

The established distinction between power and resistance may be being increasingly challenged and elaborated, not least in the *Journal of Resistance Studies*. However, in relation to the 2010/11 West Asia North Africa (WANA) Revolutions—the so-called Arab Spring—the perspective of a dichotomy has broadly tended to endure in analyses. It is insufficient to focus on this purely in relation to the traditional media, although they are significant in terms of shaping popular understanding. Therefore, when the ‘Arab Spring’ is termed an ‘Arab Winter’ (The Economist, 2016), when the ‘failure’ of the Arab Spring is discussed (BBC, 2019b, Bowen, 2020) and a ‘reverting’ to violence and war-risking ‘instability’ (BBC, 2019a) pervades, this cannot be overlooked in how the WANA revolutions’ legacy is framed.<sup>1</sup> More complex outcomes have been acknowledged, although this has tended and continues to be a state-oriented, top-down analysis of democratisation concerned with seeing ‘resistance’ within western conceptions of democratic change and reform (Lynch, 2016; Bank, 2015, p.23; Ritter, 2015). While this broadly invokes what we may term ‘power over’, the ‘power to’ (Holloway, 2002, pp.27-28) encapsulated in the WANA revolutions and any legacy of resistance has found it difficult to register.

Moreover, in academia this dichotomy can dominate, with power and resistance finding some parallel in the ‘autocratisation-democratisation’ paradigm (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). In a seeming restatement or reorientation of the impression of ‘Middle East exceptionalism’ in being ‘resistant’ to the waves of democratisation that periodically sweep the international system (Heydemann, 2007; Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012, p.192), here it has been common to focus on the swift democratic opening posed by the so-called Arab Spring, then an equally rapid descent into authoritarianism (Brownlee, Masoud & Reynolds, 2013; Benstead, 2015, pp.1184,1187; Salamey, 2015, pp.112,125; Hassan, Lorch & Ranko, 2019)—although the notion of hybrid regimes has captured the greater complexities

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<sup>1</sup> I have considered this in greater depth in Brown (2016).

at work at the state level (Hinnebusch, 2010, p.201; Polat, 2014, p.636; Levitsky & Way, 2020). Relatedly, although a 'reversion' to authoritarianism for most of the countries with revolutions in 2010/11 is focused on, Tunisia is often considered to be a 'success story' of democratisation from the so-called Arab Spring—often the 'only' one (Lynch, 2016, p.5). Again, this is not so straightforward as a successful case of resistance to an authoritarian leader. Elections and political elites resolving their own manufactured crises of near-'civil war' proportions may be considered evidence of positive moves towards democratisation (Hassan et al., 2019); alternatively, Tunisia offers an example of 'elite pacting' (Marzouki & Meddeb, 2015) between those traditionally perceived as political opponents—Islamists and secularist forces—to co-opt, institutionalise or simply ignore and distract from revolutionary demands (Marks, 2016, p.27; Brown, 2019a, pp.296-297). However, there have been internal tensions and issues within resistance movements, as Anne de Jong's article in this special issue show. These are significant reflections. Indeed, as resistance along the original lines of the revolution has continued in the WANA region in varied forms, as with resistance processes everywhere critical reflection on what is working is crucial.

In the same manner, those countries 'reverting' to authoritarianism do not connote the wholesale success of 'power over'. The above state-oriented paradigms are of course valuable in helping to understand 'what is being resisted', yet the resistance, especially bottom-up, is largely overlooked. Therefore, resistance-oriented study of the WANA region and its revolutionary processes has a lot to offer in terms of understanding of political, economic and social processes there. The most apparent way to understand this is through the concept of 'everyday resistance' that has been evidenced under various authoritarian regimes and manifests in the wake of the 2010/11 revolutions—as a number of the articles in this issue discuss in relation to Egypt. However, open nonviolent resistance has emerged in Syria even after years of violent conflict; during the ceasefire in 2016, peaceful demonstrations emerged across the country (Al-Monitor, 2016), still calling for the same improvements as in 2011. These may seem insignificant in terms of outcomes, yet the testament to endurance, organisation and courage is worthy of further investigation.

In this special issue assessing the WANA revolutions a decade on, it would be remiss not to mention the period of uprisings and revolutions seen in 2019, including in Lebanon and Algeria. The relationship of these events and the revolutions of 2010/11 should be considered in all their

complexity—mindful of different country contexts, causes, triggers, and methods of resistance—as well as any influences, continuities and similarities. While some initial assessments of the 2019 events acknowledged that the underlying issues and causes of the so-called Arab Spring were never resolved (Bowen, 2019; Safi, 2019; Hearst, 2019), even pointing to the legacy of effective broadly nonviolent resistance (Fahmi, 2019), the ‘Arab Spring’ is still cited as ending in failure in relation to this new or renewed potential since 2019 (Muasher, 2019). Distinguished as events, one of the problems is that, as much as the so-called Arab Spring had significance as a ‘departure point’ for the recognition of unarmed resistance in the region, perceiving a pre-2011/post-2011, pre-Arab Spring/post-Arab Spring dichotomy is excessively simplistic. This is particularly relevant to our understanding of resistance, as again we should reflect on both its ‘hidden’ and ‘open’ forms, among varied groups and individuals.

Referring to my book review of Hamid Dabashi’s (2012) *Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, I hold that his text effectively encapsulates the significance of the so-called Arab Spring then and its importance now, and why talk of its failure is flawed, erroneous and indeed lazy. At the same time as the so-called Arab Spring helped to remove the blinkers on resistance to all manner of authoritarianism and repression in the WANA region, which had in many guises been long-running prior to the 2010/11 events, I am also aware that the so-called Arab Spring has been perceived as the benchmark from which subsequent resistance departed. This constrains and simplifies our understanding of resistance in the region itself. This is criticised by Elmeligy in her article on Egyptian women’s resistance in this special issue, and Abdelhamid’s article points to long-running repression and resistance of homosexuals in Egypt. Thus the ‘Arab Spring’ as label reduces the period of resistance temporally and spatially. On this basis and in fact taking the same point of departure as Dabashi, it is perhaps time to join the end of post-colonialism with the end of the Arab Spring label—but not as a mark of failure. Ultimately, there is still a great deal that should be explored in relation to the 2010/11 WANA revolutions, especially to understand resistance; the articles in this special issue make a fine contribution in this regard.

## The Papers

Everyday resistance has been a developing focus in the resistance studies field, with Nehal Elmeligy’s paper exploring ‘everyday feminist resistance’ in Egypt. Her interviews with Cairene women illuminate various aspects of

feminist resistance in the city of Cairo, with three main practical actions of everyday resistance centring on women's removal of the hijab, opposition to street harassment, as well as leaving their parents' and husbands' homes. In this regard, Elmeligy's paper presents a robust case study that contributes to our understanding of everyday resistance in varied contexts, thus augmenting the recent theoretical advancements of Johansson and Vinthagen (2020) in *Conceptualizing 'Everyday Resistance': A Transdisciplinary Approach*.

A further crucial insight of Elmeligy's research is the appraisal of everyday resistance in relation to Egypt's 2011 revolution. While noting that participation in the 2011 revolution 'was the catalyst for some women's public feminist resistance', Cairo had a 'pre-existing feminist social nonmovement'. This helps with a corrective to narratives of the 2010/11 revolutions that somehow perceived them as a sudden emergence of resistance without any real history or legacy (see Castells, 2012, pp.17-18; Angrist, 2013, p.548; Pearlman, 2013, p.394), something my own research in Tunisia showed overlooked both everyday and organised resistance elements and the complex interactions between them (Brown, 2019a, pp.162-164). Even more significantly, Elmeligy's research raises how feminist resistance is at odds with the 2011 Egyptian revolution and its aftermath—and specifically the politics of public space and the reinsertion of the citizen into that space as symbolised by Tahrir Square—because of the issues of women's exclusion and side-lining from the revolutionary processes, while she clearly shows why the ongoing feminist social nonmovement is so vital to meaningful change in Egypt, and indeed the wider region.

In this regard, Amira Abdelhamid's paper also has significance in showing a longer arc of LGBTQ+ resistance (and regime stigmatisation) in Egypt, situating the 2011 Egyptian revolution's significance within that arc. While locating the 2011 events as coming with 'revolutionary potential', 'immense hope' and being 'a moment of unprecedented resistance', Abdelhamid provides a comprehensive account of the seemingly effective counterrevolutionary portrayal of events as the pursuit of a Westernisation 'inauthentic to our Muslima and Arab existence'. This included further demonisation of LGBTQ+ communities and those human rights activists advocating for them as representing 'deviance'.

However, Abdelhamid stresses that particular 'hidden' and 'invisible' forms of resistance have proven important in Egypt—challenging both an emphasis on hierarchies of power, as well as resistance entities' alliance

building that is typically orientated around state power. As Abdelhamid suggests, ‘resistance is not just about resisting restrictions and repression, it is also about resisting *conducting* power, power that regulates individual behaviour, and one that dictates normalcy within society’. Similar to Elmeligy, Abdelhamid reflects on how ‘small, seemingly insignificant acts of sarcasm are telling of an important story of subjectivity and collective action’; actions we may consider under ‘everyday resistance’ that lead to an accretion of change.

Concerning the relationship between revolution and counter-revolution, Abdelhamid invokes the image of a pendulum, with ‘certain openings and closures [...] constantly taking place [...] revolution does not necessarily precede counter-revolution; they are both in constant motion, constant tension’. Abdelhamid offers a strong supporting case of open-ended resistance and indeed Dabashi’s (2012) conception of ‘cosmopolitan worldliness’, considered in the classical book review of this issue. Abdelhamid significantly stresses that counter-revolutionary forces have been fed by the perception that Egypt’s revolution ‘was a mere attempt to “catch up” with the West, carried out by “Westernised” youth’. Participants in resistance, prior, during and following the revolution, including those engaging in LGBTQ+ activism, are examples of an ‘endogenous multiplicity’. As in Dabashi’s conception, these groups may join with the world’s other diverse populations in their resistance for dignity and justice.

Isabel Bramsen’s article considers nonviolent resistance during the so-called Arab Spring to explore what they refer to as the situational power of nonviolence, as a form of direct action that can intervene to challenge ‘structural and direct violence manifested in particular situations’. Bramsen suggests that nonviolence’s situational power can be ‘small acts of surprise, resistance or fraternisation [that] may seem insignificant’, yet potentially ‘have a profound effect on the overall relationship between the ruled and the ruler’, and may have a cumulative effect. This can ultimately ‘challenge everyday suppression and domination and with enough de-stabilizing actions—challenge the very organizational structure and rhythmic coordination of the regime’.

The actions which Bramsen considers are largely open acts of individual resistance—and they suggest that the cumulative effect ‘depends on the overall ability of a protest movement to stay united, gather support by the silent majority and escalate at a time of high momentum’. It is worth our

consideration how these often courageous acts of open resistance relate to the 'hidden'—yet not necessarily less courageous—actions of individuals through everyday resistance, as Elmeligy's paper explores, as well as how these may ultimately result in 'making a scene', as Bramsen terms it. The gap between the hidden and open acts of resistance is not necessarily so large (see Brown, 2019a, pp.162-164; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2020, pp.2,190); Elmeligy directly links Egypt's feminist social nonmovement to Johansson and Vinthagen's (2020, p.190) sense of how a 'resistance culture' may be built. Indeed, the individual-level actions explored by Bramsen and Elmeligy help us to identify and understand the ways they may be joined up with other activities to strengthen and broaden resistance.

Bramsen's paper draws on data they collected from interviewees from Bahrain, Tunisia and Syria, as well as a video dataset of nonviolent and violent interactions pertaining to these three cases. Significantly, despite the events in Bahrain and Syria largely being focused on for, in the first case, the violent suppression of protests including intervention by Saudi Arabia, and in the second case for its extremely violent civil war, there remains significant understanding about nonviolence to be derived from these cases. Indeed, while Bramsen explores the escalation to and avoidance of violent conflict at a micro-level, often an individual basis, there is considerable potential for resistance studies to investigate how actions at the level of the individual interrelate to various levels of interaction, to the extent that Syria moved from an episode of nonviolent resistance to a full-blown civil war involving regional and international powers. Relatedly, it seems imperative to further our understanding of how nonviolent and violent actions within episodes of resistance interact, if nonviolent escalation is to transplant violent escalation.

Anne De Jong's article offers a thorough ethnographic analysis of joint nonviolent resistance undertaken by Palestinians and Israelis in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, to identify '1) how unequal power relations can be reproduced within nonviolent protests, and 2) how certain nonviolent protests can perpetuate the structural violence they initially seek to oppose'. De Jong considers the Sumud Freedom Camp and a 'joint' nonviolent action in Israel near the Erez crossing into Gaza, exploring the two issues above but also how the notion of what counts for such cooperation is contested. De Jong suggests that nonviolent action potentially 'colludes with its violent surroundings in multiple ways', which is a strong statement but is deserving of much more attention, because if nonviolent resistance academics and

practitioners are not prepared to scrutinise this possibility and find ways to counter it, our resistance may indeed fall short.

Although constructive resistance is not the focus of De Jong's paper, their use of the Sumud Freedom Camp as the example of joint Palestinian, Israeli and international activists cooperation provides an intriguing example, and De Jong identifies such action as 'a form of prefigurative politics which firmly rejects discriminatory categories set by Zionist practices'. As well as the physical reconstruction of the forcibly demolished Palestinian West Bank village of Sarura, this was also a space for building a cooperative space of 'workshops, direct actions and a program promoting "nonviolent civil disobedience as transformative political practice"', the basis of 'a broader resistance against Israeli occupation and continued settle colonial dispossession'. Indeed, as examples of constructive resistance are increasingly investigated (Sørensen, 2016; Brown, 2019, pp.265-268) and some theorisation is developed (Sørensen, Vinthagen & Johansen, n.d.), identifying the basis of power relations disruptive to effective constructive work is crucial. In Tunisia, the councils emerging during the revolution perhaps suffered from their swift emergence, quick dominance by established political parties and disregard of involvement of younger people (Brown, 2019, pp.147-149,194-199,234-236). The case of joint Palestinian-Israeli activism is more complex, although some of the potential solutions to problematic power relations that De Jong points out may remain relevant in other contexts, for example those participants who could be broadly identified with those exercising far greater 'power over' (Israelis and international activists – the IDF) being willing to listen and be led, as well as critical consciousness and direct challenging of the ingrained structural and symbolic violence which underlies the physical violence which is being directly resisted—through ensuring such relations are not replicated, thus being 'without' and 'against' violence (Vinthagen, 2015, p.67).

Both Bramsen and De Jong's papers are to some extent complementary in their consideration of nonviolent resistance in relation to structural violence. While Bramsen shows how nonviolent resistance can help to challenge structural violence, De Jong notes that structural violence may be replicated within nonviolent resistance, although through a nonviolent campaign being conscious of structural violence and actively challenging it, this can mitigate the effect. This is pertinent for resisters to consider in contexts where 'allies' within campaigns have quite different degrees of power or the potential to exercise power over, as in the case of joint Palestinian and

Israeli actions. Indeed, such considerations are relevant to the resistance by varied groups presented in this special issue, whether by women, LGBTQ+ activists and other minority groups, which are present across the WANA region.

Kanaaneh's paper explores Hezbollah's relationship to the protests that emerged in Lebanon in 2019, in doing so raising some significant questions for how resistance is perceived. As Kanaaneh notes, Hezbollah has an established reputation in some quarters as a resistance movement, confronting Israel and US imperialism in the region but also traditionally Lebanon's institutionalised political system. Yet, when the 'social mobilisation' began in Lebanon, as a grassroots and bottom-up emergence of resistance, Hezbollah had become well entrenched in Lebanon's political system and ultimately positioned itself on the side of that system. Kanaaneh points to the 2019 demonstrations' non-sectarian nature, as well as criticism of the economic system and ingrained corruption, as emphasising the 'dilemma' for Hezbollah in terms of its support for change.

Moreover and crucially for this special issue on resistance in relation to the so-called Arab Spring, Kanaaneh provides further explanation of Hezbollah's position as a 'resistance' movement in relation to the 2011 events. While Hezbollah welcomed the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, its alignment with Al-Assad's regime in Syria showed a different position, against the bottom-up calls for dignity and freedom. Kanaaneh refers to this as an 'embarrassing situation' for Hezbollah, 'due to the paradox between the position of the resistance party and the advocate of the most marginalized people, and the demands of the marginalized Syrians'. He also suggests this embarrassment may have been somewhat mitigated by Syria's descent into civil war with the involvement of numerous regional and international powers, allowing Hezbollah's retrieval of its 'resistance' status to some extent.

Kanaaneh's analysis evokes once more the assessment of Hamid Dabashi (2012), who suggested that the ideological resistance of entities such as Hezbollah (Islamist) were shown to be defunct by the non-ideological, nonviolent, cosmopolitan concept of revolution encapsulated in the 2010/11 protests. While to some extent Hezbollah's 'institutionalisation' reflects Bayat's (2013a) assessment of post-Islamist politics—alongside certain events over the past decade such as the rise of Isis in Syria and Iraq and Hezbollah's involvement in the war against them showing the continued relevance of Hezbollah as a traditional 'armed' Islamist movement—this is

all within a nexus of politics from which Dabashi's assessment may be said to diverge. Indeed, Lebanon's 2019 protests are more indicative of Dabashi's sense of resistance reflecting the 2010/11 period aims such as economic dignity and anti-corruption.

## **Implications for Resistance Studies**

A number of the articles in this special issue focus on aspects of everyday resistance; with the further significant theoretical development of this concept with Johansson and Vinthagen's (2020) recent work, these articles make an empirical contribution to the understanding of everyday resistance. As with Elemeligy's drawing on Bayat's (2010, 2013b) established work on social nonmovements and everyday politics, the articles expand the exploration of everyday resistance in the specific context of the WANA region. Given the common trope that the people of the region were broadly acquiescent and accepting of their dictators prior to the 2010/11 revolutions—and despite the evidence of resistance being there if one was to look, including instances of open and organised resistance (Khatib & Lust, 2014, p.2; Chomiak, 2014, pp.27,29,30; Brown, 2019, pp.155-164)—such explorations of everyday resistance continues expanding the solid basis from which to argue that resistance was and continues to occur even in the most unfavourable and repressive circumstances.

Relatedly and significantly—although not discussed in this special issue—is whether such everyday resistance may count as a form of 'constructive resistance', even if disparate and of a 'nonmovement' nature. While constructive resistance—where groups and communities attempt to bring into existence the sorts of societies they envisage (Sørensen, 2016, p.49; Johansen, 2012, p.31; Vinthagen, 2015, p.218)—perhaps at least in its more 'prefigurative' understanding pertains to some form of concrete, tangible alternative system, Gandhi's constructive programme evidently had an element of changing values and norms, which can lead to changing practices. There were significant aspects of constructive resistance during the 2010/11 revolutions, in the form of alternative organisations and revolutionary councils, significant because they embodied the much-expanded political space/public sphere and its potential with the values of dignity, freedom, nonviolent relation. Yet they proved transient and easily co-opted as a concrete political alternative, meaning that some continuation of this alternative and these values through 'everyday resistance' practices

is meaningful. Elmeligy notes the cultural shift that may be built through feminist everyday resistance; on the one hand perhaps this shows the failure of many men to take on the values reasserted by the revolution, but on the other a continuation of efforts for change within the restricted open political and revolutionary space post-2013.

Finally, a further notable theme emerging from the special issue papers relates to Vinthagen's (2015) conception of social pragmatism in relation to nonviolent resistance, which helps to further situate the significance of acknowledging the breadth and diversity of resistance activities in the WANA region. As Vinthagen observed, there is a need to move beyond the principled/pragmatic distinction, 'the division of nonviolence into lifestyle and tactics', which is possible:

With the idea of nonviolence as social pragmatism [...this] involves the practical consequences of action in social situations: what happens based on the actual experience of people, how people react and deal with each other's actions [...] it assumes that the interaction occurs within a historically specific social order. Since every social group has a normative structure, even norms play a part in pragmatism. Thus, one can be a proponent of nonviolence if one perceives that this form of struggle is more effective for certain (long-term) goals in a certain (normative) social context (pp.10,51).

Approaching resistance struggles in this way, as an acknowledgement of the multifaceted comprehension and practise of unarmed resistance in diverse contexts, will hopefully mean that as researchers, we are far more willing to listen, understand and support, rather than necessarily moralising or producing sure-fire models of action. It has been my privilege to edit the articles of this issue which are a contribution to this end.

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# Making a Scene: Young Women's Feminist Social Nonmovement in Cairo<sup>1</sup>

Nehal Elmeligy *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

## *Abstract*

*This paper argues that some women in Cairo, Egypt are part of a feminist 'social nonmovement' that predates the 2011 revolution, where they 'make scenes', i.e. commit acts of everyday feminist resistance, by defying patriarchal control over their bodies and behavior in public space independently from one another, spurred by patriarchal oppression for most, and participation in the revolution for some. Through interviews with twelve Cairene women in 2017, I investigate how and why they defy the social norms governing women's use of public spaces and investigate the role of the 2011 revolution in their different forms of feminist defiance. I analyze three acts of public feminist resistance: women removing the hijab, defying street harassment, and moving out of their parents' and husbands' homes. My findings contribute to the literature on recent Egyptian women's feminist resistance specifically, and everyday resistance studies in general. Only a quarter of my participants identify the revolution as the main reason for their feminist epiphany and resistance.*

## Introduction

On January 25, 2011, Egyptians took to the streets to protest the 30-year autocratic rule of Hosni Mubarak (Hass 2017). During the eighteen-day sit-in at Tahrir Square in Cairo, citizens could not turn their eyes away from the large presence of women. It was difficult for many Egyptians to comprehend that women were leaving their homes and taking an active role in national politics. This was shocking because historically in many Muslim majority

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1 I dedicate this paper to my father, Mohamed, who passed away before I finished my MA. I sincerely thank Ashley Currier, Therese Migraine-George, Ghassan Moussawi, Asef Bayat, Craig Brown, Armaghan Ziaee, Gabriella Nassif, Dominique Lyons, Matthew Schneider, Noah Glaser, Brandi Lewis, Mahmoud Hafez, and the reviewers for their support, comments and editing assistance.

societies the public sphere has always been perceived as the domain of power, politics and religion, and as the ‘universe of men’ (Mernissi 2003,138).

In March 2011, the military forcibly removed protestors from Tahrir Square who stayed after the toppling of Mubarak in February. Both men and women were tortured and later jailed, however women had to go through a series of virginity tests (Human Rights Watch 2017). Through this and other similar measures, including death threats, sexual assault, and proposed dress codes, the Egyptian state and society aimed to exclude and control the increasing number of women protesting in public (El Said, Meari, and Pratt 2015).

When a General representing the army was interviewed on CNN about this incident, he voiced the opinion of the majority of Egyptian society regarding women’s morality and the public sphere: ‘[T]he arrested women were not like your daughter or mine[...they] camped out in tents with male protestors’ (Abouelnaga 2015,44). According to the General, respectable women are confined to the private realm and comply with normative femininity,<sup>2</sup> but loose women ‘demonstrate boldness and courage and break the segregation norms’ (Amireh 2017; El Said, Meari, and Pratt 2015,16). To the state, loose women were a national threat in need of containment as they transgressed traditional gender norms.

These virginity tests, sexual assaults and death threats aimed at controlling and terrorizing women aptly reflect the socially and politically constructed division between the public and private spheres, and the extent to which this division informs how traditional Egyptian society and the state view and treat women. Once a woman transgresses patriarchal boundaries and steps into the (male) public sphere, her body and honor are subject to public scrutiny; they are questioned and checked in efforts to delegitimize women’s presence in public spaces. Egyptian women do not have a right to use male spaces (exemplified in the street or traditional cafes, *qahwas*) and if they are ‘unveiled the situation is aggravated’ (Mernissi 2003,144). Consequently, a woman’s mere presence in a male dominated public place, nontraditional behavior, or immodest clothing is enough to raise suspicion.

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2 Normative femininity means traditional feminine behavior and presentation a woman exhibits, complying with society’s patriarchal notions of womanhood. In line with politics of respectability, normative femininity dictates that Egyptian women must be modest, quiet, mostly homebound, obedient daughters and wives, among others.

But the women in Tahrir Square entered the political terrain, a symbol of the public sphere, believing in their right to exist in this space and refusing to be merely gendered symbols of honor. While the revolution of 2011 inspired some women to assert their right to be in public, for many others the decision to defy patriarchal social and religious traditions concerning public appearance was before then spurred by various personal reasons and experiences. Regardless of the catalyst, I argue that when a woman in Cairo asserts her right to be in public space by acting or appearing in a way that society deems a violation of acceptable gender norms and feminine propriety, she is committing an act of feminist resistance.

Cairene women, through individual, everyday acts of feminism, are challenging the patriarchal and conservative social norms of how to appear in the public sphere in growing numbers. Some women have removed their hijab, called out sexual harassers in the street, and moved out of their parents' home. I find these women's stories worth exploring, considering the parental, societal, and religious obstacles they face when carving new spaces for themselves in public. Through interviews with twelve Cairene women, I investigate how and why they defy the social norms governing women's use of public spaces through 'making scenes' (Creasap 2012). These scenes can be read collectively as public, feminist acts that together create what Asef Bayat (2013) calls a social nonmovement. In a social nonmovement, individuals carry out everyday forms of resistance that are repetitive and dispersed across time and space, causing an unintentional but widespread impact. Building on Bayat's concept, I argue and emphasize that my participants are part of a *feminist* social nonmovement, where women commit acts of public feminist resistance by resisting patriarchal control over their bodies and behavior in public space independently from one another (Bayat 2013). Furthermore, I investigate the role of the revolution of 2011 in the different forms of women's public feminist defiance.

This paper joins literature that sheds light on women's everyday resistance in the public sphere in the Global South and feminist literature that challenge the public/private, masculine/private dichotomy in the Middle East and North Africa (Alnass and Pratt 2015; Fabos 2017; Galana 2016; Jabiri 2016; Moussaid 2009). Furthermore, I situate my above argument and vision for the future of the feminist social nonmovement within the emerging field of everyday resistance. In line with Anna Johansson and Stellan Vinthagen (2020), this study aims at changing the discourse on resistance and what qualifies as 'real resistance' (19). It contributes to this

field by shedding light on everyday, feminist acts of resistance that are non-political' or have "private" goals, emotions or personal needs' (Johansson and Vinthagen 2020, 29). Finally, through this study, we gain a better understanding of the feminist cultural shift underway in Cairo and its potential to dismantle patriarchal manifestations in the public sphere, and patriarchal institutions at large.

## **Background: Women in the MENA and Egypt's Patriarchal Public Sphere**

Men and women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) often inhabit 'two different worlds': the private and the public (Ghannam 2002,90). Women, who are expected to be powerless and subordinate, are confined to the private sphere, and men monopolize the public sphere as they are expected to be powerful and dominant (Ghannam 2002). Sexual segregation, as Mernissi (2003) calls it, is an integral part of this social and spatial division. To prevent sexual interaction between men and women, societies developed veiling and seclusion by relying on certain interpretations of Qur'anic verses, allowing men and women to collaborate only for procreation when they marry (Mernissi 2003). To prevent illicit relationships, restrictive codes of behavior ensure women's sexual purity and virginity (Moghadam 2003). A woman's sexual purity, or honor, is her primary duty towards herself and her family, because her honor is by extension her family's (Moghadam 2003). Men are responsible for protecting the family honor by controlling female members, to the extent that they sometimes kill them due to 'real or perceived sexual misconduct' in a crime dubbed 'honor killing' (Moghadam 2003,122-123). In this kinship system, men have rights over their female kin that women do not have over themselves or their male kin. These patriarchal rights reduce women to objects that must be preserved until handed from father to future husband, and views them as incomplete and in need of legal and social dependence on a male figure (Frye 1990; Radicalesbians 1970; Rich 1980; Rubin 1975).

The apparent 'preoccupation with virginity,' the heavy burden of family honor that women carry, the division of society into public and private spheres, and the lengths to which men go to police the lives and the behavior of the women in their family force some women to 'bargain with patriarchy' (Kandiyoti 1988; Moghadam 2003,122). By dressing modestly outside the home, such as wearing the Islamic veil or hijab, women signal

their belonging to the concealed private sphere, and use it to bargain with patriarchy, or the male dominated public sphere, specifically to partake in the economic market. In Egypt, many women who wear the hijab do so out of conviction, not as a bargaining tactic. Nevertheless, many Egyptian women do employ occasional bargaining tactics in public. For example, when a woman wants to leave her home at night, it is best if a man chaperones her so she can ‘trespass into the men’s universe’ (Mernissi 2003, 143). Otherwise, she should expect men to harass her. Unfortunately, societal traditions consider women’s presence in the public sphere both offensive and provocative, which automatically exposes them to harassment (Mernissi 2003).

## **Everyday Resistance and Cairo’s Feminist Social Nonmovement**

Despite the hostile public sphere and patriarchal hierarchy of Egyptian society, many women are refusing to bargain with or abide by the rules of patriarchy. However, recent research on Egyptian women’s feminist activism *narrowly* focuses on the revolution of 2011 as catalyzing their defiance and resistance to sexism and normative gender roles (El Said, Meari, and Pratt 2015; Hafez 2019; Hatem 2011; Mourad 2013; Ramadan 2012; Sholkamy 2013; Tadros 2016). While the revolution is a source of social change, including ‘a heightened sense of gender awareness’ on the part of women, scholars considering it the main catalyst for propelling women’s resistance overshadows other factors that awakened Egyptian women’s feminist defiance, and that some women’s defiance started before the revolution (Moghadam 2003, 23). In fact, accounts of Egyptian women challenging patriarchal social norms of how to appear in public, which predate the revolution or are not related to it, populate news articles (Darwish 2012; Debeuf and Abdelmeguid 2015; Gamal 2015; Nkrumah 2016; Primo 2015).

Furthermore, much of the social movement literature assumes that women who engage in feminist resistance belong to feminist activist groups (Al-Ali 2000; Moghadam 2005; Sandberg and Aqertit 2014). Even researchers who work on ‘marginalized forms of resistances, such as hidden and everyday resistance, as in James C. Scott’s work, still tend to privilege certain “political” forms of resistance’ (Johansson and Vinthagen 2020, 29). Not all women can assume the risks of participating in feminist political activism in patriarchal societies and under authoritarian regimes, but they can participate in resistance outside formal social movements. While everyday acts of resistance do not necessarily originate from a declared

feminist agenda, they could have ‘important, if unintended, consequences’ in society (El-Kholy 2002,15). Such *ordinary* public feminist acts slowly chip away at the patriarchal system in place, inspiring other women to do the same, resulting in an unorganized feminist ‘popular mobilization,’ or a feminist social nonmovement (Zaatari 2014,55).

Some women who live in Cairo are now part of a feminist social nonmovement. Here, I build on Asef Bayat’s (2013) ‘social nonmovement’ and add ‘feminist’ to clarify its nature. A social nonmovement refers to ‘collective actions of noncollective actors’ (Bayat 2013,20). In a social nonmovement, individuals carry out similar everyday<sup>3</sup> forms of resistance separately from one another; these forms of resistance, in the case of the Cairene women, take place in public and are feminist. As part of this feminist social nonmovement, women’s public feminist practices can be exemplified by having short hair, smoking, and retaliating against male harassers, among others, all of which are actions that the patriarchal Egyptian society deems inappropriate and unfeminine. The simultaneity and accumulation of these forms of resistance normalize these women’s behaviors. The more women ‘assert their presence in the public space, the more patriarchal bastions they undermine’ (Bayat 2013,21). The power of these women’s practices lies in their ‘*ordinariness* [original emphasis],’ in their occurrence one day after the other at the hands of different women on separate occasions in different places (Bayat 2013, 88). Despite their ordinariness, these noncoordinated ‘everyday forms of resistance’ demonstrate the potential of women to challenge and change patriarchal societal notions (El-Kholy 2002,12).

Indeed, resistance is potentially productive and can be part and parcel of everyday life (Baaz et al. 2016). Its productivity lies in its ability ‘to constructively transform societies and change history’ (Baaz et al. 2016, 138). To James C. Scott (1985), the potentiality of everyday resistance lies in it being ‘informal, hidden, and non-confrontational’ (140). Like Scott (1985), the resistance I study falls outside organized, formal political activity; it happens every day by ordinary people. In contrast to Scott (1985), however, one of its main characteristics and where I argue most of its transformational potential lies is its confrontational and conspicuous nature, or in other words, its scene making.

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3 ‘Everyday’ means ‘way of life,’ not something that happens ‘every’ day (Johansson and Vinthagen 2020,28).

As part of a feminist social nonmovement, women's public acts of defiance contribute to creating or 'making a scene' (Creasap 2012). Kimberly Creasap (2012) explains that making a scene occurs when people challenge norms governing who 'belongs' in public spaces; 'the presence of a scene at some point entails a struggle over territory' (184). I utilize the concept of making a scene to signify two simultaneous meanings; the first is Creasap's definition, and the second is its idiomatic meaning which is to cause a public disturbance. As such, the everyday resistance I study here is different from Vinthagen's (2015) elaboration of it where he explains that unlike protest, everyday resistance does not necessarily call for attention—my research is concerned with everyday feminist resistance that either calls for attention, or attracts attention without the intent to do so, due its audacious nature in the context of the Egyptian public sphere

In this study, women struggle against men's territorial hold over Cairo's public space. As resistance is always a response to power, this power can be manifested in different forms including, but not limited to, laws, state institutions and, what concerns this paper, patriarchal divisions of private and public space, and traditional gender norms and normative femininity (Baaz et al. 2016). Cairene women make a scene by appearing in public space in a manner that does not conform to traditional gender presentations or even by simply being in a male dominated setting. Furthermore, the street, for example, is the scene where a woman chooses to leave her house wearing what some perceive as immodest clothes. In every instance of scene making, Cairene women are putting their foot down and asserting that they too have a share of public space. This is a contemporary and concrete example of how resistance results in the simultaneous restructuring of power and reconstruction of spaces and material realities that allow the creation and expansion of possibilities to resisters (Baaz et al. 2016; Vinthagen 2015).

In Egypt, engaging in public acts of everyday feminism and/or participating in unorganized feminist social movements seem to be the only option for women as the government has been cracking down on organized feminism. Before and after the revolution women human rights defenders experienced gender-based violence during protests at the hand of plain-clothes police/government men to 'silence and exclude [them] from public spaces and the political events shaping Egypt's future' (Torungolu 2016). Five months after the toppling of President Mubarak in 2011, an investigation into the registration of local and foreign funding of women's and human rights nongovernmental organization (NGOs) initiated the closures of many

international and local NGOs, such as the feminist organization Nazra for Feminist Studies (Aljazeera 2017; Amnesty International 2016; Nazra for Feminist Studies 2018; Nobel Women's Initiative 2016).

Everyday public feminist practices can be powerful and influential, because unlike conventional social movements with well-known leaders, they cannot be dispersed by governments that are unable to track individual acts of resistance (Bayat 2013). Women in Muslim majority societies under authoritarian regimes do not necessarily need an organized social movement or mass mobilization to negotiate, resist, defy or overcome gender discrimination (Bayat 2013). Unlike Scott (1985), the (women's) resistance I study, does not make 'explicit claims' and while it may result in undermining patriarchal power relations, it does not intend to 'undermine [them] through its consequences' (Baaz et. al 2016,140). In defining everyday resistance, I follow Michel de Certeau (1984) and Baaz et al. (2016) in focusing on a particular kind of act, not an intent or a consequence. This research is concerned with everyday feminist resistance where women can employ the 'power of presence': 'the assertion of collective will in spite of all odds, refusing to exit, circumventing constraints, and discovering new spaces of freedom to make oneself heard, seen, felt and realized' (Bayat 2013,88). By asserting their presence in the public sphere, Cairene women become 'public players' by subverting gender roles and norms (Bayat 2013,98).

Even though Egyptian feminist figures and organizations are currently experiencing an unprecedented backlash, no previous government has ever allowed NGOs to operate independently (Magdy 2017). During the rule of President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956–1970), parliament passed legislation to put all NGOs under state control during a period often referred to as 'state feminism' (Magdy 2017). During Mubarak's rule (1981–2011), the number of new women's rights NGOs increased substantially; however, they were mainly development focused and closely related to state officials (Magdy 2017). Unfortunately, what was originally a feminist movement in the Arab world, has mostly become a women's rights movement that relies on international agreements and funding instead of 'popular mobilization' (Zaatari 2014,55). There is a difference between 'the calls for reform by the women's movements' and a population that mobilizes under 'the feminist call for change' (Zaatari 2014,58). A feminist popular mobilization, or a feminist movement, unlike a women's rights movement seeks to dismantle all patriarchal institutions in place by abolishing the patriarchal/paternal system that places men at the top of its hierarchy and by creating policies that

promote equality in social and legal frameworks (Zaatari 2014). Regrettably, the current political climate in Egypt will not allow for the complete realization of such a movement. However, some Cairene women enact ‘off the radar’ ways that gradually dismantle patriarchy through engaging in a feminist social nonmovement by carrying out everyday acts of feminist resistance in the public sphere. As such, this study illustrates the nexus of social nonmovements and feminist calls for change: an unorganized feminist movement that challenges patriarchy and allows women equal rights and access to the public sphere.

Unearthing some women’s epiphanies, challenges and victories, who are part of the feminist social nonmovement, are essential to a real understanding of the lives of women in Cairo and the potential of Egypt’s feminist future. By showcasing Cairene women’s agency and resistance, I contest the essentialized image of oppressed and helpless Muslim, Arab, and ‘Third World’ women (Bulbeck 1998; Kaplan 1994; Lugones 2010; Mohanty 1988). Furthermore, this paper aims at changing the narrative around the everyday lives of Arab and Muslim women and countering, and challenging their consistent portrayal of mostly, if not only, bargaining with patriarchy.

## Data and Methods

I conducted research for this paper as a master’s student at the University of Cincinnati, Ohio, U.S.A. I was planning to do in-person interviews in Cairo, Egypt in the summer of 2017. After I arrived in Cairo in June, the IRB proposal that I had started in February was not approved. This decision was not negotiable; according to the IRB, it was not safe for me to conduct these interviews in Egypt. The IRB was wrong. Before starting my MA in 2016 and during my summer visit in 2017, I had conversations with women in private and public about topics relevant to this paper. We spoke freely, without fear for our safety or judgement by nearby listeners. In fact, one young man offered to take part in my study when he overheard me telling a friend about the topic. Since I did not want to change my topic, I opted to interview Cairene women who were temporarily living in or visiting the U.S., as the IRB suggested. As an Egyptian national, I am part of a network of Egyptians who reside abroad, and through this network, I invited Egyptian women in the U.S. to take part in my research. I circulated my interview invitation among my contacts, in English and Arabic, clearly stating the research is about women who challenge the socially and religiously acceptable

ways of being in the public space in Cairo. I recruited participants who were in the U.S. for three years or less, a duration that allowed me to find enough participants and ensured they had not forgotten their experiences in Cairo. I interviewed women who were in the U.S. from two weeks to two years. Using snowball sampling, I identified twelve women between the ages of 25–38 who are all educated and none are wealthy. Eleven of them identified as members of the middle class; they were either on scholarships supported by private institutions to complete a two-year master’s degree or attending trainings paid by their jobs. Only one person identified as a member of the upper middle class and was on a trip paid for by her parents. By August 2019, all the participants were back in Cairo, which means all the experiences discussed in this study occurred before their U.S. stay. Four women (Mariam, Marta, Nancy, and Monica) are Christian, six (Wafaa, Dina, Shereen, Heba, Noha, and Reem) are Muslim, and two (Salwa and Safaa) were born into Muslim families and no longer identify as Muslim. I use religiously and culturally appropriate pseudonyms for all participants. All participants are cisgender, heterosexual women. Some participants answered all my questions in English, some used a mix of English and Arabic, and others relied more on Arabic.

I searched for women who exhibited any form of defiance to cultural and religious norms in Cairo’s public sphere. I had personally taken off the hijab in 2010 and started to verbally fight with men harassing me on the street. I had met Cairene women who had also taken off their hijab, some who started to be bolder in fighting street harassment, and others who moved out of their parents’ home and lived on their own. In addition to these three main categories, two other categories emerged during my interviews, though I did not include them in this study: women biking and smoking (in public). Finally, living in Cairo until 2016, I witnessed how the revolution catalyzed many young Egyptians to defy religious and cultural beliefs and practices.

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews via Skype as this interview approach allows researchers to understand the lived experiences of the participant (Hesse-Biber 2014). I based the interview guide on my positionality as a native of Cairo and my knowledge of the undergoing sociocultural changes (Altorki and El-Solh 1988). In these interviews, there was space for a normal flow of conversation and spontaneity, which was essential to unearthing details about participants’ experiences, feelings, and changes (Aurini, Heath, and Howell 2016). I built rapport with each participant, embracing a ‘participatory model’ as I have lived through similar

experiences (Hesse-Biber 2014,199).

I asked the participants six categories of questions (with an extra one for Muslims). First, I asked them about their experiences and views on women in public space in Egypt and Cairo to ascertain what they deemed as transgressive and appropriate and if they have behaved ‘inappropriately’ themselves. Second, I asked about their current religious beliefs and any reevaluation if appropriate. These two question sets did not result in their stand-alone sections in the paper but were interwoven in other relevant parts. Third, I asked (previously) Muslim participants about their experiences with the hijab. Fourth, I inquired about their living situation in Cairo. Fifth, I asked about their experiences being out late alone and with others in public. This also did not result in its stand-alone section. Sixth, I inquired about their experiences with sexual harassment in public spaces. Finally, I inquired about their participation in the revolution and its direct or indirect effect on their lives. I paid for a speaker of English and Egyptian Arabic to transcribe the interviews which I also reviewed. I coded the transcripts following the interview guide, and then analyzed the data according to topic.

### **Making a Public Statement: Removing the Hijab**

Removing the hijab is the only act of public feminist defiance that pertains solely to Muslim women. Many Muslim women who wear the hijab follow the common interpretation of a dress code related to Quranic verse. This interpretation dictates that all girls who have started menstruating should cover all but their faces, hands, and feet (in private or public) from men who are eligible to be their husbands (even if a woman is married), as they have now entered womanhood. The hijab’s purpose is to keep women modest, to protect their sexuality, hide women from men’s gazes, and to avoid harassment in public (Hauslohner 2009). Not all Muslim women, however, wear the hijab, and not all who do wear it out of religious conviction.

Most women I interviewed who used to wear the hijab, even if they did not strictly observe Islam, felt they must abide by what society deems religiously and culturally appropriate (since the hijab is a visible marker of their faith). Six of the eight Muslim participants I interviewed no longer wore the hijab. Wafaa was still wearing it at the time of the interview, and Reem had never worn it. I interpret the women’s decision to stop wearing the hijab as acts of, and commitment to, feminist resistance in public space that is part of Cairo’s feminist social nonmovement. In most cases, for

those who no longer wear hijab, removing it was their first step toward self-discovery and defying patriarchy in the public sphere. Some participants faced opposition from their families, because many Muslims consider it a sin when a woman takes off her hijab. A hijab, in many cases, not only reflects a woman's religious conviction, but also her family's. Therefore, parents fear how their daughters' removal of the hijab will reflect on their daughters' reputation (and, by extension, theirs) when she appears in public without it (although the forms and intensity of familial disapproval vary).

Three participants, Dina, Shereen, and Heba, faced little opposition from their families when they decided to remove the hijab. As teenagers, Dina and Shereen decided to wear the hijab since many girls in their circles wore it. Shereen donned the hijab at 17 and took it off at 28, and Dina put it on at 14 and took it off at 21. Heba is the only one whose father forced her to wear the hijab. She started wearing it at seven years old. She wore it for 31 years, never imagining that she would take it off. After the revolution, she felt her 'body needed to breathe,' as if the conservative dress code had been constraining her.

Heba is a mother and a divorcee living in a family apartment building. According to her, many Egyptian Muslims believe the hijab is an integral part of a woman's identity and presentation, so taking it off makes her susceptible to interrogations by family and neighbors about her 'controversial' decision. She describes this as a confrontation she is eager to get over with, because only then can she 'cool down' knowing that it is behind her. She expects her neighbors to ask about her 'mental and psychological health'; and she expects she will tell them that it is none of their business. In this environment, removing her hijab is not simply a personal affair but a public one as well. With such an act of public feminist resistance, Heba is challenging both the society sanctioned dress code and the patriarchal surveillance society exerts over women's bodies and personal choices.

In contrast, the families of Salwa, Safaa, and Noha openly opposed the women's decisions to take off the hijab. Safaa and Noha's parents forced them to wear the hijab at a young age. Both began doubting religious teachings and obligations as they grew older. They reread hijab-related verses from the Qur'an and were no longer convinced by the common interpretation. Noha, for example, wore the hijab for seven years and took it off when she was away from her family during her last year at university, because the fact that her parents forced her to wear it had become 'unbearable.' By the time Noha

was about to graduate, her social circle had expanded, and she had outgrown some of her family's values. Through this feminist act, she decided for herself how to publicly present her body and identity. Her brothers and parents later found out and disapproved of her decision. While Noha's mother eventually made peace with her decision, she initially told her that she must wait until she married or traveled. There are still people who judge her when they find out she stopped wearing the hijab.

Unlike Noha, Salwa struggled internally, and with her family, with her decision to stop wearing the hijab. Even though she had been an atheist for a year, she continued wearing the hijab because she was unable to face her family with her desire to take it off. In 2013, after having worn the hijab for 18 years, Salwa went to a hair salon and walked out of the salon without her hijab:

I felt I was naked in the street, which made me cry. For me, it was hard to understand what it was to be unveiled. I felt that everybody in the street was looking at me... I walked a few blocks. I was so nervous that I felt I couldn't continue walking. Then I entered a clothes shop. I entered the fitting room. I wore my hijab again...and went back home. I just couldn't do it.

Salwa wanted to remove her hijab because she felt like a hypocrite as she was no longer a Muslim but appeared to be one. However, since the hijab had been a 'part of [her] identity' for so long, being without it in public proved extremely difficult; it seems the hijab and her conservative dress code had functioned as her 'second skin,' making her feel 'naked' without it. On the following day, she decided to go out without it and to inform her mother of her decision.

Her father did not oppose her decision, taking it as a political statement against the Muslim Brotherhood's disappointing politics (Primo 2015). Salwa's mother, though, was 'hysterical.' Believing that a woman's hijab preserves her honor and protects her from harassment, every day, for six months, she would wait for Salwa to return from work to camp outside her bedroom and dramatically scream, drop to the floor, and slap her own face. For those six months, Salwa insisted on her decision and challenged the 'patriarchal bastions' at home and in public (Bayat 2013, 21). By the end, she could no longer handle her mother's 'abuse' and decided to wear the hijab again, until 2013, when she married and could take off the hijab away from her mother's input. By doing so, she committed to her feminist resistance

while persisting through extreme patriarchal pushback and challenging patriarchal norms in the public sphere.

Like Salwa, Safaa had to leave her home to be able to take off her hijab. When Safaa was in college, she told her family she was considering taking it off. They told her, 'That's the devil's work,' and advised her to pray more and get back on the right spiritual path. Safaa's husband was equally unsupportive. He told her he could not 'walk in the street next to a woman with an uncovered head.' Nevertheless, Safaa could not get the thought out of her head:

I wasn't happy or convinced...why would my God force me to cover my body, so why was I given a body in the first place? Also, I was raised believing that I wasn't very attractive so why am I covered?

Safaa explains part of her confusion with the hijab. Her older sister, mother and others always point out that her skinny figure renders her unattractive, saving her from harassment. Why, then, does she have to keep covering her body since her uncovered body is not attractive? She no longer understood the logic in covering a woman's body. After three months of telling her parents and husband, Safaa decided to act. The only way she could take off the hijab was if she left her home; so she moved out while she was still married and later got a divorce. After removing the hijab, Safaa says she can 'see [her] face more clearly now. Before, [she] felt that [she] was invisible in pictures.' She could not defy patriarchal traditions by only taking off the hijab but had to move out as well. Safaa's doubting the hijab led her to doubt all her Islamic beliefs, culminating in her no longer identifying as a Muslim.

By removing their hijabs, these women visibly declared their disapproval of a common religious and social practice, they socially rebelled through their body by discarding a traditional physical modifier of Muslim women, all while being fully aware of the possible negative and harmful consequences at home and in public (Pitts-Taylor 2003). Every time these women leave their houses without their hijab, they assert their presence in public by exhibiting 'embodied' everyday feminist resistance and challenging religious and social norms governing public space (Bobel and Kwan 2019; Weitz 2001). By sticking to their decisions they committed to feminist change; and through their daily 'power of presence,' they sustain and expand Cairo's feminist social nonmovement (Bayat 2013,88).

## **Cairene Women Stand up for Themselves: Defying Harassment**

Most women I interviewed identify sexual harassment as a significant barrier to their use of most public spaces in Cairo, except for some upper-class settings. In fact, 99.3 percent of Egyptian women have experienced some form of sexual harassment in their lifetimes (Tadros 2016.). As the women were growing up, their mothers told them never to respond to street harassment. Their mothers warned if they did respond, their response would constitute an invitation to the harasser and would reflect badly on them. Families and society ask girls and women to remain in the shadows, no matter the circumstances. Consequently, when women stand up for themselves (with no help from a male companion) and retaliate against harassment, it is a form of feminist resistance and a denouncement of gendered traditions that confine women to a submissive and often abused state when in public.

Common forms of harassment women experience range from staring to verbal harassment to groping. Most participants agreed harassers do not discriminate: they harass all kinds of women. What exposes women to this harassment? Making a scene. This scene making can take the form of not wearing the hijab, laughing out loud, wearing flashy clothes, or even being tall. In addition, women assert that society blames men's harassment on their sexual repression (McBain 2015). However, the actual reason that men harass women is because they do not see women as their equals. Mariam captures the status quo perfectly:

In the street, no woman is safe, verbal harassment, physical assault. It's like we're public property. Anyone has the right to attack any time, and you don't have the right to defend yourself... She's expected to be the weaker person, and she's expected to deal with it. If she defends herself in the street, then she's loose, she doesn't have a man they can talk to or defend her. So, if I defend myself when I get harassed, I don't just disgrace myself but also my family.

Mariam explains that women in public are 'up for grabs'; men do not question their right to infringe on women's privacy and do not expect the women to fight back. Indeed, most Egyptian men 'inhabit and move through public space through restricting the mobility of women' (Ahmed 2004, 70). Even more, society and harassers look down on women who make scenes

in public, such as those who yell/speak loudly and swear. Because women do not usually find support from passersby when they call out harassers, it is uncommon for women to publicly stand up for themselves. Women's feelings of vulnerability on the street, and fear of harassment, disgrace or scandal have long shaped how their bodies minimally inhabit, and how their bodies minimally inhabit—and how they inconspicuously appear in—public space (Ahmed2004). Nevertheless, most participants indicated that they and many women they know no longer put up with men's transgressions in the street and stand up for themselves in any way they can, especially after a new law criminalized sexual harassment.

In 2014, for the first time in Egypt's history, the government identified and criminalized sexual harassment (The Economist 2015). Before the revolution, the term 'sexual harassment' did not exist in Egyptian Arabic, or at least people were not aware of it. The word *mo'aksa*, which loosely translates as 'bothering' or 'flirting,' was the only word people used for harassment in general and verbal harassment in specific. During the revolution, people and reporters started using the term *taharosh gensy*, sexual harassment, because, for the first time in recent memory, thousands of women and men gathered together in close quarters. Unfortunately, this close physical proximity for extended hours led to many cases of harassment. As a result, thousands of women and many Egyptian feminist organizations rallied together, causing the Egyptian government to criminalize the act (Massena 2015). As Marta and Wafaa have shared with me, this law encouraged some women to defend themselves, speak up about their experience, and demand justice (Haase 2013; UN Women 2013).

Women stand up for themselves against harassment in different ways. Nancy, Shereen, Marta, and Noha verbally responded to different forms of harassment without using profanity. When responding to harassment, these women use phrases such as 'respect yourself,' 'why don't you mind your business?' or, 'how dare you?' Phrases that do not contain profanity are the least offensive and confrontational form of fighting against harassment, because Egyptian society looks down on women who use swear words. Nevertheless, the mere fact that these women vocalize their disapproval of harassers' transgression and entitlement is a form of feminist resistance and scene making. It feels 'triumphant,' as Nancy describes it.

In contrast to those four, Heba, Salwa, Wafaa, and Monica have verbally responded to harassment using profanity, which often causes an even bigger scene. Wafaa, who describes herself as skinny, started talking back to

harassers when she became more self-confident. When she experiences verbal harassment, she does not 'let it go.' For Heba and Salwa, participating in the revolution gave them the confidence to stand up for themselves. In the past, Salwa always tried to be 'invisible' in the street in order to 'move freely' and avoid harassment. When walking in the street, she wore loose clothes and 'frown[ed] like a soldier' so as not to attract attention. However, Salwa has gone from wanting to be invisible to responding to harassment with a litany of curse words. Similarly, Monica always tries to use insults she knows will deeply offend the harasser.

Like Salwa, Heba had initially always kept her peace in the street. Even after the revolution, her attitude and response to harassment did not initially change, 'but when harassment became really abusive, [she] found it meaningless to remain silent.' One time, a man told Heba that she has 'nice breasts,' in response, she told him that '[his] mother's are better.' Even though this is not profanity, Egyptian society considers this very insulting. Heba felt 'victorious' not only because she was not used to insulting harassers, but because men almost always expect women to be scared to retaliate, to be 'polite,' and not to know foul language.

Unlike the other women, Mariam used physical violence in response to physical sexual harassment, making an audacious scene. In the summer of 2016, Mariam finished her gym work out at 6 p.m. and was walking home when a car drove by quickly; Mariam stepped back in shock. A man yelled at the driver, 'Why would you want to hit that hottie?' This man's comment angered Mariam. When she insulted him, he explained that this was a compliment and asked how dare she insult him. When he grabbed her arm, people started pulling him away. This time, Mariam did not resort to screaming and swearing: 'I do boxing so I beat him up! I take boxing classes not just to defend myself but to hit people in the street if they harass me.' Mariam narrates what happened next:

The police saw him grabbing me... I told them I wanted to file a report. They took him, and I went to the station alone. When I arrived, because it was in Ramadan, I stayed from 6:15 till 8:00 waiting till they broke their fast, and during this time, the officers were trying to convince me not to file that case, so as not to harm him. Though, they should simply be executing the actual law. I now have my lawyer's union card, so I showed it to them and told them, 'I'm a lawyer and I will file a case.'

At this moment, the harasser turned into a coward; he kept begging me not to file the case. Then he started denying what happened...saying he was a respectable guy and was not used to catcalling girls...He was just protecting me from the car that was about to hit me.

By the time the night shift officers arrived, the marks on Mariam's arm had disappeared. Since there was no proof of physical assault, she could only file a case of verbal harassment. Officers let the man go after four hours of being locked up. Nevertheless, Mariam says she felt triumphant in the end. Mariam's way of fighting harassment is the least common. Not only did she learn boxing, she also hit a man in public, consequently making a scene and smashing gendered expectations of how women should behave in the public sphere. Her form of combating harassment is the most confrontational and retaliatory, clearly illustrating the lengths to which women will go in order to protect the spaces they have carved for themselves in public.

Regardless of the form women's retaliation takes, women's continuous contestation of harassment gradually alters the behavior discipline and patriarchal relations of power 'inscribed' into 'the spatiality of social life' (Johansson and Vinthagen 2020,122; Soja 1989). These contestations make known to the public that women are able and willing to defend themselves and that they refuse constraints on their being in public. As such, these contestations are a way the women are affirming their right to be in public space, and a step towards making it safer for themselves and others. Fighting harassment is indeed a social interaction that results in the remaking and unmaking of Cairo's symbolic and material public space (Johansson and Vinthagen 2020,122). These women stood up for themselves and made scenes despite not being in the company of a male guardian; they refused to abide by society's politics of respectability and feminine gender roles by using curse words or fighting back physically. This illustrates one form of daily public feminist resistance in which some Cairene women engage.

## **Scandalous in the Public Eye: Leaving Home, Living Alone**

Women who move out and live alone make the biggest scene of all, making them essential contributors to Cairo's feminist social nonmovement. Egyptian social traditions dictate that single men and women live with their families until they get married, but in modern day Egypt this applies more

to women than men. Preserving her virginity, which is synonymous to a woman's honor, is a daughter's main and most important duty toward herself and her family, because their honor relies on hers (Moghadam 2003). Society assumes that a woman being under the supervision of her family is the best way to preserve their honor. Marriage is the only religiously (whether in Christianity or Islam) and socially accepted license to have sex and to have a separate life from one's parents. Some women move alone to Cairo for study or work since it is the capital and has the country's best education and employment opportunities. Regardless of origin, many participants believe society generally considers women who live alone to be 'loose' or 'whores.'

All women I interviewed had wanted to live alone in Cairo for years, but most were unable to do so. For example, Nancy, Shereen, Mariam, Marta and Monica's parents do not prevent them from traveling alone abroad and within Egypt, but object to them living alone in Cairo. The first time Nancy told her mother she wanted to move out, her mother reminded her that this is not acceptable in Egyptian culture, but did not mind that Nancy left the country, where she would be away from people's eyes and judgment. All that mattered to her mother was saving face:

My darling, you are in Egypt. If you want to do that, immigrate. Leave the country, go study somewhere and have your life. Nobody will tell you what to do or not to do. But as long as you are in Egypt, you are not gonna leave your parents' house. You can't do that. You can't just simply move out.

Nancy's mother's response and opinion on the matter is representative of that of many Egyptian mothers. These women's parents do not mind their daughter's independence in the sense that they can have their own jobs, travel alone, and pursue further education locally and abroad. However, being physically independent and living alone as an unmarried woman would be scandalous; the shame of an unmarried woman living alone in Egypt is unbearable to many parents.

Unlike most participants, two women moved out despite their family's disapproval. In 2015, Safaa was married, but she moved out because her husband was not supportive of her decision to remove the hijab. When her mother found out, she considered it a 'catastrophe.' Safaa's mother tried to change her mind; when she lost hope, she told Safaa that if she wants to 'live like this,' then she should 'leave the country.' In 2016, another participant,

Wafaa moved to Cairo from Fayoum, 60 miles southwest of Cairo, against her mother's wishes, when she received a scholarship to study cinema. Two years away from retiring and being the sole breadwinner in the family, she only accepted her daughter's leaving when Wafaa received a job offer that could provide her with financial security.

According to Safaa, women must use a secret phrase with some real estate brokers if they are looking to live alone. When a woman asks for a 'freedoms apartment,' the broker knows she is looking to live alone where the neighbors and doorman mind their business, usually for a premium. Safaa says, 'It's like I would pay for the broker or the doorman to mind their own business... it's like renting a place with a dishwasher and another without.' Doormen and brokers exploit her desire to be independent because they know she will not easily find an apartment where she can live alone. Consequently, she must bribe these patriarchal social guardians to turn a blind eye.

Finding a broker who knows landlords who do not mind renting to single women is only one part of this difficult process. Neighbors, doormen and landlords do not necessarily leave the women alone after they have moved in. For example, after a male friend of Wafaa's carried a new microwave to her apartment, the doorman saw him and insisted he carry it instead. Apparently, no strange men were allowed in the building. In another building where Wafaa lived, her landlord told her that the doorman will not allow her in the building after 1:00 a.m. because 'people would talk'; Wafaa stayed in the apartment for two nights and moved again. Society clearly judges and attempts to control unmarried women who live alone. Although these women live in a physically private space, they do not live alone in the building, on the street, or in the neighborhood, so they are always subject to the public eye.

Safaa learned that finding and living in a freedoms apartment does not guarantee a private and free life. Once, the doorman knocked on her door to inform her the neighbors had called the police because they saw men walking into her apartment. Nevertheless, Safaa would not give up her independence for anything. Living in a space of her own, Safaa says, enables her to reflect on her thoughts and behavior, allowing her room to be a 'doer of things not an object to whom things are done.'

By living away from their families, without a (male) guardian, Wafaa and Safaa carry out a monumental act of public feminist resistance as they

challenge Egyptian rules of sexual respectability and social propriety. These women proclaim that they do not need anyone to be responsible for them. Rather, they are responsible for themselves; they have control over their decisions, time, body, and whereabouts. They risk their reputation and honor; they risk being ostracized by their neighbors and harassed (verbally and sexually) by the police or landlords. For them, to live alone is to provoke society; neighbors, shopkeepers and doormen constantly question their virginity, wonder why their parents have no control over them, and why they are still not married. These women, fully aware of the situation, refuse to give up their newfound space where they feel they can finally evolve and experiment with life.

### **The Revolution: The Feminist Resistance Catalyst?**

Participating in the 2011 revolution, especially in sit-ins and protests, was the first time many women felt that their presence in public was welcome and appreciated. Many women started to believe that they could scream and shout in public, and that they have a right to be in the public sphere. Not all the women I interviewed, however, have gone through this experience. In previous sections, I presented and analyzed the different ways Cairene women defied patriarchy in the public sphere. In line with Johansson and Vinthagen (2020) who argue that 'everyday resistance goes on before, between or at the side of the dramatic resistance events' (28), in this section I explain that the revolution was not the main reason behind this defiance, although it was the catalyst for some women's public feminist resistance and participation in Cairo's preexisting feminist social nonmovement.

The public feminist resistance of Dina, Monica, and Wafaa proves that Cairo's social nonmovement existed before the revolution. Three different events, each unconnected to the revolution, triggered their public feminist defiance. Dina took off her hijab in 2009, and even though she participated in demonstrations, she does not think the revolution has changed her in any way. Though she still identifies as Muslim, Dina no longer believed the hijab was a religious obligation. Monica started standing up to harassment because it had become unbearable. Wafaa read a novel, *The Beggar* by the Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz (1965), in the summer of 2009 that made her reevaluate her constricted and conventional life:

It's a very philosophical novel about a nihilist called Omar Hamzawy who is depressed and wants nothing from life...and has no energy to

change it. Back then I identified with this state of isolation...Then I started to feel that there was something more to be done in life beyond this; something more than just graduating, getting married, having children, aging and dying. I couldn't imagine being like my mother, coming back from work at 3p.m., prepare lunch, watch TV and go to bed...At the end of the novel he resorted to mysticism...Yet he still did not find comfort, but the point is that he kept trying all the time. We are here to try. No one is consistently happy but trying makes life worth living. This influenced me greatly. I wanted to try life too.

Clearly, Wafaa wanted to experiment with life and tread 'the road not taken.' She did not want to lead the conventional life of many Egyptian women. This novel pushed her to study cinema and move to Cairo in 2016.

Some women, while not completely rejecting the revolution as catalyzing their feminist resistance, are uncertain how much to credit it. Marta, Nancy, Noha, Reem, and Shereen think the revolution, alongside other catalysts, may have indirectly instigated their bold behaviors. Nancy participated in demonstrations, but she draws no links between the revolution and her change in behavior from ignoring harassers to talking back at them. Without explicitly using the phrase 'the personal is political,' after the revolution, Nancy explains that she started feeling that sexual harassment is no longer 'a personal matter, but rather a communal thing' and that women must stand up for themselves. Similarly, Shereen did not participate in the revolution, but she thinks it 'might have something to do' with her decision to remove the hijab. She explains that the revolution resulted in a 'vibe' that emboldened many women, including herself. Similarly, Noha identified the revolution as a possible cause for the change she witnessed in her social circle and believes that is how the revolution indirectly influenced her. Many of her friends took off the hijab after the revolution, however, she is unsure if they were able to do so because 'the revolution broke down some social barriers' or because they 'saw others do it so that gave them strength.' When one of Noha's neighbors took off her hijab, it 'empowered' her to do the same. This illustrates the ripple effect of one woman's act of everyday feminist resistance, resulting in the spread of Cairo's feminist social nonmovement.

Similar to Noha, the revolution played a minor role in Reem's feminist defiance. She briefly participated in the revolution in 2011 and was 'fascinated by people demanding their freedom.' Reem's change, however,

was gradual and progressed over the years. She questioned gender roles as she observed how parents in her family treated their sons more favorably than their daughters. When she fell in love with a Christian man, she questioned gendered interpretations of the Qur'an that allow Muslim men to marry Christian and Jewish women but do not allow Muslim women to marry Christian and Jewish men. Furthermore, in 2011, at Reem's university, there was a call for members for a newly established feminist union. This was Reem's first encounter with feminist thought, especially women's sexual and bodily rights. All these factors resulted in Reem no longer abiding by what society or her single mother consider acceptable. She started dressing less conservatively, smoking, and staying out late. Finally, Marta is now more comfortable with staying out late and calling out harassers after she participated in political protests in 2013, widely considered a continuation of the revolution, and volunteered in an anti-harassment campaign at the time. The church she attends also had a role in changing her attitude through harassment awareness sessions.

The remaining four participants clearly identify the revolution as the main reason for their feminist epiphany and resistance. Safaa, Heba, Mariam, and Salwa participated extensively in the revolution, and described their lives before and after it as completely different. Before the revolution, they were shy, followed the curfew that their parents set for them, never talked back to harassers, and dressed conservatively. For them, the revolution was the site where they first felt present; it gave them a voice and confidence that they had never felt before. Salwa explains that in the beginning she never used to yell out slogans with crowds. She had never been one to raise her voice in public, but during the revolution, she was angry enough to 'scream [her] heart out.' This was her first time making a scene.

During the sit-ins and protests, these women interacted with Egyptians from all walks of life. They spent countless hours observing and talking with people who existed beyond their small social bubbles. As a result, these women, who belonged to traditional and protective households, socialized with 'the other,' as Heba put it, and gradually got rid of the stereotypes they had about people who are more liberal, less religious, and of different religions. Due to their extended hours outside their homes and discussions with protesters and activists, for the first time in their lives, they thought about feminist issues that affect their daily lives like women's freedom of mobility, taking off the hijab, sexual freedom, harassment, women's rights, and constricting gender roles. Heba explains, 'If it wasn't for the revolution, it

would be impossible for me to understand [that women should have freedom to do whatever they want with their bodies]. This is why I am so grateful for this revolution with all my life.’ Heba owes her feminist consciousness to the revolution. It propelled her into resisting patriarchal practices and ways of thinking. She started respecting other women’s personal choices and decided to practice daily public feminist acts of resistance to live the liberated life she envisioned for herself.

The personal decisions participants made as a result of the revolution made them feel more like themselves; they all expressed a notion of self-discovery. Mariam says that after the revolution, she ‘became herself’; it pushed her to break away from the carbon copy lifestyle that many Egyptian women live and pursue; she no longer just wanted a husband and kids, but wanted to explore different ways of living. In the same vein, Salwa says the following about how the revolution changed her:

The revolution enabled to move without having a problem with people seeing me...With my old personality, I would never ride a scooter, or wear short clothes, or show my hair. I wanted to look like everyone else, so I could freely walk. After the revolution I strongly wanted to look like myself. I wanted to be me, to be present as I am and ‘fuck you people’; I don’t give a shit about you.

The revolution spurred Salwa and the three other women on a journey of soul searching and self-discovery. After a series of personal epiphanies during and after the revolution, they decided they had to shed their old skin and live their lives as they wish, even if it meant going against all that is acceptable, traditional, and respectable, even if it meant making scenes. Even though it was a political uprising that inspired them, these women did not choose to go into politics afterwards, rather, they channeled their epiphany into everyday acts of feminist resistance in the public sphere, expanding Cairo’s social nonmovement.

## Conclusion

The women whom I interviewed for this study represent a wider feminist social transformation in Cairo and Egypt. Most of my interviewees know, have seen or heard of women who removed their veil, have moved out to live away from family, or stood up to harassment. Furthermore, there has been media coverage of how some Egyptian women of various social classes have been defying socially accepted ways of being in public. Some unmarried women

moved out of their parents' home because they were seeking independence, education, or new careers (Debeuf and Abdelmeguid 2015; Gamal 2015), others took off their hijab (Darwish 2012; Nkrumah 2016; Primo 2015), and some are riding bicycles for fun and transportation to save time and money (Agence France Presse 2015). These women have faced both backlash and support from their families, immediate social circles, and strangers in the public sphere. There is no evidence, however, of support or backlash on a *national* level. Despite a lack of attention on a national scale, such media attention proves the noticeable growth of a feminist social nonmovement in Egypt. There are no available statistics of how many women are part of this social nonmovement for various reasons, including the following two. This is the first study that acknowledges the wide occurrence of this everyday feminist resistance; the media coverage deals with the women as individual cases or groups and not as part of a wider feminist social (non)movement. Second, as this paper has shown, a nonmovement is uncoordinated and does not have a leader; therefore, the women participating may not even be aware of how widespread it actually is. This makes it all the much harder 'to track down' the participants of the nonmovement. In sum, through a sample of 12 participants, this study makes a claim that there has been a continuously growing feminist social nonmovement in Cairo that suggests a larger nonmovement occurring in other Egyptian settings, especially cities, among middle class, educated women. Due to the nature of nonmovements, and the qualitative methods of the paper, the number of women participants in this current feminist social transformation is unknown.

This research study joins the works of de Certeau and Scott to highlight the resistance by people in a subordinate position consisting of small actions compared to large-scale political resistance or organized social movements. These nonmovements are less visible in the literature on women's feminist resistance in Egypt and the MENA (Johansson and Vinthagen 2020). Nevertheless, the aim of this research has been to contribute to the under researched field of everyday resistance by revealing that on a micro, everyday scale this resistance is in fact *big* and *conspicuous*. Even more, this study has revealed how everyday resistance 'connects to collective actions or social movement activism, how it might scale up and spread, how it impacts social change' (Johansson and Vinthagen 2020, 181).

Along with Johansson and Vinthagen (2020) who argue that everyday resistance 'constitutes an initial, off stage, or later stage activity in relation to other more sustained, organized and conventional political forms of

resistance,' I argue that Cairo's feminist social nonmovement started before the 2011 revolution and still continues, and in fact, the revolution is not the main catalyst for Egyptian women's feminist resistance. Each participant challenged patriarchal norms and defied traditional gender roles before and after the revolution in public space. Women took off their hijab, fought sexual harassment verbally and physically, and moved out of their parents' (and husband's) homes to live alone. By carrying out such everyday acts of resistance, they defied patriarchal and gendered norms that often ban women from entering public space or dictate constricting conditions for their appearance in it. Each participant faced various obstacles at home as their parents (or husband) opposed their decisions or endured verbal, physical, and psychological violations in the street as they made scenes and enacted feminist resistance publicly.

More importantly, I have revealed how and why these women overcame these obstacles and persisted to publicly challenge Cairo's patriarchal society everyday. First, by defying patriarchy in public and, second, by refusing to yield to familial and cultural pressures, these women have created and maintained 'new spaces of freedom' for themselves to experience daily life as they wish and declare their right to exist in public (Bayat 2013,88). Furthermore, by creating new spaces of freedom independently, yet through similar forms of resistance, these women's actions constitute Cairo's feminist social nonmovement.

Considering the uncoordinated nature of this social nonmovement, an organized feminist effort is not the way to keep it alive. These women's everyday acts of resistance are effective because they are contagious. As long as Cairene women within the feminist social nonmovement continue to employ their 'power of presence' in public space, they will inspire more women to question their daily lives and their surroundings, which might result in their defiance of patriarchy and public feminist resistance (Bayat 2013,88).

However, will these individual acts of feminist resistance ever amount to large scale social change? While no one can answer this question with complete certainty, we must acknowledge that resistance is 'a process of unfinished struggle' (Vinthagen 2015, 8). Nevertheless, I argue that the women of the feminist social nonmovement are slowly going in the direction that Zeina Zaatari (2014) believes may lead to an Arab feminist renaissance. The Arab world as a whole needs a feminist change, not another wave of state actors that call for women's rights that seek adjustments within patriarchal/

paternal institutions (Zaatari 2014). In Cairo's case, its feminist social nonmovement is gradually dismantling the patriarchal institution pertaining to women's presence in public space.

I stand with Zaatari; real change does require the complete shattering of available institutions and frameworks. But what would that look like in the current political state of Egypt? Will feminists be able to lobby for and create policies that promote equality in social and legal frameworks as Zaatari calls for? This study reveals a potential societal and cultural 'arm' of Zaatari's envisioned feminist popular mobilization. Cairo's feminist social nonmovement is a cultural shift that embodies feminist change and resistance on the everyday, micro level that may be preceding a possible large-scale organized feminist movement. While this does not provide a practical answer to one of the pertinent questions in everyday resistance studies of 'how everyday resistance can "scale up" into resistance in many instances or into open, collective and organized resistance into a regional, national or transnational scale,' it offers a contemporary contextualized example of 'resistance culture' that can arguably lead to 'mass mobilizations' (Johansson and Vinthagen 2020,190).

Regarding the recent past, present and the near future, this study situates the feminist transformation in Cairo, and in Egypt, within a wider societal transformation taking place in the MENA region. The revolutions of 2011 inspired around 50 Saudi women to organize a decentralized campaign to demand the lifting of the ban on women driving (Galana 2016). In 2011, two Libyan women created Friday's Bike, a first-of-its-kind Facebook page in Libya for a weekly women's biking event (Alnass and Pratt 2015). In Jordan, women are challenging *wilaya* (guardianship); they are 'achieving independence at the levels of work, travel, and mobility' (Jabiri 2016, 128). In Sudan, women musicians transgress social and gender rules by performing their music in public (Fabos 2017). In Rabat, Morocco, women are increasingly frequenting cafes which are spaces men traditionally occupy (Moussaid 2009). More specifically, this study offers an inside look at the coalition of Bayat's (2013) social nonmovements and Zaatari's (2014) feminist call for change; a feminist social nonmovement in which Cairene women are challenging patriarchy and claiming their rights to the public sphere.

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# ‘When will we be ready for democracy?’

## The mobilisation of deviance as counterrevolutionary technology in Egypt<sup>1</sup>

Amira Abdelhamid, *University of Sussex*

### *Abstract*

*In a 2011 interview, then-Vice President Omar Suleiman declared that Egyptians are not ready for democracy, in response to mass anti-regime protests around Egypt. More peculiarly, protesters have been accused of trying to implement foreign (western) agendas, being perverts and homosexuals, and disrupting domestic cohesion. Discourses that attach deviance—ascribed as a western attribute—to open resistance have since prevailed. This article argues that the historical imagination of the evils of westernisation, delegitimises the revolution and its revolutionaries, while at the same time reproduces the figure of the monolithic normative (Honourable) Egyptian citizen, as docile and counterrevolutionary. In employing figuration as a method, I examine the emergence of the figure of the Egyptian Male Homosexual through the 2001 Queen Boat incident and argue that the mobilisation of figures of deviance acts as a counterrevolutionary technology that long preceded revolution. I suggest that rather than designate failure to the revolution, we should look elsewhere for the new potential for a resistance that disrupts these figurations and their effects. Through a counter-conduct analytic, the article posits that local human rights work is undertheorized as an important space to contest the power that conducts and encourages resistance.*

### **Introduction**

By early February 2011 when then-President Mubarak was ousted as a result of the 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolution, protesters in Cairo’s Tahrir Square had been accused, ample times, of being foreign agents, a threat to national security,

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and obstructing the wheel of production, both in the media and in official discourses. Protesters were also disparagingly accused of being homosexuals, paid in dollars and Kentucky Fried Chicken meals.<sup>2</sup> Relatedly, in an ABC interview (2011), then-Vice President Omar Suleiman announced that ‘Egyptians are not ready for democracy’, Egypt simply does not have ‘the culture of democracy’,<sup>3</sup> evoking an age-old trope that Egyptians are just *not there yet*, and perhaps will never be on a par with ‘the West’. More recently, prominent pro-regime TV host Ahmed Moussa proclaimed that the waving of a Rainbow Flag (for the first time) in 2017 at a Mashrou’ Leila<sup>4</sup> concert in Cairo ‘only took place after [because of] the events of the January 2011’. Seven people were arrested as a result<sup>5</sup> and Moussa demanded that such a case be treated as a national security case ‘because Egypt is a Muslim country’.<sup>6</sup> In the same vein, another journalist, Dandarawy al-Hawary, wrote, ‘the Mashrou Leila queers are part of the April 6 Organisation<sup>7</sup> and have participated in the January 25 events. They also support a homosexual organisation in Egypt’.<sup>8</sup>

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2 Abdulrahim, Raja. “KFC gets a bad rap in Egypt”. *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 2011. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2011-feb-07-la-fg-egypt-kentucky-20110208-story.html>.

3 Sussman, Anna Louie. “Laugh, O Revolution: Humor in the Egyptian Uprising”. *The Atlantic*, February 23, 2011. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/02/laugh-o-revolution-humor-in-the-egyptian-uprising/71530/>.

4 Mashrou’ Leila is an internationally renowned Lebanese band whose lead singer, Hamed Sinno, is openly gay.

5 N.a. “Seven arrested in Egypt after raising rainbow flag at concert”. *BBC News*, September 26, 2017. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-41398193>.

6 Sada ElBalad. “Ahmed Moussa uncovers new information about the Mashrou’ Leila concert,” trans. Author. September 25, 2017. Video, 4:28. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ld3D\\_qjN7WI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ld3D_qjN7WI).

7 The April 6 Youth Movement is a dissident organisation that is often cited as central to the 2011 Revolution and has been deemed by the regime as foreign and conspiratorial. The movement was banned by an Egyptian court on 28 April 2014.

8 Dandarawy al-Hawary. “Mashrou’ Leila queers belong to the April 6 Youth Movement, participated in January 25, and support a homosexual organisation

Such narratives also resonated outside of media and official discourses and I have encountered them first-hand during my participation in protests from January 2011 onwards. One particular incident frequently comes to mind when on a very hot July day in 2011, I marched from Cairo’s Tahrir Square towards the Ministry of Defence, to protest against the ubiquitous military trials of civilians under the power of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF – Mubarak’s interim successor).<sup>9</sup> Upon greeting a friend in the crowd, a man on the sidewalk shouted at us: ‘Is this the freedom you are calling for? You start a revolution so you can smoke hash on the streets like in the West?’ Only to realise that my friend had tobacco in his hand and was rolling a cigarette. Before we were able to reach the Ministry’s quarters, army tanks and barbed wire blocked us and a vicious yet expected attack by locals in the neighbourhood ensued. People in civilian clothes (sometimes referred to as thugs by protesters, and as ‘honourable citizens’ by the regime) charged at us with kitchen knives and other ‘light’ weapons. Army men watched as dozens of us were attacked while others scrambled to escape a very tight cordon. On the train back home, surrounded by protesters who were injured and shocked, the words from the man on the sidewalk started to resonate. I became increasingly angry because his words reduced our struggle to a narrative of welcoming ‘westernisation’. Our march to stop arbitrary arrests, to demand and imagine a different future, were understood as a mere demand for *selfish* and *licentious* personal rights. *Freedom* was fixed at the West. Freedom does not suit us; we are not ready for democracy.

Discourses of dissidents aspiring to be (an)*Other* and threatening national security, resonate in other locales too. However, the Egyptian case in particular exposes the prevalence and intelligibility of conspiratorial discourses and their ‘paralysing impact’: ‘The widespread belief in conspiracies and plots as driving forces behind political developments and social conflicts, is increasingly identified as a major obstacle to the management of change and transformation in contemporary Egyptian political culture’ (Nordbruch, 2007: 71). Indeed, I depart from this assessment; the belief in conspiracies, in ‘foreign agendas’ continues to obstruct transformational change. But

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in Egypt,” trans. Author. Youm 7, September 26. 2017. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2FsUvIO>.

9 “Egypt: Retry or Free 12,000 After Unfair Military Trials”. Human Rights Watch, September 10, 2011. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/10/egypt-retry-or-free-12000-after-unfair-military-trials>.

*where* do these beliefs come from? *What* does this have to do with (homo) sexuality? *Why* do these conspiratorial discourses reverberate powerfully within our communities over revolutionary demands of ‘bread, freedom, and social justice’? And, what are the implications of this on understanding and practicing resistance in Egypt?

Thus, I am curious about the tropes and accusations of *westernisation, perversion, and duplicitousness* that are attached to the figure of the revolutionary, and the deviance attached to revolution in Egypt today. The main question I engage is: *How have postcolonial and contemporary Egyptian discourses on deviance produced a counterrevolutionary impetus; and what implications does this have on practices of resistance and transformational change?*

This article suggests that the mobilisation of figures of deviance, particularly the figure of the Egyptian Male Homosexual, is a counterrevolutionary technology. I depart from the year 2001 and take the case of the Queen Boat—where 52 allegedly gay men were arrested aboard a discotheque moored in the Nile and tried in an emergency state security court—as the beginning of a specific kind of national identity construction, particular to the intensification of Egypt’s internationalisation after the end of the Cold War. This is to highlight the ways in which (homo)sexuality politics—located within a moral panic over the ‘evils of westernisation’—plays a significant role in enacting closures and displacing resistances in Egypt, as well as to explore the potential to open up different and more profound spaces for resistance. I deploy the method of figuration in order to understand the meanings attached to deviance (through the figure of the Male Homosexual) and normalcy (through the figure of the Honourable Citizen) and what kind of world these meanings create. In looking at how both these figures act as ordering and ‘straightening devices’ (Ahmed, 2006), and departing from the notion that discourse is productive, I analyse official statements and statements in popular media that show how gay subjectivities in Egypt are figured since 2001 and mobilised in opposition to normative Egyptian citizenship to create strict binary distinctions between East and West. I also use semi-structured interviews I conducted in Cairo in January 2019 with self-identified gay men and local human rights defenders, in order to go beyond articulations of homosexuality in discourse and examine the lived experiences of this figure. The aim here is to show that the lived and embodied experiences of gay men and human rights actors opens up new spaces for resistance, this is further illustrated by the concomitant use of counter-conduct analysis to examine how subjects exceed their figuration

and choose their own conduct. Due to the sensitivity of the research, as crackdowns on homosexuality and human rights defenders continue today, the identities of the interviewees are hidden and pseudonyms are used instead.

The first part of the article explores the figure of the Honourable (model Egyptian) Citizen in relation to counterrevolution literature in International Relations (IR) and makes the argument that such literature eschews an analysis of the role of discursive constructions of Egyptianness (as anti-Western) in reproducing a counterrevolutionary subjectivity. Such constructions can and do limit the possibilities of being together with others—who imagine and live Egyptianness differently—and limits the possibility to imagine and build something new. Drawing from various Queer Studies scholars (Puar, 2007; Rao, 2010; Amar, 2013; Weber, 2016), the second part of the article suggests a methodological approach that reclaims sexuality outside of its conventional 'private' and domestic realm and positions it within the logics of national identity (Pratt, 2005), sovereignty (Weber, 2016), and of central importance to this article, resistance. Here, I draw upon the concept of figuration to highlight the way nationalist repertoires are employed in order to demobilise dissent and reproduce autocratic rule (Naguib, 2020:52). Moral panics (Cohen, 1972) around figures of deviance, such as the Male Homosexual and the prosecution of same-sex desire, have allowed for the construction of a counterrevolutionary vigilante, a quintessential hero, the figure of the Honourable Citizen, the model Egyptian citizen who is male, heterosexual, and docile. Put somewhat differently, the figuration of deviance onto the homosexual body not only represses but also generates counterrevolutionary subjects who 'loyally repeat the nation' (Haritaworn, 2008) and in doing so, reproduce less visible—though powerful—limitations and challenges to change and socio-political transformation. The third part applies the framework of figuration to the case study of the Queen Boat to illustrate the constitutive relationship between figurations of homosexuality and the cultural and moral construction of Egyptian subjectivity. The fourth part briefly engages the implications of reading counterrevolution as such on practices of resistance. This is an attempt to encourage us to look beyond notions of failure or success of revolution, as 'resistance stretches far beyond various, more obvious articulations such as revolutions and demonstrations, and includes a much wider scope than is immediately visible' (Baaz, Lilja, & Vinthagen, 2017: 191). Here I use a counter-conduct analytic to foreground less visible resistances. Finally, I draw together the main arguments and

conclude that certain discursive ‘truths’ and power configurations need to be uncovered, deconstructed, and recontextualised in order to be able to escape them and build anew.

## **The Counterrevolutionary Vigilante: Egypt’s Honourable Citizens**

The honourable citizen has important qualities that we should all have [...] the level of patriotism in their blood is very high. This is why you see them suddenly appearing on the balconies in their homes, carrying pots of boiling water, dumping them on the heads of the dishonest citizens who are walking the back streets, shouting and screaming in the name of social and political justice [...] These voices [of protesters] cause sound pollution that has to be combated and eliminated. You may find gas bombs that they have kept in their homes, as a precaution, to ward off any strife that the rioters may cause, when their [‘rioters’] foreign masters give them orders to start implementing their plots and agendas on our beautiful homelands. Honourable citizens also suddenly appear in the squares and the streets where dishonest citizens may pass, fighting these evil forces, armed with simple honest tools, such as sticks and knives [...] The honourable citizens are convinced that freedom, if it settles here, will only cause chaos in our orderly homeland.<sup>10</sup>

Rasha Omran, a poet and writer, tells us—sarcastically—a succinct story about figure of the *honourable* citizen, which emerged in Egypt in the early days of the 2011 Uprising. ‘I love you Egypt’, says Karim Badawy enthusiastically to BBC cameras.<sup>11</sup> Karim, a local print house owner, describes himself as an honourable citizen, loyal to his country and staunchly anti-opposition, ‘me, my neighbourhood, and my family, anyone who says anything about him [Sisi] in bad faith or anyone who opposes him, will find us on their tail, now is not the time for opposition’, says Karim. And of course, President

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10 Omran, Rasha. “The Honourable Citizens,” trans. Author. *The New Arab*, April 30, 2016. Accessed March 20, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3ady6JR>.

11 Gamal Eddine, Ali. “Who are the honourable citizens in Egypt?,” trans. Author. *BBC Arabic*, June 20, 2016. Accessed March 23, 2020. [https://www.bbc.com/arabic/multimedia/2016/06/160618\\_egypt\\_honorable\\_citizens](https://www.bbc.com/arabic/multimedia/2016/06/160618_egypt_honorable_citizens).

Sisi himself has called upon ‘the honest honourable citizens’ to protest on the 26th of July 2013 in order to provide him with the mandate to ‘fight violence and terrorism’ against the backdrop of the military coup that had ousted previous Muslim Brotherhood president, Morsi’.<sup>12</sup>

These pronouncements clearly show that even in authoritarian and/or militaristic regimes, power is never solely concentrated in the state apparatus but circulates among the body politic. More generally, nationalist discourses on citizenship reproduce ‘good’ or ‘honourable’ citizens to be the markers of normalcy and to ‘exude’ a specific national sovereignty. Thus, the view here is that ‘Citizenship is, inherently, a normativizing project—a project that regulates and disciplines the social body in order to produce model identities and hegemonic knowledge claims’ (Brandzel, 2016: 5). The good Egyptian citizen is figured as a moderate and pious Muslim, *he* puts nation above the self, and *he* positions *himself* against western conduct and morality. In Omran’s quote, the honourable citizen can only exist in contrast to the anti-regime protesters. They are pure and unadulterated by foreign agendas or foreign masters, for them freedom is not a goal, *stability* is. Often found in protests supporting the regime, or simply attacking anti-regime protesters, honourable citizens have been an important figure in the past decade. Walter Armbrust (2013) argues that counterrevolutionary demonstrations by ‘honourable citizens’ have played a pivotal role in defeating revolutionary momentum. These demonstrations were further mobilised by various media presenters, inciting hatred and violence against revolutionaries and calling upon the honourable citizens to protect their country.

In participating in this counterrevolutionary discourse and practice, these demonstrators do not simply want to restore the pre-2011 situation. Armbrust argues that power is not static in the contestation between revolution and counterrevolution. In this contestation, power is reconfigured and is ‘particularly prone to generating perverted forms of social knowledge’ (Armbrust, 2013: 838). Perverted knowledges—such as those that fix freedom in a western and perverse register, undesirable for Egypt and Egyptians—justify violence against those who call for social justice. Violence against anti-regime activists and protesters, encouraged and carried out by these honourable citizens, is thus narrated as a desired vigilantism against

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12 *BBC News*. “Egypt’s Mohammed Morsi: A turbulent presidency cut short.” BBC News, June 17, 2019. Accessed March 23, 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18371427>.

perverse conduct. Correspondingly, 'revolutionaries' who are concerned with the legitimacy and tenability of their claims, enact a politics of closure to demonstrate their authenticity and are themselves implicated in the same perverted forms of social knowledge. When asked about her experience in the revolution, one interlocuter recounted:

There was always this overarching notion that we are girls who behave and look a certain way [read westernised] so there was always this negotiation of whether or not to go to protests. Male organisers would argue that we need to focus on the bigger picture and bring people to our side, basically by hiding us, and on the other side of it, there were also security concerns as security forces would sometimes target us.<sup>13</sup>

In his fiction novel about a young gay man in WANA (Western Asia and North Africa), Saleem Haddad highlights this tension between the euphoria of collective resistance, and certain identities within the revolutionary camp who are framed as problematic in furthering resistance:

The protests had felt like the most authentic thing I had done in my life. Now they felt like a martyrdom operation to help a new generation of dictators come to power [...] How could I share my political dreams with those in the squares when I couldn't even share my personal ones? I joined the protests so that I would no longer have to wear a mask. What's the point of risking your life to remove a mask only to have to wear a different one? (Haddad, 2016: 86)

The figuration of the Honourable Citizen points us towards hidden spaces where normativity is produced. This provides an analytical opening to trouble linear and binary distinctions between revolution and counterrevolution. In this next section, I read revolution, counterrevolution, and all that is in between, through the metaphor of the pendulum, where certain openings and closures are constantly taking place. Thus, revolution does not necessarily precede counter-revolution; they are both in constant motion, constant tension. I find that using this metaphor better captures how 'power passes through individuals. It is not applied to them' (Foucault, 2003 [1975-6]: 29). To expand, there is no one locus of power that moves the pendulum towards closure while a force on the other end is pushing back in response.

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12 Confidential interview with Hind, trans. Author. Cairo, January 2019.

Instead of putting the state in a position of power against less powerful actors of resistance, my contention here is that the different actors moving the pendulum do so in a number of ways and not always in the same direction. Put more explicitly, those deemed agents of resistance are *not* 'always already' pushing the pendulum in the direction of an opening, and vice versa. What moves the pendulum I argue, are discourses and practices along an axis that, on the one end incites the *forsaking of multiplicity*, and on the other end, inspires the recognition of difference and practice of solidarity.

## **Problematising the Linear Temporality of Revolution/Counterrevolution**

Within IR theory, there is a tendency to polarise revolution and counterrevolution as binary opposites, therefore viewing counterrevolution as merely a reaction to revolution. This view also implies that resistance is only a response to the coercive state apparatus, particularly in authoritarian contexts and ignores the complex power relations that clearly show that 'subjects become entangled in and performative of complex forms of governance' (Rossdale & Stierl, 2016: 158). Moreover, IR's dominant focus on the outcomes of revolution rather than its processual elements, automatically assigns failure to most, if not all, WANA revolutions that have taken place in the past decade, perhaps with the exception of Tunisia (Allinson, 2019). Crucially, this focus on outcomes carries an implicit understanding of revolutionary success along a western developmental axis, which reinforces a linear temporality of social change where moving towards building liberal democratic state institutions is the ultimate goal. If applied to the specific case of Egypt, the revolution failed the moment the July 2013 coup succeeded, which instated a direct military dictatorship. Egyptians are yet again 'lagging behind'.

For Bisley (2004), however, counterrevolution 'should be understood as part of a broader political process deriving from internationalised social conflict' (54). In this way, the intensification of the internationalisation of Egypt under a new post-Cold War regime of globalisation has necessitated an intensification in counterrevolutionary measures. Nicola Pratt makes the argument that 'cultural processes associated with globalisation [are] perceived to be threatening Egyptian national sovereignty' (2005: 80). However, this does not entail that the Egyptian state is only reactive to or external to the processes of globalisation. Paul Amar (2013) identifies

new modes of governance emanating from countries in the global South like Egypt and Brazil particularly at the end of the millennium. Amar explains how the South has generated its own governance model, what he coins the 'human-security regime'. In Egypt, this model established a new logic to security; by imagining and perpetuating new threats to the public and to culture, and positing the state as the protector of a fixed Egyptian identity, 'certain subjects were rendered responsible for urban insecurities associated with globalisation, while creating immunity for other powerful groups and processes' (68). Through mobilising new logics to sexuality within governance, 'homosexuals' bore the responsibility of the supposed moral and economic slump that Egypt was facing at the time. Preventing what policymakers termed 'the perversions of globalisation' (71) had become the foundation of nationalist rhetoric. This has profound implications on local capacities for resistance, as Pratt argues, maintaining and reproducing a particular postcolonial understanding of Egyptian national identity 'in the context of globalisation and ever-increasing transnational linkages acts to undermine attempts to promote civil and political freedoms' (Pratt, 2005: 69-70) and produces a political consensus, even among civil society actors, that 'excludes the possibility of fluidity and heterogeneity, thereby contributing to creating a climate in which civil and political freedoms may be *legitimately* sacrificed in the name of national unity and security' (70, my emphasis).

The figuration of normative citizenship has relied on centring an ideal masculine, impenetrable, normalised and heteronormative male body and has been central to the survival of the postcolonial Egyptian state. The counterrevolution has tapped into a much longer history of anti-colonialism and political homophobia and this has long stood against progressive change. Counterrevolution (through a technology of citizenship) uses gendered, sexualised, and classed bodies as proxy for the nation and (dis)locates threats to the nation in 'westernised', corrupted bodies. Thus, through tapping into colonial and neoliberal anxieties, counterrevolutionary politics work through many ways, most notably through figurations of deviance and perversion.

Here citizenship is always in a state of becoming, a continuously unfolding set of exclusionary practices and discourses. This is why discourses around westernised and perverse protesters, once mobilised, act as an immediate counterrevolutionary technology. Therefore, counterrevolution is not an event that suddenly appears and takes place after revolution, it is rather a process that fails or succeeds in its own right, its success can be

determined by the extent to which its discourses are taken up and practiced. In the next section I engage with the concept of Counterrevolutionary Discourse (CRD) in order to highlight a partial history of counterrevolution that goes back to the constitution of the Egyptian subject under colonialism.

## Counterrevolutionary Discourse

Anti-western sentiment and political homophobia are existential and foundational to the postcolonial Egyptian state, they are engrained into the logics of nationalism since before Independence. David Scott advances the notion that colonial political rationalities have been ‘inserted into *subject-constituting* social practices’ (1999: 28, emphasis in original). Scott continues:

With the formation of the political rationality of the *modern* colonial state, not only the rules of the political game but *the political game itself* changed – not only did the relation of forces between coloniser and colonised change, but so did *the terrain* of the political struggle itself [...] resistance [...] would have to articulate itself in relation to this comprehensively altered situation (29, emphasis in original).

To expand, colonial discourses have grossly misrepresented the colonised subject, and yet, their power lies in how they have been internalised and continue to inform subaltern identities, especially in their ability to interact with, and be detrimental to contemporary uprisings and revolutions. Colonialism has particularly constructed gendered and sexualised figures of perversion to justify intervention and exploitation. For example, the legacy of colonialism in the contemporary prosecution and persecution of same-sex love in Egypt and the wider region has been well studied (Massad, 2007; El-Rouayheb, 2009). Many scholars have also demonstrated how sex is a tool of statecraft, as Katherine Franke argues:

State efforts to eradicate the traces of empire and to resurrect an authentic postcolonial nation have produced sexual subjects that serve as a kind of existential residue and reminder of a demonised colonial past and absence [...] the management of sex becomes a tool of governance that produces individual unfreedom in the name of expanding national freedom or independence (2004: 68).

Franke argues that the Egyptian state has attempted to ‘secure the symbolic purity of Egyptian culture’ (80). These ‘sexual subjects’ that serve as a reminder

of a demonised colonial past, facilitate the reproduction of different meanings and figures in registers outside of sexuality, i.e. in the register of nationalism. But colonial legacies did not only result in internalising homophobia, they also play a central role in limiting resistance. In his work on CRD, Govand Azeez notes that colonial power ascribes the colonised subject with regimes of truth that 'impose permanent restrictions and techniques of surveillance on the processes of subjectivity and resistance' (2015, 119). It is in this vein that revolution in the WANA region is fixed at an orientalist understanding that limits its potential. For Azeez, counterrevolutionary discourse functions as a:

Psychological, socio-cultural discursive amalgam and a tautological performative creed that Middle Eastern revolutions, due to occult and solidified Eurocentric-Orientalist truths, are Islamic, impulsive, conservative, irrational, anarchic, violent, tribal or ethnic. At best, the revolutions are mere attempted failures at capitalist modernity and nationalism by a few hopeful westernized or Western-supported Orientals importing foreign philosophies, ideals and concepts (122).

These discourses inform the dominant western developmental temporality of revolution. Such enduring discourses are also what informs these anti-revolutionary honourable citizens, in their portrayal of the protesters in 2011 as westernised agents and dupes of empire. Egyptian resistance then becomes lost, silenced and misrepresented within this dominant discourse. But this is not to imply that the outcome of revolution is predetermined, or that counterrevolution is unchallenged. On the contrary, if we recognise that the discourse of counterrevolution is 'functional and generative; it does things, brings about durable effects, regulates practices and behaviour rather than merely misrepresents the state of affairs' (122), then disrupting these discourses might have more desired generative effects. Azeez's CRD connects with Scott's work that aims to destabilise 'the normalised *telos* of a developmental process' (Scott, 1999: 35) that which modernity is built on, in how it uncovers the impact of discursive lineages from the past on contemporary resistance.

Other recent work that highlights how counterrevolution functions at the level of the subject is carried out by Boon and Head (2018). They have studied trauma in the Egyptian context, before, during, and after the revolution and argue that 'trauma is inherently *political*' (262, emphasis in

original). Trauma is not just an individual experience but collective and constitutes a counterrevolutionary colonisation (Habermas, 2015 [1981]), where ‘counterrevolutionary actors destroyed [revolutionary] hopes through extreme physical violence, harsh social polarisation, repressive laws and exclusionary backhand deals [...] and closed public space and the potential for a transformed public sphere’ (Boon & Head, 2018: 264). While true that such repressive articulations of power have impeded the ‘potential for a transformed public sphere’, counterrevolutionary actors here are seen as separate from the revolutionaries (as binary opposites), neglecting the ways in which counterrevolutionary discourses and practices circulate within the revolution itself. As well, this emphasis on coercion falls into the same trap that views authoritarian power articulations as only coercive and leaves other forms of power unrecognised. This, I argue, obscures less visible forms of resistance to *other* forms of power. Comparably, El Hady, an Egyptian LGBTQ activist notes:

The state was very quick to adopt this as a counterrevolutionary tool. ‘This is what the revolution brought onto us,’ they would argue. January 25 almost immediately came into the narrative [...] the state was always talking about what happened at Tahrir Square in terms of sexual deviance, perversion, et cetera. This ‘sexuality’ dimension has always complimented the counterrevolutionary rhetoric that Sisi adopted.<sup>14</sup>

In the next section I will highlight the framework of figuration in order to show the ‘persistence of the past in the present’ (Ahmed, 2004: 187) and to expand on the workings of the non-coercive and indirect articulations of counterrevolution.

## **Figuration: The Forsaking of Multiplicity as Counterrevolutionary Technology**

With the aim of developing a Queer IR method, Cynthia Weber (2016) illustrates how ‘specific meanings of sexualities and sexual subjectivities are produced through specific – even repressive – discursive formulations

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14 El Hady, Ahmed. “The Crisis of LGBTQ Communities in Egypt: Questions for Ahmed El Hady”. The Century Foundation. May 2, 2019. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://tcf.org/content/report/crisis-lgbtq-communities-egypt-questions-ahmed-el-hady/>

that bring [...] sexual subjectivities like the “homosexual” into being’ (6-7). Through analysing how ‘sex is put into discourse’ (6) and the effects of such discourse (understood here as productive power), Weber shows how certain sexualised figures participate in the ‘construction of sexualised orders in international relations’ (22) and that sovereignty(ies) (understood as a construct) is called upon to construct identities that authorise and perpetuate domestic and international orders. Queer here is mobilised to indicate non-heterosexual subjectivities and practices, but also to denote ambivalence and instability of meaning and of figures. Queer methodology opens up the space to disrupt normalcy and otherness, it illuminates how dichotomies do not allow certain things to exist, queer ‘resists definition, uniformity and cohesion. It examines how normal is made specifically with regards to sexuality’ (Manning, 2009: 2). Queer figurations examine how lines of normalcy are drawn and provides an understanding of the production of normalcy, which collapses binaries such as ‘straight’/perverse and allows us to see them for what they are, a construct with productive consequences that might not be related to sexuality at all.

The main theoretical argument is somewhat tiered; on a broad level I argue that rather than conventional linear readings of revolution followed by counterrevolution, it is important to think of counterrevolution as a process that fails or succeeds in its own right, a process that can ‘pre-empt’ revolution (Bisley, 2004). Counterrevolutionary measures can and have been pre-emptive in order to sustain certain configurations of power and privilege certain international and social norms over others. Central to our discussion are the sexualised logics of the contemporary international order, especially what Momin Rahman calls ‘homocolonialism’ (2014), where queer rights are understood as a marker of progress and modernity and are ‘positioned at the apex of Western exceptionalism’ (279). Relatedly, some postcolonial states have attempted, with relative success, to normalise political (specifically Muslim) homophobia as a marker of authenticity and a type of resistance against the immorality of modernity and the dangers of globalisation. These different figurations of homosexuality point to how sovereignty and ‘sovereign man’—embodied in the figure of the Honourable Citizen in the Egyptian case—is produced against the backdrop of, among other things, homophobia and colonialism (Weber, 2016). In this vein, when for example, protesters in 2011 in Tahrir Square were accused of being dupes, foreign conspirators and un-Egyptian, they are immediately read as perverse and

inauthentic, marking revolution as deviant. Which brings us to the more specific argument and concern of this article: the mobilisation of tropes of westernisation within discourse to effect a counterrevolutionary closure.

As previously discussed, I read revolution and counterrevolution through the metaphor of the pendulum in order to highlight the continued production of counterrevolution through figures of deviance, and in order to disrupt such figures and swing the pendulum towards an opening. Counterrevolutionary closures, I argue, are enacted through forsaking multiplicity and heterogeneity. Here, I engage with the concept of multiplicity on two levels, on the one hand and despite the dominance of this discourse, Egyptians are not homogenous. ‘Human beings do not create unitary societies but a diversity of intersecting networks of social interaction’ (Mann, 2012: 16) that inform how we understand ourselves and others around us. These networks are always relational and grow larger with globalisation, yet, multiplicity is replaced by the overriding notion of social unity. This produces ‘an essentialised and homogenous national identity in contradistinction to the West [which] necessarily entail[s] the suppression of internal difference within the nation’ (Pratt, 2005: 77). This has made possible claims that homosexuality is a western import. Discourses of homogeneity solve a problem for Egyptian sovereignty, that which Foucault had identified, as the problem ‘to discover how a multiplicity of individuals and wills can be shaped into a single will or even a single body that is supposedly animated by a soul known as sovereignty’ (Foucault, 2003 [1975-6]: 29). However, my aim here is not just to show how certain *deviant* figures are regulated to impose a uniform conduct on the nation, it is also to understand the productive impact of such regulation on *normal* subjectivities and subjectification.

Subjectification (Foucault, 1982) aims at inciting subjects who enable and extend the governing of conduct. However, inciting new forms of subjectivity—deviant or normal—does not only facilitate ‘governing conduct [...] but also the governing of dissent [...] processes of subjectification [...] remain central to, and enable, the production of resisting subjects and their practice of dissent’ (Odysseos, 2011: 447). Put somewhat differently and bringing us to the second level of engagement with multiplicity, the construction of the western Other in Egypt, and the Egyptian (Arab/Muslim) Other in ‘western’ discourses fixes Egyptian identity in time. The notion that ‘we are not ready for democracy’ emanating from within and from without

Egypt, figures Egypt and Egyptians not as having different and valid cultural mores and experiences of being in the world, but instead implies that we are the *same* but *behind*. This western temporality so dominant in domestic as well as international discourses reinforces counterrevolutionary closures through the following three steps: 1) social transformation is fixed in one direction, the western developmental ethos and (liberal) democratisation, 2) but the West is evil and deviant and so, Egyptians should not aspire to be on the same developmental trajectory, 3) all the while Egyptians are simply not ready for democracy, but *do they really want to be?* will they ever be ready to accept a western ethos?

What makes these discourses of homogeneity and otherness tenable in Egypt? As formerly alluded to, one of the main discursive tools that turn the pendulum towards closure is the mobilisation of tropes of westernisation; the reproduction of these tropes takes place through the historical construction of *figures of deviance and others of respectability*. Figurations here broadly refer to 'performative images that can be inhabited' (Haraway, 1997: 11), they emerge out of 'discursive and material semiotic assemblages that condense diffuse imaginaries about the world into specific forms or images that bring specific worlds into being' (Weber, 2016: 29). What happens when these figures are (re)produced? What worlds do they bring into being? I use the concept of figuration as developed by Donna Haraway (1997) and its later employment by Queer IR scholar Cynthia Weber (2016). Figurations are 'condensed maps of contestable worlds' (Haraway, 1997: 11), but they 'have to be tropic; that is, they cannot be literal and self-identical' (Haraway, 1997: 11). Put somewhat differently, figuration is 'the employment of semiotic tropes that combine knowledges, practices, and power to (in)form how we map our worlds and understand the actual things in those worlds' (Leigh & Weber, 2018: 84). I am tracing the figuration of the homosexual as it is articulated in contemporary Egyptian discourse around westernisation and its evils, my contention is that such figure of *deviance* acts as an ordering device that serves a counterrevolutionary agenda and displaces resistances. How then do these figures 'organise, limit, and open up our thinking'? (Vint, 2008: 289) How do 'epistemic cultures' produce specific subjects?

## Figurations as World Configurations

Ordering devices produce shared meanings and values. Both the Male Homosexual and the Honourable Citizen act as ordering devices that

connect the personal and the subjective to the dynamics of revolution and counterrevolution. Weber identifies four key elements in Haraway’s figurations: ‘tropes, temporalities, performativities, and worldlings’ (Leigh & Weber, 2018: 84). For example, tropes that narrate the Egyptian homosexual as a western product imagines ‘authentic’ Egyptianness as grounded in hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality. This gendered and sexualised understanding of ‘Egyptian Sovereign Man’ and sovereignty is embodied in the (imagined) figure of the Honourable Citizen, a citizen who is patriotic, economically productive, and is staunchly willing to defend the nation against *others*. As for the second element, the prevalence of western developmental temporalities (i.e. Egyptians are *behind*) is a crucial component in reproducing Egyptian sovereignty as such. For example, calls for social justice are understood within the limits of liberal democracy. Again, we find the Egyptian subject stuck in time, lagging behind and should wait (indeterminately) before demanding change, since as Mubarak had repeatedly claimed, it is either him or chaos.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, figuration of westernisation through figures of deviance pits anti-regime resistance against sovereignty, delegitimising the revolution and its subjects. The repetition of acts, behaviours and rituals, what Butler (1999) refers to as performativity, allows figures to come to life, figures become inhabitable and embodied. In this way, ‘performing’ belonging to Egypt (Kuntsman, 2009) in the case of the Honourable Citizen, is in big part an act of denouncing homosexuality and reproducing the figure of the Male Homosexual as deviant and un-Egyptian. Performativities, however, are never identical and therefore have the potential to expose how hegemonic understandings of identity are obscure and fictitious.

These three sexualised (as well as gendered, classed, and racialised) elements, tropes, temporalities, and performativities, produce a sexualised worlding. Worlding refers to ‘the ways we imagine and try to represent the world through the figurations we have conjured up’ (Leigh & Weber, 2018: 85). Not only is the global world order sexualised in how it marks progress through measuring whether and how a state upholds the rights of its LGBTQ individuals, but more significantly and on a national level, this sexualised

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15 Salem, Suhaib. “If I resign today, there will be chaos:’ Mubarak”. The Globe and Mail. February 2, 2011. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/if-i-resign-today-there-will-be-chaos-mubarak/article564870/>

worlding emphasises the ‘inherent’ homophobia in the ‘post colony’ to signal sovereignty. This configuration of the world justifies contemporary international hierarchies and structures of national identity that obscure alterity and swings the pendulum towards closure.

In the next section I turn to the case study of the Queen Boat in order to ground the above theoretical and methodological engagements.

## **The Queen Boat**

On the 11<sup>th</sup> May 2001, the Queen Boat was raided by State Security police and the Vice Squad,<sup>16</sup> who arrested 35 Egyptian men aboard the moored boat. Another 17 arrests were made in the following days and added to the same case. Today, the Cairo 52 Trials, or the Queen Boat affair, continue to be one of the most highly publicised crackdowns on homosexuality in WANA (Awwad, 2010; Pratt, 2007). In November of the same year, and after months of torture in prison, the publicising of the defendants’ identities in newspapers, and subjecting their families to verbal abuse and stigmatisation, an emergency state security court found 21 men guilty of ‘habitual debauchery’,<sup>17</sup> while the two key defendants—alleged ringleaders of ‘a group of Satan worshippers’—were guilty of contempt of religion (Long, 2004; ‘In A Time of Torture’, 2004; Pratt, 2007).<sup>18</sup>

The Queen Boat was a floating discotheque on the Nile River in Egypt’s affluent Zamalek neighbourhood and is only a couple of kilometres away from the infamous Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo. Since the early 1990s, this entire space of downtown and its surrounding neighbourhoods had been clandestine cruising areas for queer men, Egyptian and foreign, to love, converse, and find friendships. In a detailed report by Human Rights

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16 Cairo’s Vice Squad or morality police was established in 1937 as part of Egypt’s police force with the aim of upholding public morals.

17 The Egyptian legal code itself does not criminalize homosexuality; courts use other laws to justify its criminalisation, such as Law 10/1961 on combating prostitution.

18 President Mubarak revoked the verdicts in May 2002, except for the two men convicted with contempt of religion. The case was referred to the state prosecution for review, and there was a re-trial at the Court of Misdemeanours in July of the same year. The men were found guilty of debauchery, but sentences were reduced by one year.

Watch on the violations that took place during the Queen Boat affair, it is mentioned that those who were seized were 'doctors and teachers, but also truck-drivers and electrical repairmen [...] the idea of a "gay" identity was widely disseminated, even among working-class men in towns outside Cairo' ('In a Time of Torture', 2004: 16). In a sense, these men were transcending—at times very intimately—class boundaries in a highly classed society. Tangentially, Tahrir Square has been narrated as a space that has also transcended class boundaries, 'as individuals together embraced new, simplified "anti-regime" identities, which became the only identities that mattered: no one cared about religion, regional affiliation, or even class' (Rashed and El Azzazi, 2011: 27) .

The Queen Boat is interesting in a number of ways: 1) the Cairo 52 were tried in a state security court, an exceptional court that predominantly works—with no due process guarantees—to punish political dissent and activism, whether secular or Islamist;<sup>19</sup> 2) the Queen Boat arrests not only punished homosexuality but also made it intelligible, for the first time, to the Egyptian public, the homosexual man is no longer a man who only lives in the West, *the homosexuals are among us now*, the Queen Boat *put* homosexuality into discourse. This is demonstrated in a recent article in an independent national newspaper recounting the incident: 'the homosexuals appeared in Egypt for the first time under President Hosni Mubarak, and particularly in 2001'.<sup>20</sup> This 'appearance' of homosexuality was certainly presented as a discovery of a deviant species that needed to be excised for sovereignty to function. Couched in a long-standing history of anti-Semitic tropes around homosexuality, the defendants were presented in the media as part of a Jewish conspiracy emanating from Israel to threaten Egyptian national security. Israel here has to be understood as part of the 'West'. Such anti-Semitic tropes are only intelligible because they have a long history. For example, during the 1990s, a famous Egyptian author, Mustafa Mahmoud, wrote about the Jewish invention of satanic worship rituals and their

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19 Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Repeal Emergency Law, Abolish Emergency State Security Court", August 27, 2003. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2003/08/27/egypt-repeal-emergency-law-abolish-emergency-state-security-court>

20 Al Masry Al Youm, "The 'Homosexuality Flag' flutters in the Cairo sky, Laila is to blame". Al Masry Al Youm. September 23, 2017, <https://lite.almasryalyoum.com/extra/163133/> (original in Arabic).

concomitant perverted sexual practices:

The Jews were those who invented the rituals of this worship [...] they are those who invented methods to approach the devil, by group-sex parties and urinating on the divine books, by shredding the gospels, by nakedness and obscenity, by practising *perversions*, by insulting god and vilifying the prophets, by mocking religious laws and slaughtering children as a sacrifice for the devil (Mahmoud in Nordbruch, 2007: 76 [emphasis added]).

More recently, Heba Kotb, a famous Egyptian sexologist and media personality, claimed that Jewish people ‘have had the highest rate of sexual perversions in history’.<sup>21</sup>

Reading about the Queen Boat has helped me understand one of my initial questions; *what does this [revolution] have to do with homosexuality?* Since the Queen Boat affair, homosexuality has been figured as a phenomenon that is purely imported from the West and the defendants as ‘un-Egyptian’ (Pratt, 2007). There are two immediate problems with this statement: the first is that it erases the rich history of same-sex love in the region and invalidates self-identified gay Egyptian men’s experiences. The second being this idea that although western culture is seen as an enemy to the tenets of Islam and Arab culture, it is still omnipresent, dominant, and powerful enough to deny any agency to ‘queer’ Arabs. In other words, [some] Egyptians are passive recipients of western culture taken at face value without interacting with it, without transforming it, and without rejecting it as only entirely western. Therefore, Egyptians are not ready for democracy, because if they were, there would be no risk of them falling into the ‘cult of homosexuality’ (El Menyawi, 2006:32).

Some countries in the West have criticised the Queen Boat arrests, for example, then French President Jacques Chirac raised concerns about the prosecution of gay men in Egypt. ‘The European Parliament [also] condemned the attacks on these men [...] and in the US, a group of Democratic members of Congress sent a letter to Congress asking to “withhold any support for a US-Egypt Free Trade Agreement” due to Egypt’s

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21 Gancman, Lee, “Egyptian therapist: Jews most sexually perverse ever”. Times of Israel, January 24, 2016. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/egyptian-therapist-jews-most-sexual-perverse-ever/#gs.fjuv4i>.

persecution of gays’ (El Menyawi, 2006: 41). This furthered the impression that homosexuality and gay rights are a western product. Mostafa Bakry, then Editor in Chief of Al-Osbou’ newspaper wrote, ‘after Iraq and Syria, Egypt would be next in line [...] I do not find it far-fetched to suppose that armies will one day be positioned, and warships proceed, armed with UN Security Council resolutions, against an Egypt that “persecutes homosexuals”’.<sup>22</sup> This, of course, generated enough proof that Egyptian sovereignty was at risk.

## Mobilising ‘the Homosexual’

Sexuality within IR is located in the realm of the ‘private’ and the ‘domestic’, which in the mainstream, acts as a distinct space from that of the ‘public sphere’ and especially outside of the political (Weber, 2016). Unsurprisingly, a number of Egyptian queers, as well as Arab scholars have advocated invisible and ‘private’ queer existence. In *Desiring Arabs* (2007) for example, Joseph Massad reads ‘Arab homosexuality’ through the Queen Boat affair. Massad insists:

Western accounts since the nineteenth century have invested sexual subjectivities and practices with cultural and civilizational value along an evolutionary schema within larger colonial and imperialist contexts that constitute the West as advanced and modernised and the East as backward and undeveloped (472).

Colonial discourse has split native subjects into good versus bad, as either obedient ‘authorised agents of mimicry’, or bad, dangerous and insubordinate (Rao, 2014: 201). Massad illustrates how the re-telling of ‘pre-colonial’ and ‘colonial’ histories subjected Arab past to the scrutiny of western morality and argues that globalisation had resulted in producing ‘homosexuals where they don’t exist’ (Massad, 2007: 363), and that the universalisation of gay rights has imposed colonial constructions of identity. He claims that the discourses that produce these ‘missionary-like’ human rights activities in the global South, and the ‘organisations that represent them constitute the Gay International’ (361). Massad therefore concludes that the Egyptian police were not repressing same-sex practices when they raided the Queen Boat, but rather ‘the socio-political identification of these practices with the western identity of gayness and the publicness of that these gay-identified

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22 Sami, A., “By our own hands,” trans. Author. Al-Ahram, April 24, 2002.

men seek' (183).

This monolithic reading of the 'gay' and/or 'activist' ignores the complex and relational circumstances of the emergence of these figures elsewhere. His argument that LGBTQ+ activism is just another form of cultural imperialism, and a method to obliterate 'authentic' sexual subjectivities encourages the prosecution and persecution of homosexuality. He also fails to address the role of the Egyptian state and civil society in the reconfiguration of the nexus between sexual identity and imperialism. If we consider Southern states and citizens as active actors in our analysis, we can observe the varying ways countries of the global South are capable of traversing globalisation in their local contexts (Amar: 2013). Implying that the state only reacts to an imported identity, or that 'Arab gay subjects' are passive recipients of western hegemonic agendas, as Massad does, is inaccurate, reductive, and reinforces imperialistic power dynamics. The Cairo 52 trials represent a far more complicated governing technology, the events of the Queen Boat mark the first official acknowledgment of the Egyptian male homosexual, he was 'discovered', stylised, prosecuted, and fixed as un-Egyptian, and mobilised to this day as part of a counterrevolutionary technology.

## **Moral Panics: The Making of 'the Homosexual'**

*Governing through panic* in Egypt has constituted a constant evasion and fear of responsibility, any internal error or flaw is displaced onto the *Other*, all crises—real or imagined—are almost always read through a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', which results in civilians policing and surveilling the conduct of one another. Sean Hier (2016) theorises moral panic as a technique of government within an everyday regime of moral regulation. Hier specifies and locates moral panics outside of the realm of exception and characterises them as 'volatile expressions of long-term moral regulation processes' (417). Moral regulation is a project of 'normalizing, rendering natural, taken for granted, in a word "obvious", what are in fact ontological and epistemological premises of a particular and historical form of social order [...] state forms are always animated and legitimated by a particular moral ethos' (Corrigan & Sayer, 1985: 4). More explicitly, moral regulation entails long-term processes that call upon individuals to regulate their conduct based on a set of established (but changing) moral codes, while moral panic discourses call upon the same individuals to control the actions of others. This is specifically important in the context of Foucauldian ethical self-

formation, where Foucault recognises that identity, or defining oneself, arises from how the individual is socially situated (Foucault, 2000). In this view, one’s agency is enacted in everyday practices but within social limitations delineated by moral regulation. Ethical self-formation ‘concerns practices, techniques, and discourses of the government of the self by the self, by means of which individuals seek to know, decipher, and act on themselves’ (Dean, 1994: 156).

The intersection between Foucault’s work and moral panics literature highlights how moral regulation projects stimulate modes of self-governance that involve acting upon the conduct of one’s self and others and problematizes forms of identity (and figurations) that are taken for granted. This theoretical lens allows us to do two things. First, it locates the construction and reproduction of the normative Egyptian subject—the Honourable Citizen—within a long-term process of moral regulation, which involves techniques of responsabilisation and governing one’s own conduct. Second, it facilitates the study of the emergence and governing of figures of deviance, such as the male homosexual, which always appears in episodes of moral panic over religiosity and cultural authenticity and constructed as a figure to be acted upon. The exemplarity of the normative Egyptian citizen, as opposed to the deplorable conduct of the male homosexual, not only provides insight into how and why certain subjects align themselves with the counterrevolution, but also elucidates the production of political homophobia, not as native to Egypt but as a process that involves *orientating* work (Ahmed, 2006). The tropes associated with the figure of the Male Homosexual act as an example of how *not* to be Egyptian, essentially reproducing the Honourable Citizen. The presence of this figure in space (i.e. in the West) has significant temporal implications, as it acts to fix Egyptians in a past that only moves linearly along a western developmental axis. The performativity of nationalism and citizenship, through the figure of the Honourable Citizen, repeatedly forsakes multiplicity and produces a ‘political consensus that excludes the possibility of fluidity and heterogeneity’ (Pratt, 2005: 70). In the end, we are left with a world that has a very specific and narrow form in relation to national identity, freedom, and resistance.

Moral regulation processes construct specific identities and nationalisms that are reinforced by episodes of moral panics, such as the moral panics over the Queen Boat affair. This political strategy constitutes figurations that stir

already existing anxieties and reproduce the normative Egyptian subject and their conduct, not only through inciting action upon certain bodies, but also through orienting one's own conduct if one is to be an 'honourable' Egyptian citizen.

## **Implications for Resistance: Counter-Conduct as an Opening**

When you start thinking of gender and sexual orientation as things that are not stable, the world collapses and you see things as constructed, you realise that there is a new world that needs a commitment from you, a commitment that you can simply live without. Progressive people and revolutionaries claim acceptance, but this is different, this needs us to accept that the world is far more complex. This is sometimes the case with feminism; when you talk about unpaid affective and domestic labour as a form of discrimination, you destroy everything. This is not love, love is something else, love is a choice. Queerness is about critiquing our grandparents, our generation, love, not to believe in love the conventional way ... it is a very personal thing.<sup>23</sup>

The starting quote of this section is by Laila, a feminist activist and human rights defender. In 2011, Laila decided to discontinue her postgraduate education abroad and travel back to join the revolution in Egypt. While reflecting on the trajectory of the revolution, Laila pointed out the need for a queer politics in order to 'move the revolution forward'. Laila understood that queer politics is a politics of not just refusal, but of conducting one's self otherwise and she identified opportunities for a new kind of self-formation. Echoing Foucault's counter-conduct approach, a queer politics for Laila is about emphasising the importance of the personal to the political. This is particularly significant in the current moment where visible resistance has disappeared under Sisi. I want to suggest that this absence of visible resistance does not mean an absence of *all* resistance.

The dominant claim that there is such a thing as real resistance, that:

'Real resistance' is organised, principled, and has revolutionary implications [...] overlook entirely the vital role of power relations in

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23 Confidential interview with Laila, trans. Author. Cairo, January 2019.

constraining forms of resistance [...] if all we heed and study is 'real resistance' then all that is being measured may be the level of repression that structures the available options (Scott 1989: 51).

Hence, I am looking at resistance elsewhere, in a different register. There is a 'tight interrelationship between power and freedom' that Foucault has captured through governmentality, which 'regulate[s] the "conduct of conduct"' (Death, 2010: 238). The conduct of conduct shapes and guides possible actions and norms 'by a diverse range of actors and institutions' (238). Resistance is also 'bound up within networks of governmentality' (239) as it operates within the same networks as power. In this reading, resistance is not a complete rejection of being governed, rather, it is 'how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them' (Foucault, 2007: 44), which Foucault identifies as counter-conduct. Counter-conduct 'politicises the everyday and locates politics "everywhere"' (Demetriou, 2016: 218) not just at moments of mass upheaval, and it allows for one to re-imagine themselves and their relationship to others.

Counter-conduct is thus a "positive" and "productive" form of resistance, and not a "negative" or "reactive" one, as it uses the same means of governing to forge a different form of conduction with different objectives' (Asl, 2018: 198). Similar to how the figure of the deviant male homosexual generates and reproduces the figure of the normal (Honourable) Egyptian citizen, counter-conduct not only disrupts the assigning of normalcy onto certain subjects and not others, it also redefines and generates *another* normal. The story of revolution is incomplete without a recognition and exploration of the ways this normalcy has been disrupted, and how this disruption contributes to changing power relations that allow for a re-constitution of the self.

The Egyptian revolution disrupted the normal and opened up opportunities and possibilities for resistance that were once thought to be impossible. My contention is that 'resistance encourages resistance' (Baaz, Lilja, and Vinthagen, 2017), and that 'Individuals' [frustrated] experiences of organised and public forms of resistance might inspire themselves or others to develop new resistance forms of identities or everyday behaviour' (29). Contemporary counter-conduct in Egypt 'involves practices of the self working to challenge, redirect or modify techniques of power that

govern our conduct, without the requirement of intentional rejection or explicitly political expression' (Odysseos, 2016: 189). The figure of the male homosexual is not only simply an instrument of the Egyptian state, gay men in Egypt embody a counter-conduct in relation to how they are figured. The kind of resistance here is not necessarily intentional but embodied, as one interviewee tells me:

I was never political and I never participated in any protests but after the revolution I was surrounded by many queers and political activists, my circle of friends started changing drastically and I found out that there are [human rights] organisations that defend us ... why didn't I know about this from before! I had been out to my mother and only a couple of friends, I remember when I first told her she said not to tell anyone else and that once I graduate, I should find work abroad, in Canada or something. But now, I am staying, and I am not afraid, I have a right to be here.<sup>24</sup>

My interviewee's surprise that there are human rights organisations that defend queer rights is not because these organisations started doing so only after the revolution, it is rather due to human rights activists' increased appearances in the media between 2011 and 2015. As one interlocuter explains, 'human rights organisations gained more reputation and credibility after the revolution and there was faith that these organisations are working for the people'.<sup>25</sup> I want to encourage us to read human rights work in Egypt as a space that provides the opportunity and the language to challenge the power that conducts and to reflect on what kind of potential human rights opens up for counter-conduct (Odysseos, 2016: 182). This is premised on the claim that 'ethical discourses and claiming practices of human rights invoke new forms of self-formation that interrupt [...] modes of subjectification' (182).

## **Human Rights: A New Generation**

In 2001, Hafez Abu Saada, the secretary general of the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR) 'commented in the Egyptian press that he won't defend the 52 men arrested on the Queen Boat because he 'doesn't like the

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24 Confidential interview with Sami, trans. Author. Cairo, January 2019.

25 Confidential interview with Eissa, trans. Author. Cairo, January 2019.

subject of homosexuality’.<sup>26</sup> Although a very sensitive task, to defend those arrested on board the Queen Boat, a number of younger human rights defenders (HRDs) distanced themselves from EOHR, started working on the case of these men, and established their new human rights organisations. Hossam Bahgat, a prominent figure within the human rights community, both nationally and internationally, founded the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) in 2002 after being dismayed at the lack of support that the 52 men so desperately needed from already existing human rights organisations. For Bahgat, ‘the Queen Boat trial was indicative of a systemic failure to protect the rights of the individual in Egyptian society’.<sup>27</sup> The Queen Boat ushered in a new generation of human rights defenders that fundamentally challenged the binary of East/West; however, engaging with such a case has meant that human rights was now solidly attached to perversion:

Movements for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people [... are] the most vulnerable edge of the human rights movement [...] they are easy to defame and discredit. But the attack on them also opens space for attacking human rights principles themselves—as not universal but ‘foreign’, as not protectors of diversity but threats to sovereignty, and as carriers of cultural perversion (Long, 2005: 71).

I would like to propose a reading of this challenge of the East/West binary as an important opening that disrupted normative meaning-making and conduct, and eventually allowed for a different imagination of the future, more inclusive and multiple.

When Hussein Derar, deputy-assistant foreign minister for human rights at the time, emphasised this East/West binary and said that ‘they have their western culture and we have our Islamic culture’,<sup>28</sup> Hossam Bahgat

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26 Hossam Bahgat, “Explaining Egypt’s Targeting of Gays,” Middle East Report Online, 2001. Accessed, March 23, 2020. <https://merip.org/2001/07/explaining-egypts-targeting-of-gays/>

27 Soussi, Alasdair. Interview with Egyptian human rights activist. *The New Internationalist*, July 1, 2009.

28 N.a. “Egyptian rights group ‘cannot protect gays.’” BBC News, February 11, 2002. Accessed March 20, 2020. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/1813926.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1813926.stm)

said, ‘people have the right to reject homosexuality, but we believe that any moral conviction shouldn’t be the basis and shouldn’t take the form of discrimination or persecution’.<sup>29</sup> In court, lawyers’ defence mostly emphasised procedural errors in the arrest of the defendants, falsified evidence, and the torture of the detainees as basis to dismiss the case:

We couldn’t plan our defence strategy on the basis of personal freedom, our priority was to free these men, this is why we called out procedural issues and emphasised the unlawful nature of the arrests. It simply wasn’t the moment to defend sexuality politics as such, but our strategy still confronted the discourse of ‘we don’t have homosexuals here’ and challenged the state’s attempts to nationalise human rights in Egypt’.<sup>30</sup>

The enduring struggle of the Queen Boat case and the multiple crackdowns that have come after it, informs the kind of resistance human rights work carries out today. Critical scholarship has pointed out that human rights has governing and normalising effects (Brown, 1995; Cruikshank, 1999); their work has focused on ‘how rights create new categories of, and engender, rights-holder subjectivities that enable the furtherance of (neo)liberal rationalities and mentalities of directing and governing socio-economic and political life [...] and structures their political possibilities for resistance’ (Odysseos, 2016: 180). However, Louiza Odysseos cautions us from failing ‘to see beyond the governing effects of rights’ (181) and their destabilising effects on conduct as they render ‘the governing of our conduct unstable and reversible’ (181) and illuminate important sites for resistance. Moreover, human rights offers (marginalised) subjects “authoritative” and internationally coherent accounts of themselves as rights-holders of equal moral worth’ (192). As one of my interlocutors pointed out:

I had this impression that all those who work in the human rights field are elitists. I felt that they were advocating liberal rights that were not representative of our real struggles. Bit by bit, I started to see things differently. I understood that even if the overall human rights agenda is not radical enough, it is something that compliments grassroots movements. It provides us with recognition, it reports on violations, and it provides the moral and legal support needed. In any case, now

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29 Ibid.

30 Confidential interview with Amgad, trans. Author. Cairo, January 2019.

there is no space for mass mobilisation and the human rights field and community are the most important thing available.<sup>31</sup>

Disrupting state discourses about ‘truth’ and identity has been an important strategy for the human rights community in Egypt. Transforming oneself through these acts of disruption is key. One interviewee emphasised this:

This is a very important struggle; I am always afraid things will get lost and forgotten. I think there is an important first step, to document events to make sure that in 10 or 15 years we can work on the events of the past. You give the next generation the main keys, you have to show them that there were people before them who did the homework and complicated the struggle. It’s true, things are complicated! This is a struggle for the future. There is no one truth but there are personal narratives and there are multiple persons! For me, the revolution was about thinking differently, it was very influential on a personal level not just on a political level. For me, my work on human rights is about the people not the state. It is about showing them, everyone, how things can be different.<sup>32</sup>

The potential of human rights for counter-conduct lies in how it brings about a whole new way of relating and belonging to Egypt and to the world. It transgresses this narrative of homogeneity, it writes counter-histories, and opens up spaces for recognising multiplicity. The conducting of Egyptians as *lacking* or lagging behind involved specific discursive and material reforms that need to be addressed. Counter-conduct is useful precisely because it ‘is not so much a refusal but a critically informed demand to co-govern, to redirect or change processes and objectives of governing’ (Odysseos, 2016: 186), it demands and insists on shared governance. The real threat and potential of human rights in Egypt is that it disrupts the discourse on our unreadiness for democracy. The real danger for the Egyptian state is that practices of local human rights have proven that Egyptians can be the subjects of human rights and not only the objects of Western human rights intervention. It is not the people; it is the state that is *not* ready for democracy.

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31 Confidential interview with Samar, trans. Author. Cairo, January 2019.

32 Confidential interview with Amr, trans. Author. Cairo, January 2019.

## Conclusion

During the two decades preceding the 2011 Egyptian revolution, notions of homogeneity, unity, and sameness of the 'Egyptian character' have underscored how Egyptians—in the mainstream—have been understood, and how they understand themselves in the world. In this context, the revolution came about and brought with it new potential understandings of what Egypt and Egyptians are: a multitude of different things and people who are capable of resistance. While coercion and violence have been extensively employed in the counterrevolutionary process (torture, imprisonment, killings, rape, etc.), a set of rationales and tactics for governing conduct and discouraging resistance have also been employed more tactfully and less visibly. I have argued that there is a need to look into that power that conducts and the resistances to it. Through figurations, I have located one example of such conducting power, the historical mobilisation of tropes of westernisation as deviant, in parallel with the mobilisation of resistance as an attempt to be like the West. Both figures under discussion, the Male Homosexual and the Honourable Citizen, are part of a 'technology of citizenship' (Cruikshank, 1999) that reproduces subjects of government who are politically illiterate and 'not ready for democracy', while the state is figured as the only source of power and moral authority. The infantilization of the Egyptian citizenry as such, paves the way for claims not only about the inability of Egyptians to demand justice and freedom because they do not have a sense of what that really means, but also fortifies the notion that those who are actively protesting on the streets are either a) agents of foreign powers (particularly the West) with a clear intent to destroy the social fabric and spread perversion, or b) unaware Egyptians with good intentions who have been tricked; in a sense, they are easily *penetrable*.

While there have been multiple counterrevolutionary discourses, including that of the 'Islamist threat', this paper has focused on the discourse of the evils of westernisation as counterrevolutionary with the hope to show that homophobia does not have a 'natural' presence in Egypt, to contest essentialist voices that view homophobia as an innate subaltern characteristic and strongly assert that it is a politically constructed technology of government. Through counter-conduct analytics, I have shown that the local human rights community in Egypt is capable of recognising the power that conducts and acts to change it. Any agenda that wants to effect change must develop narratives and practices that encourage contestations of the

future and recognises the systematic forsaking of multiplicity, as well as the fluidity of resistance. Only through accepting different modes of being and questioning (hetero)normative hierarchies, will we be able to effect change and realise this revolutionary potential, and keep the pendulum moving towards openings for as long as possible.

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## The UMass Amherst Resistance Studies Initiative

The Initiative seeks to Develop "resistance studies," and support the efforts of activists worldwide that are employing direct action, civil disobedience, everyday resistance, digital activism, mass protest, and other kinds of nonviolent resistance. Its essential goals are to help create a more humane world by fostering social change and human liberation in its fullest sense. It will study how resistance can undermine repression, injustices, and domination of all kinds, and how it can nurture such creative responses as constructive work, alternative communities, and oppositional ways of thinking.

The Initiative hopes to do all of this by:

- Working closely with the other members of the international Resistance Studies Network to encourage worldwide scholarly, pro-liberation collaboration
- Maintaining strong ties with activists worldwide, documenting their activities, and providing critical analysis upon request
- Offering academic courses in Resistance Studies at UMass Amherst
- Offering resistance-themed workshops, lecture series, and symposiums
- Publishing the international, interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed **Journal of Resistance Studies**.

# To Strike Together: Conflict Rituals and the Situational Power of Nonviolence

Isabel Bramsen, *Lund University*

## *Abstract*

*What is conflictual interaction? How does it differ from domination? And how can domination and violence be disrupted by nonviolent direct action? In this article, I will theorize conflictual and violent interaction as interaction rituals and discuss how nonviolence can disrupt these rituals or change the dynamics hereof. Hence, I show how resistance studies and activists can benefit from understanding the situational power of nonviolence. Having described Randall Collins' notion of interaction rituals, I proceed to theorize domination and conflict interaction rituals, the ingredients and outcomes hereof, and how conflict rituals can vary in intensity. I challenge Collins' argument that violence and conflict go against the tendency to become entrained with others and argue that violence and conflict actually characterize a new pattern of interaction in which the parties mirror each other's actions. Subsequently, using cases from the Arab Spring as examples, I argue that violence can be a form of both conflictual and domination interaction rituals. Finally, I show how nonviolence can be used to alter the rhythm of interaction in domination rituals and potentially reinforce a new rhythm both through actions of fraternization and more direct acts of resistance and noncompliance. In so doing, I engage with Evelin Lindner's concept of Mandela-like qualities as the ability to resist domination and analyze situations from Bahrain, where activists have disrupted domination rituals nonviolently. I conclude by emphasizing the added value of the micro-sociological perspective for challenging structural and direct violence manifested in particular situations.*

## **Introduction**

When immersed in conflict, we rarely realize that we are in fact in conflict; what we often realize is that 'the other' is being aggressive, unjust or simply evil. We are seldom aware of the reciprocal nature of conflict—that our own actions affect 'the other' in a cycle of counter moves. One of the great

contributions of peace and conflict research is exactly to reveal this reciprocity and the interactional dynamics of conflict. Therefore, there is good reason to investigate conflictual interaction. Likewise, domination is a form of interaction implying the actions or inaction of at least two parties: the basic insight in nonviolent theory is, that power, suppression and domination imply subordination and consent by the dominated (Sharp 1973; Vinthagen 2015). Nonviolence, then, is the rejection of this consent; the disruption of domination rituals (Bramsen 2018b).

In this article, I conceptualize conflictual interaction and domination as different forms of interaction rituals and explore how nonviolence can disrupt them—or change the dynamics hereof. Here, I focus on the very micro-situations of conflict as opposed to the larger patterns of action–reaction or domination. I thus theorize and exemplify the *situational power of nonviolence*—how domination and violence may be disrupted in situ—that may be of relevance for activists as well as for resistance studies and beyond.

I take the notion of interaction rituals from Randall Collins, who has theorized how gatherings of people who focus on the same object or event, with a barrier to outsiders, shared emotion and rhythmic entrainment and produce emotional energy (EE) and solidarity. Collins argues that conflict is a broken ritual or an asymmetric constellation of one party gaining and the other losing energy. For Collins, conflicts go against the human tendency to become entrained in each other's rhythms. On the contrary, I argue that conflict interaction can be meaningfully described as interaction rituals similar to what Collins theorizes in terms of mutual focus of attention and entrainment. Instead of positive emotional energy and solidarity, however, it can also generate negative emotional energy and tension. I argue that *conflictual interaction rituals* imply some form of attack against the other, which is responded to with a similar counterattack mirroring the first act (although often (perceived as) disproportionate). *Domination interaction rituals*, on the other hand, do not imply retaliation but rather submission. Domination is characterized by one party being the oppressor and another adopting a subject position as 'victim.' In other words, I argue that conflict and domination rituals involve pairs of subject positions with oppressors and victims (domination rituals) or two 'counter strikers' (conflict rituals).<sup>1</sup>

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1 Even in multi-party conflicts, specific domination rituals and conflict rituals like a demonstration will have this binary structure of repressors and victims or 'counter strikers.'

Domination implies submission, whereas conflict in the Luhmanian sense is a 'no' that follows another 'no' (Luhmann 1995; Stetter 2014; Wæver and Bramsen 2019). Violence, then, can be a *form* of both conflictual and domination interaction ritual, as the counteract (or lack hereof) determines the nature of the interaction or subject relationship. Nonviolence too can be a response; that is, a 'no' to domination. Here, I theorize nonviolence as a rejection of domination and potential disruption of domination rituals. A counterstrike—but a nonviolent one. By responding to domination with neither submission nor retaliation, nonviolence can be used to change the rhythm of interaction in domination rituals and potentially reinforce a new rhythm. The argument is exemplified throughout with concrete situations of violence and nonviolence. Here, I draw upon a video dataset of 59 videos from the Arab Spring conflicts in Bahrain, Tunisia and Syria<sup>2</sup> and 52 interviews<sup>3</sup> with activists and journalists from the respective countries. The videos gives a direct insight in the dynamics of concrete situations in the streets of the three Arab Uprisings.

Several scholars have investigated the causes and conditions of the Arab uprisings (Haas & Lesch 2012; Hansen & Jensen 2012; Lynch 2013; Sadiki 2015). In this article, I propose a micro-sociological framework rather than focusing on structural route causes. The intension is not to substitute but rather to supplement and substantiate existing, structural accounts of the Arab Uprising, to add how even micro-situations in the streets can be crucial for the dynamics and development of the respective practices of resistance.

The article proceeds as follows. Having described Collins' notion of interaction rituals in further detail, I proceed to theorize conflict as an interaction ritual, the ingredients and outcomes hereof, as well as how it can be more or less intense. Secondly, I use examples from the Arab Spring to

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2 The video dataset of nonviolent and violent interaction are available online. Videos of violence (V): <http://violence.ogtal.dk/>. Videos of nonviolence (NV): <https://violence.ogtal.dk/index2.php>. For more information on how the datasets was compiled, please see Bramsen (2018b).

3 The interviews were conducted at visits to Bahrain, Tunisia and the Turkish border to Syria (Gaziantep) with activists, opposition politicians and journalists. In the interviews, I among other things asked informants about situations where violence was prevented or where they were able to resist or counter direct domination in the streets. The interviews were conducted in English, French or Arabic (with the help of a translator).

argue and exemplify how violence can assume the form of both conflictual and domination interaction rituals. Thirdly, I argue that violence and conflict are difficult, not because they go against ordinary entrainment, as Collins would argue, but rather because they imply uncomfortable emotions and because it is difficult to shift between types of interaction rituals. Once violence or conflict gains momentum, they might be equally difficult to stop. Finally, I discuss how nonviolent direct action can disturb or disrupt violence and domination, leaving e.g. security forces in positions where they are uncertain as to how to react, as described by some of the activists interviewed for this study.

## Interaction rituals

To unfold the potential of micro-sociology to contribute to resistance studies, I will firstly unpack and develop the American Sociologist, Randall Collins' micro-sociological theory. The Basic unit in the theory is *interaction rituals*. The concept derives from Durkheim's theorizations of religious gatherings and Goffmann's dramaturgical theory of interaction rituals. Collins conceptualizes interaction rituals in terms of ingredients and outcomes. As illustrated in the figure below, ingredients are: group assembly (with bodily co-presence), barriers to outsiders, mutual focus on attention on a common action or event, and shared mood. The two latter reinforce each other through rhythmic entrainment, such as conversational turn-taking. If these ritual ingredients come together, they can produce certain ritual outcomes, namely group solidarity, emotional energy, symbols of social relationship and standards of morality.

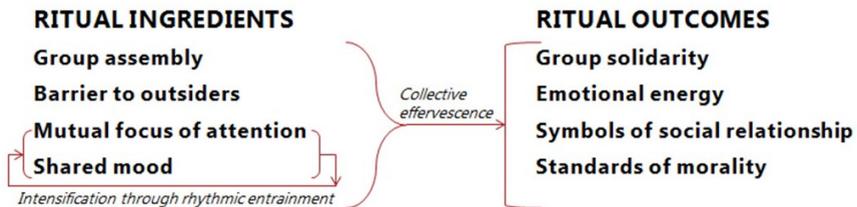


Figure 1. Collins' model of interaction rituals

Interaction rituals charge individuals and give them the energy to act and take decisions. Emotional energy amounts to 'feelings of strength, confidence, and enthusiasm' (Collins 2008, 19), and Collins argues that individuals are

driven to maximize and obtain this emotional energy. If interaction rituals are unsuccessful, that is, if participants for example have their attention anywhere else than the common event or activity, it will fail to produce solidarity, and participants will instead lose emotional energy and ‘come away feeling depressed, lacking in initiative, and alienated from the group’s concerns’ (Collins 2008, 20). As I will describe in the following, I will add a third possibility: conflict interaction rituals that energize individuals with what Boyns and Leury (2015) have coined *negative emotional energy*.

## **Conflict and domination interaction rituals**

Collins has several different conceptions of conflict rituals. In his theorization of rhythmic entrainment, he describes how conflicts obstruct this rhythm when parties interrupt each other and/or the pauses between utterances indicate a strained relationship (2004, 71). In another section in his book, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004), under the heading ‘Conflict and contest rituals,’ Collins (2004, 121–4) lumps together conflict rituals and contest rituals. He understands conflict as a situation of asymmetric distribution of emotional energy:

Consider the micro-mechanisms of an interaction ritual: the common focus of attention, the rhythmic coordination that intensifies emotions. Persons who control the situation can frustrate this process. They can break the micro-rhythm, by not responding to the signals the other person is putting out. (Collins 2004, 121)

Collins analyses a picture of two runners from the Olympics, where the runner-up has her eyes focused on the winner, whereas the winning runner is focused on the goal. This imagery exemplifies situations where one party gains emotional energy whereas the other loses it. Likewise, regarding violence, Collins writes that ‘violence is an extremely asymmetrical interaction ritual, with strong common focus of attention by both sides, attackers and victim, and tight rhythmic coordination; but the rhythm is set entirely by one side, and the other side is forced to accede to it’ (2004, 111–38).

While violence can certainly be used to dominate a helpless victim, this is not always so; neither conflict rituals nor violence rituals are always asymmetrical. Rather, I would characterize situations where one person/group gains emotional energy and another person/group loses emotional

energy as *domination interaction*.<sup>4</sup> Domination interaction implies that one party dominates another in words, actions and/or body posture<sup>5</sup>. A video with several scenarios from checkpoints in Palestine exemplifies such domination interaction. In one situation (Video 61), a soldier for example speaks to the Palestinian pedestrian in a loud and direct voice, asking him where he has come from and corrects his pronunciation of Tekoa. The soldier also asks where he is going and when the pedestrian does not answer right away, the soldier asks louder and more forceful. The pedestrian is clearly de-energized and humiliated as he looks down, mumbles and maintains a succumbing body posture.

The situation also shows how even abstract phenomena like structural violence, that analysts argues should be addressed at a structural level, manifest in concrete situations. This opens up the space for resistance, as I will come back to, where domination can be challenged at the level of interaction.

Conflict interaction, on the other hand, implies that both parties attempt to dominate each other or resist. They can take the form of a failed domination ritual where one party attempts to dominate the other in one way or another and the other party resists the role of the follower. In a Luhmanian conception, conflict is a 'no that follows another no' (1995); that is, it is not an asymmetrical situation where one party gains and the other loses energy but rather a rejection of an attempted power manifestation (Wæver and Bramsen 2019). In Collins' words, when it comes to blustering, conflicts can be seen as attempts at dominating the 'attention space' (2001, 38). People attempt to dominate others/the situation in all kinds of ways, ranging from subtle criticism to direct manipulation, orders or violence. In the subtle end, Collins describes middle class situations where a party indirectly criticizes the other 'while keeping up a nonverbal aura of politeness and friendliness (...) the aggressive game can be two-sided, when the victim of a putdown

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4 Collins (2004, 112) has a similar concept of power rituals where an order-giver dominates an order-taker. I use the concept of domination rituals as a broader concept describing all rituals where one party gains and the other party loses emotional energy (i.e. also the situations that Collins describes as contest or conflict rituals).

5 Elsewhere, I have developed how to understand authoritarian regimes in terms of interaction rituals energizing the regime and de-energizing the general population (Bramsen 2018c).

manages to mount a clever and opposite comeback' (2004, 340). Goffmann describes such polite, indirect 'aggressive use of face-work' and argues that the parties attempt to score 'as many points against one's adversary and making as many gains as possible for oneself' ([1967]2005, 24), which, in Collins' terminology, would be translated into gaining emotional energy.

A situation is only a conflict if one party counters the other party's act or utterance (Wæver and Bramsen 2019). If the 'victim' of domination is either submissive, ignores the attack or instead answers with e.g. a compliment, the situation is not one of conflict. Conflict originally comes from Latin, *con-fligere*, to strike together, which thus implies the Luhmanian no–no construction.

Collins' conception of conflict as an asymmetrical ritual, where one party dominates the other, does not imply a mechanism of escalation. If conflicts are situations in which one party already dominates the other, the situation is not a process of escalation. Moreover, Collins' (2001) point that conflicts are won when one party sufficiently dominates the other is incompatible with seeing conflict as a situation where one party already dominates. Seeing conflicts as situations where parties resist the domination or utterance of the other implies both escalation (continuous no's from both sides) and the logical termination hereof, if one party establishes all-out domination.<sup>6</sup> Thus, theorizing conflict as a reciprocal interaction ritual is arguably more consistent with Collins' theory.

To argue that conflict rituals are different than domination rituals may upset many conflict theorists who insist on labeling inequality, structural violence and oppressive relations as 'latent conflict' (e.g. Galtung 1996). True, these are 'latent conflict' in the sense that every oppressive act or domination ritual potentially could turn into a conflict due to the ever-present, immanent possibility that domination is followed by a 'no.' However, the fact that oppression, inequality and suppression are normatively 'bad' does not in and of itself qualify it as 'conflict.'

A picture from Collins' (2008: 365) book on violence (Originally from Reuters, October 2000, Jerusalem). He uses the picture to exemplify a situation where intense conflict does not lead to violence. In the picture, the two men, an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian civilian, are clearly

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<sup>6</sup> If the parties in a conflict do not try to overpower each other but simply reject each other's 'no's' a situation can also end in a standoff or stalemate.

expressing immense anger and are in fact mirroring each other in terms of facial expressions, shouting and body posture. Collins theorizes that such a situation would not turn violent because neither party dominates the other, and both men become tired or bored after a while and disengage. Unlike the running contest that Collins used to exemplify conflict, this situation resembles an actual conflict situation where both parties stand up to each other's actions.

Whereas Collins theorizes conflict as a broken interaction ritual or status interaction ritual where only one party is energized, I would argue that conflict is a social interaction ritual resembling successful solidarity interaction. In conflict rituals, as exemplified in the picture above, parties have bodily co-presence, a barrier to outsiders, mutual focus of attention (each other and/or the object of contention), a shared mood and often rhythmic entrainment (which is not visible from the picture apart from both of them shouting at the same time). As illustrated in the figure below, intense conflict interaction rituals produce tension, negative emotional energy, symbols of enmity and standards of morality.

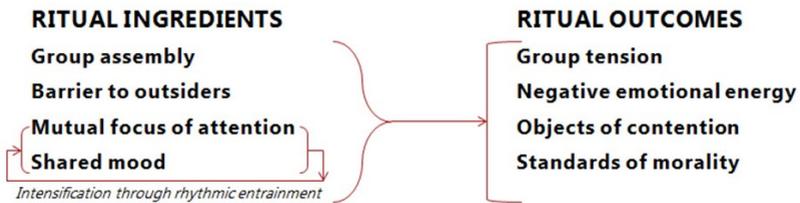


Figure 2. Conflictual interaction ritual

In what follows, I will describe each ingredient and outcome in the proposed model of conflict interaction ritual.

## Conflict ritual ingredients

- *Group assembly*: Collins argues that bodily co-presence increases the intensity of solidarity interaction rituals. Similarly, conflict rituals tend to be more intense in bodily co-presence.
- *Barrier to outsiders*: in conflicts, it is clear to the adversaries who is *part of* the conflict and who is *not*. As Collins (2011, 8) has described, neutrals are often forced to pick a side, excluded or even attacked.

- *Mutual focus of attention*: conflicting parties are often intensely focused on the same object of contention, each other and/or the activity of conflict. If conflicting parties begin to focus primarily on other things, the conflict ritual will fall apart and the conflict is said to de-escalate.
- *Shared mood*: conflicting parties often have a similar if not shared mood (in the picture above this mood is anger). Both negative and positive emotions are contagious (e.g. Barsade 2002) and it is not uncommon e.g. for the fear of one party to infect the other. However, there are also cases or sequences in conflict where one party e.g. feels pride and the other is humiliated, but the central feeling of animosity remains.
- *Rhythmic entrainment*: Collins states that interpersonal conflicts are broken rhythms, as adversaries often interrupt each other and violate good conversational customs. However, I would argue that conflicts can also be seen as enforcing a new rhythm of interaction, where parties are compelled to answer each other's accusations and attacks. Conflict interaction rituals are often characterized by a fast rhythm or high speed, and de-escalate when the tempo of interaction decreases. While Collins insists that violence goes against the tendency for rhythmic entrainment, he adds that:

The violent situation has its own entrainment and focus: there is focus on the fighting itself, on the situation as a violent one, and sometimes an emotional entrainment in which the hostility, anger, and excitement of each side gets the other more angry and excited. (Collins 2008, 82)

This is compatible with what I am arguing here: as in solidarity interaction, rituals parties in conflicts become entrained in each other's micro-rhythms and emotions. A situation from a Syrian demonstration in 2011 precisely exemplifies this rhythmic entrainment in conflict interaction rituals. An activist that I interviewed describe how he and a group of protesters met a pro-Assad demonstration, which he calls 'Shabiha':<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Shabiha is a paramilitary group that took part in repressing demonstrations in the Syrian uprising. In this example, it is unclear and not important for the example whether the pro-Assad demonstrators are actually Shabiha.

The only slogan we chanted was, ‘Allah, Syria, Freedom, Only’ in opposition to the Shabiha’s chant which was ‘Allah, Syria, Bashar, Only.’ There were two teams, two team leaders, one was shouting ‘Allah, Syria, Freedom, Only’ and one was shouting ‘Allah, Syria, Bashar, Only’ and then it was reduced to ‘freedom!’—‘Bashar!’, ‘freedom!’—‘Bashar!’, ‘freedom!’—‘Bashar.’ (Interview 36)

In this example, the slogans of the anti-Assad and pro-Assad demonstrators mirror and counter each other’s slogans rhythmically; as the speed of the rhythm increases, the slogans are reduced to single words that can be shouted to over-power the other.

## Conflict ritual output

*Tension:* is the intersubjective outcome of conflict interaction rituals. As I have described elsewhere (Bramsen and Wæver 2016) tension characterizes the state of the strained relationship between conflicting parties. Whereas solidarity brings people together in a common understanding of each other’s perspectives and experiences, the opposite is the case in tense relations. Like solidarity, tension is an intersubjective emotional state that can also be characterized as an emotional ‘field’ or ‘atmosphere.’ Tension emerges from conflictual interaction—that is, attempts at domination that are rejected—but it also reinforces and generates conflictual interaction.

*Negative emotional energy:* Collins argues that conflicts are uncomfortable and preferably avoided (2008, 20). But conflicts do exist, persist and often energize actors to act. How can conflict be uncomfortable—or even unbearable—and at the same time energize actors to engage further? Boyns and Leury have developed Collins’ conception of emotional energy (according to themselves, in accordance with his original concept of emotional energy) to answer this question. They argue that situations of humiliation, for example, need not always de-energize actors, but can also energize them; however, not in the positive sense of the word with ‘enthusiasm and confidence’ but rather, the force driving further action is a ‘negative emotional energy’ of persisting of emotions such as anger, fear and resentment. Boyns and Leury propose that such energy is ‘uncomfortable’ and that, just like individuals are driven to obtain positive emotional energy, they are compelled ‘to quickly reduce’ the negative emotional energy (2015, 160).

*Objects of contention:* whereas conflicts do not produce symbols of social relationship among the conflicting parties (this would mean the end of conflict), a conflict does produce objects of contention, i.e. objects that the conflict is said to be 'about' and that often come to symbolize or define it. Collins rightly states that 'The fighting and the motive become structured and articulated simultaneously as part of the same process' (2004, 337). Objects of contention grow out of conflict and cause further conflict. Objects that may have been of less importance to the parties prior to a conflict may suddenly become immensely important as they become part of the conflict.

*Standards of morality:* perhaps paradoxically, similar to solidarity interaction rituals, one could also argue that conflict interaction rituals produce standards of morality. In many conflicts, especially if they are protracted or repeated (i.e. in chains of interaction rituals), parties develop standards of morality about how to behave within the reality of conflict and/or war. In interpersonal conflicts, this might include unspoken or spoken rules about what not to talk about or call the other; in international conflict, this can be either standardized *jus in bellum* or informal rules about who not to target. These rules are sometimes violated, however, which will increase in-group righteous anger.

## **Intensity of conflict interaction rituals**

Collins' model of solidarity interaction rituals enables an assessment of the intensity of the ritual and how much energy and solidarity it will generate: 'Randall Collins' synthesis and extension of Durkheim and Goffman provides more specific propositions on when interaction rituals will be more likely to result in collective effervescence' (Holmes & Wheeler 2019). Conflict rituals can vary in intensity, much like solidarity interaction rituals. Could we then say that factors such as a barrier to outsiders, mutual focus of attention and rhythmic entrainment determine the intensity of conflict?

A barrier to outsiders is an ingredient in conflict rituals which is difficult to intensify, although one could argue that conflict interaction rituals where it is very clear who participates and who does not are more intense, whereas conflicts where participation is more diffuse and undefined are less intense. A better determinant of the intensity of the conflict ritual, however, is the mutual focus of attention, i.e. the focus on the objects of contention. If the parties (individuals or groups) are equally or more focused on other things, such as trade or other problems, the conflict will be less

intense. If the parties are solely focused on the object of contention, however, this will intensify the conflict. The rhythmic entrainment can also be used to assess the intensity of conflict rituals. If the rhythm of interaction is slow, if it e.g. takes a lot of time to react to the others' accusations or attacks, this will produce less tension, whereas a fast rhythm of action–reaction will generate high-intensity conflict rituals.

Regarding bodily co-presence, Collins suggests that bodily-co presence makes violence more difficult because the closer people get, the harder it becomes not to fall into the basic social entrainment of solidarity interaction. On the contrary, I would argue that tension increases when enemies meet/confront, because, much as in solidarity interaction rituals, this increases the intensity of the ritual; not because it will make it harder for the enemies to maintain the hostile relationship and violate the natural tendency of solidarity. Keeping parties separate (e.g. through a buffer zone) is a well-known tension-reduction strategy, both in interpersonal and international conflicts.

Both group and interpersonal conflicts can consist of one conflictual interaction ritual where parties come together, quarrel and resolve the conflict, but group conflict generally consists of numerous interaction rituals, some solidarity interaction rituals, some domination interaction rituals and some conflict interaction rituals (Bramsen and Poder 2014). For example, we can have a civil war where members of the groups encounter each other daily and where the elites representing the groups have several meetings. Some encounters may resemble a domination ritual, where one party is humiliated and de-energized, some encounters might turn into conflict interaction rituals, where the parties counters each other's domination and attacks, while other situations may be solidarity interaction rituals, primarily on each side, such as the celebration of martyrs.

## **Violence as a form of conflict or domination**

Violence and conflict intensity are often conflated but conflict intensity does not necessarily equal violence (Wæver & Bramsen 2019). Does the conceptualization of tension as emerging from and being reinforced by conflictual interaction contradict this statement? No; on the contrary, it implies that violence is a *form*, not a *degree*, of conflict. The reason why violence often grows out of conflict is that it is another mode or form of conflict. Carl von Clausewitz famously stated that 'war is the continuation of

policy by other means' (Clausewitz 1989 [1832], 87). The same could be said regarding violence and conflict—that violence is conflict or domination by other means. But violence does not necessarily grow out of intense conflict (Sørensen and Johansen 2016). A conflict can be very intense and involve daily demonstrations or intense diplomatic meetings but with no violence. Violence can also be applied very early on in conflicts at low intensities or to initiate a conflict in the first place. This is especially so if violence is the default mode or practice familiar to the agents involved, as in the Syrian regime, where part of their *modus operandi* prior to the revolution was violent repression. Violence can also occur in situations where there is not much to fight about but where fighting has become an institutionalized or internalized practice. One example of this would be Guinea-Bissau, where Vigh (2006) on the basis of long fieldwork (2000–2003) argues that armed conflict continues despite low levels of enmity and tension between the fighters and despite there being little to fight for in terms of larger ideological or incompatible goals.

In this article, domination and conflict are theorized as interaction rituals where the latter implies that both parties strike against each other, whereas domination is one-sided and requires some form of submission by the opponent. In this manner, domination and conflict are defined as relational, as the 'subject positions' of the parties involved determining the nature of the interaction; one attempt at domination may be countered and thus turn into a conflict. Violence, I would argue, can take the form of both domination interaction and conflict interaction (Bramsen, 2017).

Examples of one-sided violence as domination might be situations of torture or genocide. To exemplify this, we can take two situations of violence from my video-dataset of violence from the Arab Spring in Syria, Bahrain and Tunisia. Firstly, in a situation where violence is a form of domination, it is one-sided and the victim merely surrenders and aligns to the rhythm put forward by the perpetrator(s).

In video 6, during one-sided violence against demonstrators in Tunisia in 2011, one the protesters adopt the position of victim, running away submissively from the violent domination. Through surrender and alignment in response to violent domination, the protesters' subject position becomes one of victimhood and submission. Secondly, in other situations, protesters fight back with stones or other available objects or weapons. Observing numerous videos of two-sided violence (Bramsen, 2018b), I argue that

violence can resemble a dance-like sequence where both parties respond rhythmically to and mirror each other's actions (Bramsen, 2017). In video 50 and 51, we see two-sided violence in Syria in 2011, a situation where protesters throw stones at the security forces as they are met with violent repression. The situation is one of conflict, as both parties strike against each other, albeit on very unequal and arguably disproportionate terms.

## **Is violence and conflict difficult?**

In his 2008 book, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory*, Collins analyses images and videos of violent situations, unfolding the argument that violence is difficult and goes against the natural tendency of becoming attuned with other people: 'violent interactions are difficult because they go against the grain of normal interaction rituals' (2008, 20). In potentially violent situations, people therefore become tense and/or fearful, in many cases therefore paradoxically ending up not carrying out violent actions or doing so in an incompetent manner. When violence happens, it follows a limited set of pathways where individuals are able to work around this tension/fear. Here, I propose a different argument. In the model of conflict interaction ritual outlined here, tension emerges not from the reluctance to engage in conflict and violence, but from conflictual interactions. Moreover, once violent and conflictual interaction rituals are initiated, they are no longer 'difficult.' Once conflicts begin, the difficulty instead is to go against the momentum of conflict, e.g. by not responding to the other's accusations or violent attacks. At least until the momentum of fighting has run out.

According to Collins, not only violence but also conflict is difficult and goes against the tendency of rhythmic entrainment:

Antagonistic confrontation itself, as distinct from violence, has its own tension. People tend to avoid confrontation even in merely verbal conflict: people are much more likely to express negative and hostile statements about persons who are not immediately present, than to express such statements to persons who are in conversation with them. (...) Hence, when conflict has to come down to the immediate micro-situation, there are great difficulties in carrying out conflict, and especially violence. (Collins 2008, 79)

If tension is an inherent part of conflict, not because conflict goes against our natural tendency of entrainment but because of contesting wills and actions,

what can then explain why conflict and violence are difficult to initiate, as Collins has argued?

One reason for the reluctance to engage in conflict is that it often implies uncomfortable emotions such as fear, anger and tension. As Boyns and Leury (2015) theorize regarding negative emotional energy, individuals are driven to avoid or get rid of such unpleasant emotions. I would argue that the reluctance to initiate conflicts also stems from the difficulty of changing between and/or initiating interaction rituals. As Collins describes, 'once a conversation takes off, it builds a self-sustaining momentum' (2004, 71). Changing between types and rhythms of interaction—to change the flow of momentum—can therefore be challenging and require plenty of emotional energy. Collins refers to the example of a speaker galvanizing an entire audience with a powerful talk. When the speaker is done, most of the audience will have forgotten all of their questions and be unable to change the interaction ritual from one of speaker–listeners to Q&A. Only individuals with very high emotional energy are able to break through such a wall of silence and pose questions. Once the Q&A gets going and 'momentum flows another way,' others will also be able to engage in the conversation (Collins 2004, 72). Likewise, it is difficult to change between solidarity interaction and conflictual interaction. Collins has described how people are often reluctant to engage in direct conflict: they prefer to complain to others who are not involved in the dispute, thereby avoiding actual confrontation. Rather than being an indication of the difficulty of breaking ordinary entrainment, I interpret this reluctance to engage in conflict as a difficulty of breaking/changing any interaction ritual, which is similar to the example of changing between speaker–audience and Q&A. Indeed, while many individuals hesitate to engage in direct conflict with others, once the conflict gets going it can be very difficult to stop; once a fight begins, all of the accusations that individuals previously held back or complained about to others will often come to the surface, and the conflicting parties may have to invent new ones in order to counter the accusations of the other. This is also why conflicts help to 'clear the air.' As Simmel argued in 1908, conflict is a social endeavour, not merely because it generates in-group solidarity but also because it can contribute to conflicting parties reuniting after a conflict. Conflicts can, however, also become protracted and become a part of everyday life and ordinary interaction.

One of the sub-arguments underscoring Collins' overall argument, i.e. that conflict and violence go against the normal entrainment, is that conflict

and violence often tend to be short or fade away. First of all, this is often not the case; many, particularly international conflicts, stretch over several decades or more, and even if we only look at the micro-conflict interaction rituals involved in this process, they are perfectly comparable to solidarity interactions that also tend to be substituted by new ones. Like solidarity interaction rituals, they can be short or long, and negative emotional energy, like positive emotional energy, decays over time.

To sum up, I do not dispute that tension emerging in conflict situations shapes and in some cases inhibits violence, but I argue that this tension does not derive from the difficulty of going against the entrainment with the victim. Rather, it derives from 1) the difficulty of changing interaction rituals and from 2) the conflictual interaction ritual itself, as conflictual interaction entrains people in an action–reaction rhythm, with continuous ‘rejections’ of the counterpart’s attacks or utterances, which in turn generates tension.

## **Disrupting violence and domination**

How can the micro-sociological theory of conflict and violence be of interest for the study and practice of nonviolent resistance? According to Collins, protesters may take advantage of the micro-sociological difficulties of conducting violence; by avoiding to turn their back, hide their face, fall down or run away in panic, they may be able to avoid violence (Collins 2014). Inspired by Collins’ approach, Anne Nassauer (2013; 2016) has developed an interactional theory of violence on the basis of comprehensive visual data analysis of left-wing demonstrations in the US and Germany. Nassauer interestingly describes a situation where protesters avoided violent domination by the police by stating in a loud, clear voice: ‘We are peaceful, what about you?’ In my own data, I have found similar situations where violence was avoided, e.g. in a situation where a Bahraini man shouts in anger, ‘Go on shoot me!’ and throws a Koran between his legs and raises his hands in the air. Two policemen attempt to attack him, one raises his stick to hit him, but the man with the Koran’s angry and powerful gestures seemingly disable the policeman from following through with his threats (RT 2013 Video 24). Likewise, Bahraini activist Zainap Al-Khawaja has on several occasions stood up to the security forces in Bahrain without being targeted. In one situation, she was protesting with a larger group but decided not to move when the police attacked the demonstration (Mackey 2011, Video 23). The police officer ordered the others not to attack her, but they

threatened her. Zainab describes how, ‘One said, “What’s wrong with you, are you drunk? You know what we can do to you?” I said, “First, make me fear your masters before trying to make me fear you”’ (Zainab in Lucas 2011).

Nassauer and Collins would argue that this is emotional equilibrium; i.e., no one dominates the situation. Instead, I would argue that these are cases where demonstrators were actually able to dominate the situation enough to be able to change it and the rhythm of interaction. Domination and violence imply a certain script of victim and perpetrator. When one of the parts refuses to play out that script by neither attacking nor running away, screaming or ducking in fear, it becomes more difficult to act out violently; less due to any moral aversion to attacking or because violence goes against human solidarity entrainment and more because the rhythm and script of violence is disrupted (Bramsen 2017; 2018a). Nonviolence can then represent a means of enforcing a new rhythm of interaction—or at least disrupting the existing one. It can thus potentially disrupt acts of nonviolence by refusing to act submissively and imposing a new rhythm. Disrupting violent action is one of several ways that activists may challenge violent domination. Elsewhere (Bramsen 2019), I have elaborated on the many ways in which activists may try to challenge violence, both amongst themselves and amongst their opponents.

## **The situational power of nonviolence**

The power of nonviolence is usually seen as challenging the legitimacy and pillars of support for a ruling power (Helvey 2004; Sharp 1973). Elsewhere (Bramsen 2018c), I have challenged this metaphor, instead suggesting a musical ensemble as a metaphor for authoritarian regimes i.e. that what ties the regimes together is not solid pillars but rather tight rhythmic coordination and domination interaction rituals. While resistance literature has focused on various aspects of civil resistance such as nonviolent discipline (e.g. Nepstad 2004), mobilization (e.g. Schock 2015) and the moral superiority of nonviolence (e.g. Gier 2014), less attention has been given to the *situational power of nonviolence*; i.e. how certain actions can change the situation from one of confrontation and fighting to one of collaboration and compassion (Bramsen 2018). In this respect, nonviolence is not merely about taking away the pillars of a regime (top-down perspective on power), but also about changing the relationship/situation by doing something different (or

not doing what was previously constituting the power relationship, i.e. civil resistance). Nonviolence thus becomes a way of challenging and disrupting not only direct violence but also structural violence and domination in concrete situations.

One activist explained to me that ‘using nonviolence not only puts you on the moral higher ground, it also grants you control over the situation.’ She exemplified this statement with a story about her dad, another famous activist, Abdulhadi Al Khawaja:

When he was being tortured, this guy was with my dad in the military prison during the time they were being severely tortured, and he could hear my dad being tortured, and when the guy stopped torturing my dad, my dad told him: ‘I forgive you.’ And I asked my mother to ask my dad why he did that (...) his explanation to me was that, when you decide the way you react, basically when you react with violence you react the way they want you to react, and so they control their action and your reaction. When you choose not to use violence you are actually taking that control back into your own hands. (Interview 19)

In this respect, nonviolence can be seen as a deliberate attempt at taking control of the situation and initiating an alternative chain of interaction. If violence is considered an interaction ritual where the parties are mutually entrained in a process of violent action–reaction, nonviolence can cause this violent interaction ritual to ‘fail;’ that is, it becomes increasingly difficult for the perpetrator to uphold the violent ritual if the supposed victim does not ‘play by the rules’ of violence, instead initiating solidarity interaction rituals. It is indeed very difficult for nonviolent activists to dominate the situation to the extent that they are able to change the interaction ritual, or even merely to go against the situational pressure to ‘act’ as victim or perpetrator. In Collins words, it requires abundant emotional energy or that which Lindner in this respect coins ‘Mandela-like qualities’ to change the rhythm of interaction in violence or conflict interaction rituals (2013). Lindner describes a situation in which Nelson Mandela, upon landing on Robben Island on his way to jail, refused to follow the orders of the prison guards. Mandela describes the situation as follows:

The guards started screaming, ‘Haas! Haas!’ The word haas means ‘move’ in Afrikaans, but it is commonly reserved for cattle. The wardens were

demanding that we jog, and I turned to Tefu and under my breath said that we must set an example; if we give in now we would be at their mercy (...). I mentioned to Tefu that we should walk in front, and we took the lead. Once in front, we actually decreased the pace, walking slowly and deliberately. The guards were incredulous (...) [and said] ‘We will tolerate no insubordination here. Haas! Haas!’ But we continued at our stately pace. Kleinhans [The head guard] ordered us to halt and stood in front of us: ‘Look, man, we will kill you, we are not fooling around, your children and wives and mothers and fathers will never know what happened to you. This the last warning. Haas! Haas!’ To this, I said: ‘You have your duty and we have ours.’ I was determined that we would not give in, and we did not, for we were already at the cells. (Mandela, 1995, 297–9)

In this situation, Mandela literally refused to follow the rhythm that was imposed upon him (jogging) and imposed his ‘own,’ slower pace. Not only did he refuse to be humiliated (Lindner’s interpretation), he also controlled the situation and disrupted the power ritual that the guards attempted to uphold. Refusing to play neither victim nor perpetrator, and thereby neither retaliating nor being submissive, can have a disarming effect.

Three Bahraini protesters that I interviewed described a situation where a young boy walked out in front of a police car and hit/drummed on the front of the vehicle, which made it stop. One of the protesters reflected: ‘When you do something new, something that they don’t expect, they never know how to react’ (Interview 25). Along the same lines, another Bahraini activist reflected upon the importance of confusing the riot police; ‘When you’re face to face with them (...) when you’re confident, they [the security forces in the Middle East] get confused, because they’re used to the fact that they’re carrying weapons, which means you run. It means you’re not gonna stand up to them. So when someone does stand up to them, they get really confused and don’t know how to react’ (Interview 19). What activists interpret as the security forces ‘not knowing how to react’ can be interpreted as a way of challenging the script of domination and violence. When protesters refrain from playing into the theater of domination by neither retaliating nor giving in, they disrupt the interaction ritual of domination. This relates to Popovic’s concept of laughtivism, which implies funny acts that can surprise or confuse security forces. He argues that funny actions can

disrupt repression, because ‘if you’re a cop you spend a lot of time thinking about how to deal with people who are violent. But nothing in your training prepares you for dealing with people who are funny’ (Popovic and Miller 2015, 99).

Apart from ‘surprising’ or non-submissive acts that can disrupt the script of domination, activists can also initiate solidarity-generating, friendly interaction as a way to disrupt domination. These actions are framed as ‘fraternization’ (Martin and Varney 2003, Ketchley 2014). In line with micro-sociological thinking, Ketchley argues that such types of performances make ‘claims on regime agents through stimulating feelings of solidarity and comes to figure as an interaction ritual’ (Ketchley 2014, 159). Such acts may include giving roses to security forces, kissing or hugging them, talking in a calm and friendly manner or providing water bottles. Ketchley analyzes the Egyptian Arab Spring and suggest that fraternizing acts was a central component of how the activists won the sympathy and support of the army. He describes a situation where protesters moved towards the security forces but where:

There was no clash: rather, protestors moved to kiss, hug and embrace individual soldiers, all the while disrupting their formation. While individual troopers attempted to maintain their distance, others were physically encircled, remonstrated and pleaded with. In the video, the effects of these interactions are profound: both protestors and soldiers visibly moved to tears (Ketchley 2014, 160).

Ketchley argues that such fraternizing performances limit ‘the opportunities for violence to break out’ (Ketchley 2014, 162), again because the performance of violent attacks requires another type of subject positioning of the actors involved and another dynamic. Hence, acts of fraternization can potentially challenge the script of domination and violence. However, this may not always be possible. During the 2011 uprising in Bahrain, activists attempted to approach the riot police in a friendly manner, but this was impeded by the fact that a big part of Bahraini security forces are of a different nationality and in many cases speaks e.g. Urdu instead of Arabic (Bramsen 2018a).

Small acts of surprise, resistance or fraternization may seem insignificant, especially in cases where they perhaps do not even stop the acts of violence or domination in the actual situation. However, even small acts of resistance may have a profound effect on the overall relationship between the ruled and

the ruler. The picture below shows a Bahraini activist, Zainab al-Khawaja, resisting arrest. As is visible from the picture, Zainab raises her clenched fist in the air to symbolize resistance and freedom and shouts powerfully. The police officers arresting her, in contrast, look uncomfortable with the situation, with clenched lips and eyes looking down.



Picture 1. Bahraini activist, Zainab al-Khawaja resisting arrest (reproduced with permission from the photographer)

Despite the performance of resistance, Zainab al-Khawaja is arrested and taken to prison. Hence, one could say that there are limits to micro-sociological dynamics occurring in-situations as opposed to orders and structures shaping a society. However, I would argue that even as Zainab is imprisoned, her acts of resistance and importantly—the sharing of the pictures hereof—are powerful ways of destabilizing acts of domination. Little by little, this can challenge everyday suppression and domination and with enough de-stabilizing actions—challenge the very organizational structure and rhythmic coordination of the regime. As I have shown elsewhere, this however depends on the overall ability of a protest movement to stay

united, gather support by the silent majority and escalate at a time of high momentum (Bramsen, 2018c).

## Conclusion

What do we gain from viewing conflicts as interaction rituals apart from further expanding Collins' already inclusive (overly inclusive, according to Kemper 2011) notion of what would count as an interaction ritual? How can the micro-sociological perspective be useful for nonviolent activists and resistance studies? I would argue that such a perspective enables us to do two things: 1) to understand conflict not as an anomaly or anti-social behavior but rather as a form of interaction implies that parties are immersed in each other's bodily rhythms and develop a certain social bond, albeit a hostile one (in line with Simmel 1955[1908]). Whether they like it or not, enemies share a relationship (Bramsen, Nielsen, and Vindeløv 2016; Salice 2014). And 2) By seeing conflicts as interaction rituals (and violence as a form of conflict interaction ritual), we can develop strategies for how to counter or transform such interaction rituals if preferred. One example is to initiate new interaction rituals, either through mediation or trade that can generate solidarity and supplement or eventually substitute conflict interactions. Another option is to disrupt domination rituals with nonviolent direct action, as I have shown in this article. Either through direct resistance and noncompliance or through more solidarity generating actions of fraternization. Rather than considering oppression (merely) an overall, structural phenomena that may be challenged through awareness raising and norm change, understanding how structural and direct violence manifested in concrete situation can be challenged potentially empowers activists to mobilize the situational power of nonviolence.

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# **Violence in nonviolent action: Power relations in joint activism in Israel and Palestine**

Anne de Jong *University of Amsterdam.*

## *Abstract*

*This paper critically engages with nonviolent activism and resistance in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. By placing nonviolent direct actions directly in the context of its violent surrounding, it will be argued that structural and symbolic violence can be present in nonviolent actions and that unequal power relations can therewith be reproduced. Certain nonviolent actions in Israel and Palestine, this paper poses, mirror or even enable the injustices they initially seek to oppose.*

*Based on nineteen months of fieldwork research in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories including annexed East Jerusalem and besieged Gaza, this paper provides a ethnographic description of a so called joint Palestinian-Israeli nonviolent action near the Gaza Strip. The ethnographic detail enables an analysis which reveals 1) how unequal power relations can be reproduced within nonviolent protests, and 2) how certain nonviolent protests can perpetuate the structural violence they initially seek to oppose. The primary aim of this paper is not to differentiate between 'good' and 'bad' activism or resistance perse. It does aim to show how meticulous attention to less visible forms of violence can deepen our understanding of the reproduction of power and structural violence within nonviolent protest.*

## **Sumud Freedom Camp**

On May 19, 2017 a coalition of more than three hundred Palestinian, Israeli and International activists erected the first tent of what was to become the Sumud Freedom Camp. Built on the remains of the Palestinian West Bank village of Sarura, the activists aimed to reconstruct this forcibly demolished village (Podolsky 2019), while simultaneously protesting against ongoing efforts to dispossess Palestinians of their homes and land (Gish 2019). By doing so the activists intended 'to create a safe, nonviolent, unarmed space where all those who believe in a future founded on justice, freedom, and

equality can come together to build a foundation that will sustain a just peace'.<sup>1</sup> Following the lead of the village's former inhabitants, the activists not only physically repaired the homes, caves and waterways but also participated in workshops, direct actions and a program promoting 'nonviolent civil disobedience as transformative political practice'.

The coalition, which stood in solidarity with the Sarura villagers, consisted of two local and two international organisations,<sup>2</sup> complimented by Palestinians from neighbouring villages and local committees.<sup>3</sup> The parties shared a commitment to nonviolent direct action and consciously reject rigid binary divisions such as Jews versus Muslims or Palestinians versus Israelis. One of the groups, Combatants for Peace, is an activist collective made up of former Israeli Defence Force (IDF) soldiers and former Palestinian fighters who have put down their weapons and now work together to end what they call 'the cycle of violence' (de Jong, 2017). The US-based Jewish Centre for Nonviolence acknowledges the importance of different group identities in the project and cultivates 'a practice of Jewish Nonviolence in support of Palestinian and Israeli nonviolent resistance to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza'.<sup>4</sup>

On May 20, 2017, only a day after the camp's kick-off, the IDF raided the camp. With military bravura, the IDF confiscated the newly installed water tank and arrested three participants in the reconstruction. The raid

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1 The Sumud Freedom Camp intention statement as published on their website in May 2017. <https://sumudcamp.org/our-intention-b0fb960e50df> Accessed June 06, 2019

2 The coalition consisted of Combatants for Peace, the Holy Land Trust, All that is Left: Anti-Occupation Collective and The Centre for Jewish Nonviolence. Information about each of these organisations can be accessed at the following websites: <http://cfpeace.org/>, <https://holylandtrust.org/>, <https://www.facebook.com/AllThatsLeftCollective/>, <https://centerforjewishnonviolence.org/>.

3 Popular committees are a typical way in which Palestinian villages organise to oppose the occupation. For more information on the functioning of local committees see Iris Jean-Klein (2003) "Into Committees, out of the House?: Familiar Forms in the Organization of Palestinian Committee Activism during the First Intifada." *American Ethnologist* 30(4), 556-577 (Nov, 2003) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2003.30.4.556>

4 As stated on the Sumud Freedom Camp website page. <https://sumudcamp.org/the-center-for-jewish-nonviolence-826e779ff886> Accessed June 20, 2019

was recorded by camp residents and the video quickly went viral.<sup>5</sup> As people on social media expressed outrage over the use of force by the IDF, a Jewish activist of the Sumud camp was quick to point out that the IDF would have used a lot more violence had it not been for the presence of Jewish-Israeli and Jewish international activists (Fleischmann 2019). Despite many more IDF raids, the Sumud camp expanded over the following month. Activists restored several cave-houses and, with the help of a crowd-funding campaign, restored access to essential resources such as electricity and fresh water. On June 26 two villager families returned to their homes and the Sumud camp declared victory:

We celebrate the first phase of the Sumud Freedom Camp because two families returned to their lands, restored two caves, and rehabilitated roads. Together, this coalition proved that the joint non-violent struggle could be a way to resolve conflict, reconcile and advance our shared values, and challenge the status quo (Riyad Halees, June 26<sup>th</sup> 2017, Co-Founder, Combatants for Peace).<sup>6</sup>

The Sumud camp received steady media attention and, despite numerous military raids, managed to reclaim parts of the confiscated lands of Sarura village. While such self-declared success is rare, the phenomenon of nonviolent activism in Israel and Palestine is not. Nonviolent resistance here is defined as ‘the application of unarmed civilian power using nonviolent methods such as protests, strikes, boycotts, and demonstrations, without using or threatening physical harm against opponents’ (Chenoweth and Cunningham 2013: 271).

Nonviolent resistance in the territory that we currently depict as Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories can be traced back to the British mandate period of 1920 to 1948 (De Jong 2017). Since that time a vibrant nonviolent activist tradition has developed which has received modest but

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5 YouTube video ‘Israeli soldiers dismantle the Sumud Freedom Camp’ placed on the +972 YouTube channel on May 21, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2UB8rJbXlY> Accessed on June 20, 2019

6 Riyad Halees, co-founder of Combatants for Peace on June 26, 2017 in Sarura as captured on the video ‘Celebrate Sarura! We are Live to celebrate the end of Ramadan and over a month of joint solidarity and resistance! Stay Tuned!’ <https://sumudcamp.org/sumud-freedom-camp-celebrates-successful-return-of-families-to-sarura-70bc82e100f5> Accessed on June 20, 2019

steady scholarly attention. For example the seminal *Memories of Revolt: The 1936–1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past* (Swedenburg 1995) carefully reconstructs early Palestinian nonviolent struggle during the mandate period, while Mary King (2007) shows how Palestinians drew upon their past to advance nonviolent strategies during the second intifada. Both Kaminer (1996) and Rabkin (2006) engage with Jewish opposition to Zionism and put forward the diversity and complexity of such struggles from within (Rigby 1991; De Jong 2011; Fleischmann 2019). Turner (2015), Taraki (2006) and Bishara (2001) have examined the outright attacks faced by Palestinians and Israelis who engage in nonviolent struggle.

In this light, the above brief description of the Sumud Freedom camp does not simply serve as a ‘successful’ example of continued nonviolent activism and resistance in the West bank (Rijke and Van Teeffelen 2014; Jawad 2011). More so, it illustrates 1) the application of conscious and diverse nonviolent strategy, 2) the often direct and violent response toward such nonviolent direct actions, and 3) the presence of unequal power relations among different activists. First, alternative strike protests (Van Teeffelen 2011; Gawerc 2019) where suppressive measures such as house demolition are countered by rebuilding facilities and structures such as in the above described Sumud Freedom Camp are not just charity towards the evicted villagers. The well-documented Friday demonstrations in the West Bank are not merely directed at the separation wall, but constitute a broader resistance against Israeli occupation and continued settler colonial dispossession (Hammami 2015; Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2007; Pratt 2013). Second, violent repression of nonviolent direct actions by the IDF are regular and well documented (Pearlman 2016; Kotef and Amir 2007). As will be argued below, however, physical assault is not the only form of violence present at nonviolent actions in the West Bank, Gaza or Israel. Instead, the structural violence of ethno-nationalist exclusionary practice and structures (de Jong 2017) are omnipresent and warrant the inclusion of theories on the continuum of violence (Scheper-Hughes and bourgeois 2004) when looking at nonviolent actions. Third, the Sumud Freedom camp displace a consciousness among the various activists about different positions and power relations among them (de Jong 2011). That some of the unequal power relations are acknowledged and addressed by the activists does not mean that they are no longer there. On the contrary, this article will show how unequal power relations can be reproduced in nonviolent protest and how, therewith, structural violence is enabled and sustained.

This argument will be put forward and sustained through the detailed ethnographic description of a so called ‘joint’ nonviolent action in Israel near the Gaza border.<sup>7</sup> I consciously place joint in inverted commas because the provided ethnographic example draws out that what constitute as ‘joint’ or even what counts as Israeli, Arab or Palestinian is less straightforward than it may seem (Kotef 2011; Omer 2019). For the activist central to the ethnographic description, for example, it means Jewish Israeli and Arab Israeli joining in one direct action. Other Palestinian and Israeli activists, however, would not describe this as a ‘joint action’ at all and would insist that truly joint action means Palestinian led resistance with Jewish Israeli solidarity activism in a supportive or strategic role (De Jong 2015; Omer 2019; Podolsky 2019; Fleischmann 2019).

By applying a theoretical framework of ‘Thinking Palestine/the Arab Spring’ (Lentin 2008) combined with strategic nonviolent resistance theory (Helvey 2004) and the concept of ‘continuum of violence’ (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004), this article will show how the reproduction of unequal power relations in nonviolent activism can enable and sustain the structural violence that the protesters initially sought to oppose.

## **Thinking Palestine: violence, nonviolence and resistance**

‘Thinking Palestine’ refers to the body of knowledge produced by scholars who consciously and critically re-engage with the most basic question of what is going on in the territory that we currently depict as Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Aware of the formative power of words and conceptualizations in setting the debate of what can possibly be discussed or thought, scholars such as Taraki (1989; 2006) and Goldberg (2008) challenge seemingly fixed truths in order to spark a scholarly debate on the Palestinian conception of Palestine as ‘a dialectic experience positioned against its perennial other, Zionism’ (Lentin, 2008: 8). Through conceptualizations

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<sup>7</sup> This research stems from a nineteen-month fieldwork research in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories conducted to obtain my PhD at the School of Oriental and Africa Studies. The fieldwork was conducted in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories including besieged Gaza and annexed East Jerusalem. In this period, 49 demonstrations, an average of two steering committee meetings and two inner-group meetings a week, twenty-four lectures, seventeen working days and five house demolitions were attended.

such as ‘racial Palestinianization’ (Goldberg, 2008:25-45), ‘thanapolitics’ (Ghanim, 2008:65-81) and the state of Israel as either in a permanent ‘State of Exception’ (Lentin, 2008:1-22; Khalili, 2008:101-115) or as ‘a *Mukhabarat* state’ (Pappe, 2008:148-170), critical scholars aim to provide subaltern perspectives, revive subjugated knowledge and both highlight and question the power relations behind knowledge-making surrounding Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.<sup>8</sup>

Questions asked in relation to activism and resistance are thus less focused on ‘the truth’ or ‘neutrality’ (Turner, 2019) but rather on the power relations behind truth-making, social change and direct actions. Dialectic experiences of otherness draws out questions about who is perceived as us, who is perceived as them, and enables a critical perspective of how this changes over time (see for example the ambiguous and changing alliances at the Tahrir square in Van de Sande, 2013). As will be seen, for example, categories of citizenship in Israel to a degree determine one’s ability to decide over- or participate in certain kinds of protests. This suggests that strategic nonviolent resistance theory, in the context of nonviolence in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, is more useful or relevant than social movement theory since there is a greater focus on power and power relations.

As Gene Sharp, the founding father of this theory points out, strategic nonviolent resistance is all about power and power relations: ‘The practice, dynamics, and consequences of nonviolent struggle are all directly dependent upon the wielding of power and its effects on the power of the opponents’ group’ (1990:7). In this theoretical strand, power is perceived as plural and relational (Helvey 2004). It is not something one person or group possesses and the other does not, but rather consists of a complex field of resources and interaction in which pillars of support ensure domination or oppression of the other. These pillars of support range from very concrete resources, such as a military apparatus and tax-collecting institutions, to less tangible aspects, such as ascribed authority, media coverage and public support. Nonviolent direct actions concurrently aim to undermine such pillars of support to render the exercise of rule impossible (Helvey 2004). Thoughts and analysis amongst activists of what exactly the problem is, and which pillars of support should be targeted are thus central to understand both individual direct actions and

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8 The framework of Thinking Palestine is central to the broader nineteen-month fieldwork research from which this article stems. It therefore also appears in De Jong, (2017)

different activist groups. As will be shown below, a lively and heated debate among Palestinian and Israeli activists about Zionism, humanitarianism and perceived peace informs the direct actions that are taken. Input of various activists is not necessarily included equally, however, and it will be shown how power relations in broader society can be consciously or unconsciously reproduced in strategic nonviolent actions.

Sharp (1973) identifies 198 forms of direct action which can be clustered into three overarching categories of nonviolent action. First and most visible are direct actions such as demonstrations or sit-ins. These can be readily observed in contemporary Palestine-Israel and are well documented (Hammami 2001; Lagerquist 2004; Darweish and Rigby 2015). Second is civil disobedience in which the cooperation of subjects in an oppressive system is withheld through acts of omission or commission (Sharp 1973). Examples of civil disobedience in contemporary Palestine-Israel would be conscientious objection to Israeli army duty or the refusal to pay tax under the banner of 'no taxation without representation' (Kuttab 1988). The third category can be described as the forging of alternative routes. This form aims to make subjects less dependent on the rulers' provisions by, for example, providing alternative sources of primary needs, such as food, health care or schooling. In Israel and the Occupied Territories this regularly takes the form of a so-called reverse strike in which, for instance, Palestinian houses which are demolished by the Israeli army are rebuilt to limit the impact of an oppressive mechanism or to even render it useless (Halper 2000).

Direct action theory asserts that social change can occur in three ways: 1) conversion in which the opponent yields to the demands of the protesters, 2) accommodation, in which the opponent is not convinced of the nonviolent claims, but gives in nonetheless, and 3) coercion, in which the opponent is neither convinced nor willing to surrender but is forced to adhere to the demands of the protesters (Herngren 1993).

The above layout of direct action theory can be considered a blueprint for activists and has laid the foundation for a group of interdisciplinary scholars who can be loosely identified as resistance study scholars (Schock 2013). Where social movement researchers often focus on how movements emerge, recruit members, mobilize resources or how they frame the issues they are trying to tackle (Edelman 2001; Nepstad 2015a: 415-418), resistance scholars take a more intersectional approach in which resistance is foremost perceived as a constant processes of negotiation of power relations

(Lilja and Vinthagen 2014: 418). This includes the readily observable process of negotiation between activists and their perceived adversary but also entails processes of negotiation among activists and with third party others (Lilja and Vinthagen 2014: 418). It also accentuates less visible forms of resistance or everyday resistance (Scott 2008) and therewith recognizes the multiplicity of power relations, conflicts, identities and forms of resistance (Lilja and Vinthagen 2014: 424).

This framework is especially fruitful when looking at activism and resistance in Palestine-Israel because it includes both overt protest (Kotef 2007: 2010), less visible forms of resistance (Lagerquist 2009; Weiss 2016) and, combined with the critical approach of ‘thinking Palestine’, enables an analysis of how nonviolent action colludes with its violent surroundings in multiple ways. As such, the ethnographic example will draw out that visible political repression by the military police or the IDF is not the only form of violence present in nonviolent strategic action but that reproduction of symbolic and structural violence also plays a vital, yet less recognised, role.

Leading anthropological texts on violence, such as that of Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004), have moved firmly beyond the conception of violence as merely physical:

Violence can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality – force, assault, or the infliction of pain – alone. Violence also includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim. The social and cultural dimensions of violence are what gives violence its power and meaning (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 1).

Prioritizing subaltern experiences of violence and stipulating its constant interplay with power and oppression, scholars such as Lori Allen (2008), Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2005) and Philippe Bourgois (2002) propose empirical approaches that place the experience of violence within specific socio-economic and political surroundings. While the fieldwork sites and focal areas of their research vary from crack-cocaine-use in the United States to infant deaths in Brazil to the normalization of violence in Gaza, each of these scholars insists on approaching violence as a continuum rather than an exceptional event. In other words:

Focusing exclusively on the physical aspect of torture/terror/violence misses the point and transforms the project into a clinical, literary, or

artistic exercise, which runs the risk of denigrating [Sic] into a theatre or pornography of violence in which the voyeuristic impulse subverts the larger project of witnessing, critiquing, and writing against violence, injustice and suffering (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 3)

In order to counter the one-dimensional distortion to which Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004: 4) are referring, one should acknowledge the constant overlap and interaction between visible-recognised and invisible-unrecognized forms of violence; one should not separate perceived extreme incidents of violence from structural, normalised violent conditions, and; one should avoid dialectic disconnects such as war/peace or here/there, which obstruct analysis of how complex forms of violence are inherently intertwined (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004: 4).

Following the work of Johan Galtung (1969) and Pierre Bourdieu (1992), Bourgois (2004) operationalized the continuum of violence by differentiating between four distinguishable but deeply related forms of violence: direct political, structural, symbolic and everyday violence.

Targeted physical violence and terror administrated by official authorities and those opposing it makes direct political violence the most visible and known form of violence in the context of Israel and the occupied Palestinian Territories (Ryan 2015). This includes but is not limited to military raids, extrajudicial killings, torture and protest suppression by the Israeli army, as well as attacks on civilians and military personnel by Palestinian factions. Following the observation that all forms of violence should be approached as part of a continuum, these very obvious forms of violence cannot be disconnected from more structural and symbolic expressions of violence. Checkpoints, the wall and surveillance cameras do not inflict physical violence *per se*. They do, however, create 'chronic, historically entrenched political-economic oppression and social inequality' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992,167).

These structural and symbolic expression can thus all be perceived as structural violence within the broader continuum of violence of continuing settler colonialism. Furthermore, as will be shown below, interpretations of direct political violence depend on one's understanding or justification of expressions of structural violence. As such, Palestinian stone-throwing can be perceived as violent attacks on a legitimate army, or as legitimate resistance to an illegitimate occupying power.

Everyday violence, as theorised predominantly by Nancy Schepper-Hughes, is not simply violence on a smaller scale or violence occurring in everyday life, it is 'the production of social indifference to outrageous suffering through institutional processes and discourses' (Bourgeois 2007,2). It is the process in which daily armed body checks, checkpoints, and a separation wall<sup>9</sup> that cuts entire villages in half are deemed acceptable and necessary by a large part of Israeli society (Harker 2006). These intractable realities, which render the daily practise of occupation and settler-colonial dispossession normal or 'business as usual', are closely linked with the fourth form of violence: symbolic violence.

Symbolic violence is the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with their complicity (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). It is an unconscious process in which individuals internalize the violence inflicted upon them. In domestic violence, for example, battered women often internalise the abuse and are convinced that they are somehow to blame or complicit in the act. This already difficult concept is even more complex in the context of Israel and the Occupied Territories. Palestinians, whether in Gaza, the West Bank or within the boundaries established in 1948,<sup>10</sup> certainly do not blame themselves or feel that they deserve the restrictions and overt political and structural violence that is bestowed upon them. However, as will be argued below, internalised symbolic violence plays a central role within so-called dialogue groups and joint initiatives in Israel, which are regularly perceived as part of the peace camp or nonviolent activist scene. These groups, such as Seeds for Peace and YadBeyad, vary widely in location, participants and exact approach (Abu-Nimer 1999; Schimmel 2009). Many work, however, from the premise that the Israel-Palestine conflict is a conflict between Palestinians and Israelis and that if each side would understand the other's perspective, this would lay the groundwork for peace (De Jong 2017). This peace-conflict paradigm is thus radically different than those who claim that Zionism

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9 While Israel refers to this project as 'the Security Fence' I refer to it as 'the Separation Wall' because that is the reality of what it does. The wall separates Israel from Palestine, Palestinians from Palestinians and farmers from their agricultural land.

10 '48 Palestinians' described Palestinian citizens of Israel who reside within Israeli borders as established in 1948. For an eloquent discussion on 48 Palestinians identity I suggest Maira, S and Shihade, M. (2012) Hip Hop from '48 Palestine: Youth, Music, and the Present/Absent. *Social Text*. 30(3)1-26

is inherently violent because it rests on an ethno-nationalist rigid and discriminatory distinction. In addition, it should be noticed that the peace and conflict paradigm which will be connected to the so called humanitarian approach below and the perception of Zionism as inherently violent should be perceived as a range and that individual activists and activists group vary in perception and therewith praxis (de Jong 2011; Fleischmann 2019).

In sum, this article critically engages with unequal power relations and structural violence in nonviolent protest. The above theoretical framework combines direct action theory with 'thinking Palestine/Arab spring' and insights from the anthropology of violence. The emphasis on dialectic experiences and processes from the thinking Palestine perspective draws out questions about the perceived other and about who decides who this perceived other is. This concurrently leads to analysis of strategy and method. While this may seem self-explanatory in many instances—we, the protesters against them, the regime—the ethnographic example below will show the power mechanisms behind such classifications. This critical look at power relations within nonviolent protesters groups concurrently enables an analysis that places nonviolent action firmly within its violent context. Violence is in this instance not reduced to the mere physical form but includes structural inequalities and arbitrary exclusion and for that purpose is conceptualised as a continuum of Violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). More precisely, it will be argued that the nonviolent protest under scrutiny here, consciously or not, duplicated problematic ethno-nationalist identifications; which in turn draws out unequal power positions between Jewish Israeli and Arab Israeli or Palestinian activists in making organisational and strategic decisions; that Israeli participants and potential audiences were prioritised over Palestinian presence and experience during the protest; and finally, that this self-proclaimed nonviolent protest disconnected nonviolence from its direct action roots and therewith stripped its strategy from addressing the underlying system of oppression.

In line with expectations it would make sense to concurrently present an ethnographic description of a nonviolent protest which got violently dispersed by the Israeli army. However, I am particularly interested in how less visible structural and symbolic violence is reproduced within nonviolent protest and in which role unequal power relations play therein. As such, I consciously selected ethnographic material of a type that does not stand out for its physical violent interference by the IDF but exemplifies complex power relations and conflicting stances towards violence in a subtler yet

illuminating way. The following are extracts of my fieldnotes about one so called ‘joint’ nonviolent protest near the Erez crossing into Gaza. The length, depth and detail of the ethnographic descriptions serves to illustrate my methodology and reflections as well as provide a vivid example for those less familiar with the context of Israel and Palestine.

## No flags for Gaza

‘Anne, over here!’ I look to the right. In the crowd of around 3000 I recognize four teenagers whom I had interviewed three weeks earlier for the ‘messengers for peace’ program of the Parents Circle: Bereaved Family Forum. The four boys smile, and with their arms around each other, they urge me to take their picture: ‘*Yaa Ustādha, yalla!*’ (‘Teacher, let’s go!’). I try to focus my camera without dropping my notebook, sound recorder and bag—quite a challenge, because minutes earlier I had climbed on top of a loaded truck that functions as an improvised stage for those who will address the demonstrating crowd. A strategic decision—it’s close enough to record the speeches, a great place for taking pictures, and parked left of the Erez crossing,<sup>11</sup> with its nose to the southeast wind at least fifty meters from the Israeli military police, who lean casually against the all-too-familiar blue arrest vans. More than a year of fieldwork has taught me well: never get caught between the crowd and the army, know the direction of the wind in case of teargas canisters, and always plan your escape route in case the military police start randomly arresting people. It wouldn’t be the first time that, in a matter of minutes, a peaceful march turned into a disorienting battlefield, filled with teargas, smoke, rubber-coated steel bullets and soldiers with gas masks dragging people away. Today’s demonstration is not on the West Bank, however, and is not organized by Palestinians.

‘We are together, we are one, and we will not be separated!’ The loud chant from the crowd brings me back to the present. It’s January 23, 2008,<sup>12</sup>

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11 The Erez Checkpoint is the northernmost entrance to the Gaza strip.

12 The material for the broader study, from which this particular article arises, was collected during nineteen months of fieldwork between 2007 and 2011. I consciously decided to select a relatively old ethnographic example in order to avoid any negative consequences for the current activist scene. The activists depicted in this article are aware of the discussions surrounding this particular action. In line with research ethics, all activists directly quoted have given explicit permission to be included in this study. For further information about

and we're in front of the Israeli side of the Erez crossing, which separates Israel from Gaza with an eight-meter-high concrete wall, barbed wire, watchtowers and a hundred-meter 'no go area' on both sides. Three thousand Palestinians, Israelis and international activists have gathered to take a stand against the inhumane consequences of the Israeli blockade of Gaza.

The smiling faces are replaced with silent seriousness as representatives of various activist groups and organizations take to the makeshift stage one by one. When one group is speaking, I look to 'the others'—participants from other organizations who hold far different opinions and espouse different ideologies and behaviors. To the untrained eye, today's protesters are united in their message: End the Siege of Gaza. But for those who live their everyday lives within the Israel/Palestine activist scene, and for those studying them, the significance of this gathering can be read on the faces of the people present: Will the Anarchists Against the Wall [AAatW] provoke the police? Will the Physicians for Human Rights call for the so-called 'balanced' approach between the 'two sides'? Will the media pick up on this story? Will it dismiss them all as marginalized rebels, or worse, traitors?

On my left, familiar faces from the Anarchists Against the Wall start to bang wooden sticks against the iron gates in front of the crossing. The cacophony momentarily silences the speech of a seventeen-year-old girl from the Israeli town of Sderot. A not-so silent-protest against the 'two-sides-balanced' approach, I assume. I see Miri from Physicians for Human Rights and Adam from Gush Shalom (the Peace Bloc) quickly approaching the youngsters. I can't hear what they're saying, but I know the two 'designated peace keepers' aim to persuade them to stick to the agreed-upon strategy: '[Today] we want to reach the mainstream, teach them about what is going on. We cannot push them away by being too political'.<sup>13</sup> The noise subsides, but with an efficiency that suggests rehearsal, three giant Palestinian flags are unfurled and attached to the gate. Nervous looks all around. Twenty people I don't recognize turn their backs and walk away. Quickly Sulaiman, the Palestinian spokesperson for Combatants for Peace, grabs the microphone.

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the ethics of this study see: De Jong, A. (2015) "Activism, Human Rights and Academic Neutrality: The Gaza Freedom Flotilla." In: Gillan, K. and Pickerill, J. (eds.) *Research Ethics and Social Movements: Scholarship, Activism & Knowledge Production*. London: Routledge

13 Quote Miri, November 4 2007, in East Jerusalem during the initial steering committee meeting for the 'Break the Siege' campaign.

With a fast-paced ‘We-will-not-be-separated’, he draws the attention of the crowd back to the improvised truck stage. I take pictures of the Palestinian flags as well as of the twenty or so ‘peacekeepers’ who are now arguing with the instigators. *The moderates won*, I scribble in my notebook.

An hour goes by. Uri Avnery from Gush Shalom speaks, and so does Jeff Halper from the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD). By holding a cell phone close to the microphone, we hear the voice of Dr. Eyad Serraj, the head of the Free Gaza Movement, from Gaza City:

We cannot see you but we here in Gaza stand with you. Today is an important day. It gives us hope to hear so many of our Israeli friends protest with us for justice. Today there are no enemies, just people who truly desire peace. What we do here today matters. Like Gandhi said, there is no way to peace, peace is the way. We show it here. Thank you so much (Gaza, January 28, 2008).

Two more trucks are loaded with water filters, diapers, canned vegetables and other goods along with notes in both Hebrew and Arabic. They are parked next to the truck I’m on, right in front of the crossing, brought by the demonstrators and meant for the people of Gaza. The iron gate will remain closed today, but a written guarantee is given to the activists which states that the goods will be allowed into Gaza after inspection. The designated peacekeepers from the various activist initiatives are satisfied and begin to guide the crowd back to the cars and buses.

In the bus that brings people back to Jerusalem, the atmosphere is exuberant. Young activists sing and chant, still exhilarated from the experience of Israelis and Palestinians marching together. In the back of the bus, however, a group of veteran activists<sup>14</sup> are engaged in a low but heated debate:

Our agreement was clear, no Palestinian flags! It drives people away, Israelis... You need to understand their mindset.

No, *you* need to understand. You cannot disconnect this issue [the siege] from the rest of the Palestinian struggle. This is also Occupation and you

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14 The term ‘veteran activist’ is used to denote long-term (more than a year), very experienced and involved activists who often take a leading role in events like this.

cannot expect people to hold hands without admitting that they don't have a state yet!

Opposing positions are captured in these two quotes. Gadi, one of the peacekeepers and a member of both Combatants for Peace and Gush Shalom, tries to intervene:

Guys, we did great! The turnout was much more than expected, the trucks are loaded, there was a lot of media, the mission was a success!

The much-desired media coverage, however, remains limited to a few references in newspapers, not one television report and no pictures. At 10 o'clock in the evening, I receive a bulk text message sent to the organizers of the coalition: 'It was the flags ☺'.

## **Invisible violence**

Studies on both violence and nonviolence often entail graphic description of destruction, pain, harm and death. The above ethnographic description shows none of that. On the contrary, relatively uneventful protests like these are such a regular occurrence that they can be accurately categorised as business as usual. I propose that it is exactly this ordinariness that can inform us about multiple underlying power relations and about less overtly violent transgressions within nonviolent protests.

First, it should be noted that the Erez crossing protest was presented by those participating as a joint Palestinian-Israeli demonstration. What is meant with definitions such as this one, however, is less straightforward than it may seem, because all protesters, with the exception of some international participants like myself, were in fact Israeli citizens. The term 'Palestinian' in this instance, refers solely to Arab-Israeli or so-called '48 Palestinians' while 'Israeli' refers solely to Jewish-Israeli activists (Rabinowitz 2001). This clarification is important because it highlights the self-identification of the activists, the socially constructed discriminatory categories they uphold through that division, and because it draws attention to those not present at the protests.

By presenting this demonstration as a joint Palestinian-Israeli initiative the activists duplicate the problematic ethno-nationalist identification system of the Israeli state which divides citizens into sub-categories by ethnicity—Jewish, Arab, Druze and so forth—with vastly different citizen rights, duties and privileges (Helman 2007; Handelman 1994). Whether

conscious or not, this conceals those not present, namely Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank, and the reasons for their absence. In other words, presenting this as a joint Palestinian-Israeli protest simultaneously reinforces a discriminatory divide between categories of Israeli citizens and obscures the fact that Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza cannot be present because by Israeli military law they are severely limited in their freedom of movement and forbidden to travel to this protest site. While the depiction Palestinian-Israeli thus comes across as progressive and gives the impression of inclusiveness, it reproduces the ethnic based divisions that the Israeli state employs to differentiate and discriminate between categories of citizens. Furthermore, this obscures the fact that Palestinians from Gaza or the West Bank are physically excluded from this protest through the structural violence of checkpoints, the wall, and the permit system (Tawil-Souri 2012).

Second, the presence of so-called peacekeepers is so common in demonstrations in Israel that I did not even elaborate on them in my fieldwork notes. Peacekeepers are Jewish-Israeli Hebrew speaking veteran activists assigned to ensure that the rules of conduct, as previously agreed upon by an organizing committee, are maintained throughout a demonstration or action. At times this means marking the route in case of a march or staying in contact with the police ordered to oversee a protest. In this particular instance the peacekeepers were tasked with guarding ‘the image and reach’ of the demonstration. Three weeks before the event there had been discussion about the purpose of this action among different groups and organizations making up the steering committee. While some fervently opposed the idea, it was quickly decided that it should focus primarily on reaching the Israeli left. The reasoning behind this was that surely most Israelis would not condone the human suffering imposed on Gaza if only they knew what was going on, and if they could only break out of their political indifference. In order to reach this elusive Israeli mainstream audience it was quickly decided that 1) no permit requests were going to be submitted for West Bank Palestinians to participate, and 2) that the message of the action would solely focus on humanitarian aid and not include any political message. This then turned into a decision to avoid any political language, including words such as ‘occupation’, ‘blockade’ and ‘siege’, in the call for action. There was also a ‘unanimous’ decision to not expose or allow any Palestinian national symbols on the day itself.

I write ‘unanimous’ in inverted commas because at this point several representatives of groups, such as the more radical<sup>15</sup> Ta’ayush and AAtW, had already left the meeting in protest. In this context, the peacekeepers could no longer be seen simply as coordinating the demonstration as they were also actively influencing its shape and context.

Third, following from the above, the display of Palestinian flags at the demonstration was not solely a display of Palestinian nationalism. Instead it was a ‘protest within a protest’ against what was perceived to be the non-political, non-disturbing approach of the organizing committee. As one of the activists explained in an interview afterwards:

It [putting up the Palestinian flag] was a symbolic protest within a protest. A deliberate small disruption of the peace. Joint actions like these are so focused on reaching an Israeli audience that they literally leave Palestinians and Palestine out of it. They are so afraid to upset Israeli activists or the media that they do not dare to even mention the real problem. [...] Bringing food and diapers to Gaza is nice and all but this is not some sort of natural disaster. The siege of Gaza is man-made, *Israeli* made. It is deliberate policy (Ronnie Barkan, February 5, 2008).

By defying the no flag rule, Ronnie and the other activists tried to challenge what is regularly referred to as the ‘humanitarian’ or ‘balanced’ approach (Hajjar 1997). Articulated particularly by Israeli NGO activist groups such as Peace Now, this approach consciously stays away from ‘the political’ in order to reach the mainstream Israeli media and not scare off left-leaning possible Israeli sympathisers (Feldman 2009). As such, they do not speak out about the separation wall, about Israel’s military attacks on Gaza, or even about the occupation. They focus on humanitarian suffering, certain restrictions and military actions, but do not necessarily object to the policies that cause them, and do not acknowledge the structural violence behind them. For example, Peace Now strongly condemned the civilian casualties of the 2008-9 military operation Cast Lead. They did not, however, oppose the military operation per se and stayed clear of rejecting the blockade of Gaza. What is interesting is that some individual activists from Peace Now do oppose the blockade, the broader occupation, and the Zionist ethno-

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15 I consciously describe groups such as Ta’ayush and AAtW as ‘radical’ rather than militant or extreme because they are characterized by the shared aim of radical, systematic change opposed to mere policy change or topical adaptations.

nationalist practices from which these spring, but strategically they choose to ‘stay away from politics’:

Of course I understand the [flag activists’] point. The blockade and the occupation are the problem but they need to understand the Israeli mind-set. If there would have been Palestinians [from the West Bank] at the demonstration, some Israeli activists would not have come. The media would have definitely portrayed us as Arab lovers or as enemies of the state. For Israeli people the Palestinian flag is the flag of the enemy. You simply cannot do that. It has to be a truly nonviolent action. Not a demonstration in which Israeli activists feel attacked (Miri, 28 January 2008).

Despite their personal convictions, activists like Miri, thus, strategically choose to 1) exclude West Bank Palestinians, 2) prioritise Israeli feelings and possible audiences over Palestinian participation and experiences, and 3) conflate non-disturbing action with nonviolent action. While there was absolutely no physical violence at this particular example of direct action, it is exactly such ‘ordinary’ demonstrations that draw out the unequal power relations and illustrate how nonviolence can function as a smokescreen to cover the underlying structural violence which such actions purport to protest against.

Fourth, it should be noted that, like Miri, the organizers of the protest equated nonviolent action with non-disturbing action. That is, they consciously chose to exclude Palestinian national symbols in order to not upset Israeli participants and not jeopardise possible news coverage in the Israeli media. This represents a sharp break with the most basic tenet of nonviolent direct action theory, which rejects the use of violence as part of a strategy that aims to undermine the pillars of support (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008; Fatthahi 2012) on which a particular oppressive system rests. By choosing to ‘not upset’ the Israelis, the organizers chose to disconnect nonviolence from its direct action roots and therewith, it can be argued, stripping their strategy from addressing the underlying system of oppression.

The above ethnographic description shows how, in this instance, Israeli activists’ voices and Israeli audiences were prioritized over Palestinian activists’ voices and broader Palestinian everyday experiences. It is tempting to conclude that there therefore exists a ‘good activism’ and a ‘bad activism’. The good activism would refer to the Sumud camp where the direct action

takes place on Palestinian land, where those most affected take the lead and where power relations are carefully considered and translated into strategic measure during the action. The demonstration at the Erez crossing would then be so called bad activism because unequal power relations are not acknowledged but instead reproduced. This division certainly reflects a sharp distinction that various Palestinian and Israeli activists themselves make; that between co-existence and co-resistance (Hammami 2015; Rijke & van Teeffelen 2014; van Teeffelen 2011; Hallward 2009). Co-existence is used to describe dialogue groups and peace activism that work within the peace and conflict paradigm which prioritizes narratives, mutual understanding and a shared responsibility for both the conflict and the much-desired solution of peace between the two sides (de Jong, 2017). Co-resistance, in contrast, does not perceive the current situation as a conflict between two sides but rather as continued settler-colonial dispossession and apartheid (Bishara, 2001; Dugard and Reynolds 2013). They acknowledge the discrepancy in power and position between Palestinian and Israeli activists and organize their direct actions accordingly (Amir and Kotef 2015).

In sum, a critical look at the example under scrutiny in this article shows how existing unequal power relations can be mirrored in activism and how this can lead to the, conscious or not, reproduction of exclusion and structural violence. It was shown how activists use the same discriminatory categories to describe Israeli or Palestinian participants based on ethno-nationalist difference rather than citizenship. This is concurrently reflected in the decision-making process and how this constantly prioritizes Israeli participation and Israeli audiences over Palestinian presence and Palestinian experience. This then lead to the conflation of a non-disturbing protest action with a nonviolent strategic action. These conclusions plead for the distinction between peace activism on the one hand and nonviolent resistance on the other hand. As has been shown, this closely corresponds with the emic—as used by some activists themselves—distinction between co-existence and co-resistance (Gale 2014). While this distinction is particularly useful to analyse internal dynamics within the Palestinian-Israeli activist scene, this article does not merely aim to distinguish between so called good and bad activism. Instead, I am interested in the mechanism through which unequal power relations and structural violence are reproduced within or through nonviolent action. Connecting the above to the proposed theoretical framework—thinking Palestine in relation to Zionism as its dialectic other, power and strategy in direct action theory, and the continuum of violence

as inherently present—therefore shows that this is not a mere difference in disposition between activist groups. Instead, the underlying positions towards Zionism demonstrates the perpetuation of violence in nonviolent protest.

## **Violence in nonviolent action**

So far, the ethnographic example has shown how discriminatory ethno-nationalist categories can be upheld within nonviolent direct actions in Israel-Palestine. This further determined the decision-making process and the conscious humanitarian/non-political approach. By taking this approach and physically excluding Palestinian participation from the West bank, this particular protest prioritised Israeli participation and audiences over Palestinian participation and experiences. It also equates non-disturbing with non-violent which stands in stark contrast to strategic premises of nonviolent direct action theory because it does not undermine existing repressive and unequal structures. In this article, this concurrently lead to the distinction between peace activism on the one hand and nonviolent resistance on the other hand. While this distinction can be easily recognised in the Palestinian and Israeli activist scene of today, it simplifies activist positions and therewith obscures structural mechanisms of both violence and nonviolence in Israel-Palestine. In order to move beyond mere value judgement and activist/activist groups blaming, it is informative to reconnect the ethnographic example and analysis to the earlier introduced theoretical framework of thinking Palestine, strategic direct action theory and the continuum of violence. More practically this means critical engagement with activist interpretations of Zionism, how this informs perceptions of different forms of violence and, how these interpretations translate into different actions and strategic decision making.

In line with ‘thinking Palestine’, scholars such as Turner (2019) approach Zionism first and foremost as a political reality with far reaching consequences for Palestinians. While acknowledging that Zionism has different definitions and meanings, it is asserted that at the inception of the Zionist movement in 1897 its primary objectives phrased by Theodor Herzl were: 1) The creation of a collective secular nationalist Jewish identity, 2) the creation of a national Jewish language based on Rabbinical Hebrew to replace Yiddish, 3) the large-scale immigration of Jews from their countries of origin to Palestine and 4) the dominance over the ‘new old land’ politically

and economically, if necessary through violence (Avineri, 1981:127). Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), an Orthodox Jewish leader in Germany, in response observed that this signaled a transformation of being Jewish because of what you do (religious practices) to being Jewish because of what you are (Jewish as an ethno-nationalist identity) (Hirsch, 1962:461). Based on particular interpretations of early Zionist movement objectives and recently confirmed by the 2018 Jewish Nation-State Bill (Jamal 2016), Israel is thus perceived as a democratic state for Jewish people in particular and not equal/equally democratic for all its citizens. This creates a distinction between, on the one hand, Jewish (potential) national citizens of Israel who enjoy full democratic citizens' rights, and on the other hand a non-national population of which Palestinians are the most visible which are not included in this national space. This distinction carries beyond Israel proper because Jewish settlers in the West Bank also enjoy full national citizenship whereas Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, for example, do not (Braverman 2007).

Palestinian and Israeli activists such as those from the Sumud Freedom camp and the flag protest-within a-protest perceive this distinction to be the root cause of the situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories today. It is this ethno-nationalist categorization of people that was used to legitimize the creation of the state of Israel, the concurrent exclusion of the indigenous population from this newly established state, and the continuous dispossession and exclusionary suppression of Palestinians ever since. At this point, it is crucial to iterate that such interpretation or acknowledgement of Zionism as inherently violent due to ethno-nationalist exclusionary practices and structures, does not necessarily alleviate power inequalities among different activists. It does, however, show that questions of strategy, contentious repertoire and strategic nonviolent action go beyond individual preferences (Giugni, McAdam, Tilly 1999; Tarrow 2011).

Connecting this to nonviolent direct-action theory as set out before, the Erez crossing protest does not undermine this primary Zionist pillar of power but instead confirms and strengthens it. It confirms ethno-nationalist categorizations of othering by upholding ethnic divides between the activists and by excluding, both physically and symbolically, Palestinians from decision-making and the actual demonstration. By strictly observing the humanitarianism approach, the protest furthermore focused on providing urgent and temporary care to ahistorical victims and thus 'render[ed] questions about the future irrelevant or invisible' (Ticktin 2011:253).

De-politized protest like these not only confirm but even strengthen Zionist ethno-nationalist politics because it reinforced the idea of Israel as a democratic state where protests are allowed while only certain, non-disturbing, non-Palestinian protests are allowed. Protests that do not stick to a humanitarian message but address the root-cause of Zionist exceptionalism instead are rendered illegitimate and regularly met with brutal direct political violence (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2008; Pallister-Wilkins 2011).

Demonstrations in villages such as Bil'in in the West Bank are, for example, routinely met with teargas and arrests while they also apply a creative nonviolent direct action approach (Gordon, 2010; Peteet, 2017). These weekly protests are led by the local Popular Committees and often take a carefully picked theme or approach each Friday in order to confront the Israeli army and protest the presence of the separation wall (Hallward 2009). In 2010, for example, protesters dressed up to resemble characters from the popular Hollywood movie *Avatar* to visually and symbolically portray the Palestinian struggle as indigenous anti-colonial, anti-capitalist destruction (Loshitzky 2012). As Rania Jawad eloquently demonstrates, the theatrical staging of such protests should be interpreted as a conscious way to 'appropriate the colonizer's tools of suppression (whether literal, such as the tear gas canisters, or more symbolic, such as the marking of the other as terrorist)' (Jawad 2011: 132).

The protest at the Erez crossing into Gaza also employed a theatrical approach based on a strategy. The organizing committee consciously decided to predominantly target an Israeli audience and, as such, the message of humanitarian aid took central stage. By prioritizing this message of doing good over the attendance (in person) and symbolic presence (ban on displaying flags) of Palestinians and Palestine, the activists thus consciously framed this action in a manner that does not challenge the occupation or the military siege on Gaza. The activists that posed the flags and therewith staged a protest within a protest visible challenged this non-threatening script not only by symbolically inserting Palestine back into the demonstration framework but also by challenging Zionism as inherently violent. Violence in this conception does not only refer to the violent dispersal of Palestinian-led, politized protests but also to the structural and symbolic violence that enables current Zionist ethno-nationalist dispossession.

This article focused on the reproduction of categories of people and unequal power relations and the reproduction of structural violence

within and through nonviolent action in Israel-Palestine. I pose, however, that the underlying threefold focus and theoretical framework—thinking Palestine, direct action theory and continuum of violence—carries beyond this particular case study and can inform other resistance studies in different settings who are interested in critically engaging with unequal power relations and the reproduction of violence within nonviolent activism and resistance.

### **Conclusion: Analysing nonviolent action**

The analysis above illuminates how both violence and power are central to understanding the context of nonviolent action in Palestine-Israel. It has been shown that peace activism and nonviolent resistance in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories cannot be separated from the violent surroundings in which they operate and that activists, despite the often conscious decision to work together across the Palestine-Israel divide, are not immune for the multiple power relations among and between them. Peace activists—whether Jewish-Israeli, Arab-Israeli or Palestinian—deliberately work together in order to protest certain perceived unfair or inhumane aspects, such as medicine shortage due to the blockade of Gaza, or ill treatment at checkpoints. They do not necessarily always articulate an analysis or critique of what underlies such practise. While the reasons behind this may vary per peace-activist group, the general absence of deep critique among those who describe themselves as peace activists suggests that they prioritise Israeli participation and audiences over Palestinian everyday experiences of structural violence. Their insistence on conveying only certain messages and only using particular non-disturbing symbols and nonviolent methods can be perceived as perpetuating the status quo of military occupation and therewith reproducing structural violence.

Those following the nonviolent *resistance* approach, on the other hand, emphasize that they do not ‘merely’ protest the blockade or a particular instance of military violence but rather the ethno-nationalist exclusionary practices and structures that are perceived to cause them. In their political discourse, Zionist contemporary practise is described as inherently violent because it relies on a distinction based on ascribed ethno-nationalist identity. In this perspective it is assumed that professed respect for human rights is not actual unless it includes all people. In the case of Israel-Palestine respect for basic human rights depends on being classified as Jewish/Jewish-Israeli. They recognise that Zionism creates a context in which Jewish-Israeli activists hold

a different, less vulnerable position than Palestinian activists, and design both their direct actions and the internal organisational hierarchy accordingly.

Nonviolent activism is thus not simply characterised by absence of or opposition to the use of physical violence, but by the position it assumes in relation to what constitutes violence; how this translates into conscious processes of decision making and the execution of strategic action. Opposition to direct physical violence, as well as perceptions of structural violence and what its underlying causes are, is crucial to these activists' praxis. Furthermore, nonviolent resistance always maintains an element of refusal. In Israel and Palestine this can consist, among other things, of a refusal to comply with or reproduce the binary divisions of Israeli versus Palestinian or Jewish versus Muslim/Arab as implemented by the Israeli state. In other words, nonviolent resistance in those instances rejects the categories of othering on which Zionist ethno-nationalist exclusionary practises and structures are based.

To return to the Sumud camp, it becomes clear how the approach of the activists there differs from those at the demonstration near the Erez crossing into Gaza. First, they could genuinely present themselves as a joint Palestinian-Israeli nonviolent initiative, because in the West Bank Palestinians could actually participate without having to depend on Israeli counterparts to apply for a permit. Second, in the decision-making process power inequalities were addressed. As such, the Sumud camp participants acknowledged that the villagers of Sarura are the ones actually carrying the burden of IDF retaliations and therefore consciously followed the villagers' lead. Furthermore, they were aware that Jewish-Israeli and international participants are treated differently by the IDF and used this privileged position by, for example, putting Israelis and internationals in the frontlines during IDF or settler interventions. Third, the Sumud Freedom Camp clearly articulated how their particular action related to the broader situation. They not only resisted the dispossession of this particular Palestinian village, but connected it to Zionist settler-colonial expansion. By actively working together they thus embody a form of prefigurative politics which firmly rejects discriminatory categories set by Zionist practices.

To divide various activist groups and particular nonviolent actions in Palestine-Israel into 'good' resistance versus 'bad' peace activism does not, however, do justice to the activists nor the complex and violent surroundings in which they operate. Such simplified value discernment also fails to

contribute to the academic understanding of the reproduction of unequal power relations and the perpetuation of structural and symbolic violence in nonviolent actions. Instead, in this article I posed a threefold theoretical approach which enables a critical expose in both covert power relations and less visible forms of violence within nonviolent action as illustrated by an in-depth ethnographic description. Without downplaying the local specific context of Palestine-Israel, the suggested threefold approach can also be applied to investigate power relations and symbolic or structural violence in nonviolent protest in other settings.

First, whereas ‘thinking Palestine’ refers to a specified body of knowledge on Israel-Palestine in relation to Zionism, research in other settings would also first have to rethink the most basic of tenets of what is going on. It would be especially informative to scrutinize how various often competing conceptualizations of the problem/solution relate to perceptions of perpetuated violence. Second, this analysis of violence should not be limited to physical violence but instead include structural, symbolic and everyday violence and how these overlap and relate to each other. Furthermore, this second step should explore how these overt/less identifiable forms of violence apply and impact categories of people differently and how these understandings may or may not translate into processes of decision making within activist groups. Third and finally, resistance scholars should pay careful attention to how the strategies of nonviolent action are based on activist analysis of the above and whether such analysis and concurrent direct actions or strategically undermine these practices and structures.

While acknowledging existing power inequalities and consciousness about various form of violence does not automatically alleviate power relations and certainly does not immediately counter the violent surrounding of nonviolent protests, this approach may well provide activist and scholars (or activist scholars) alike with important tools to detangle less visible power relations among activists and critically analyse the perpetuation of violence through and within nonviolent actions.

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# Hezbollah's Dilemma: between Resistance and Sectarianism<sup>1</sup>

Abed Kanaaneh, *Tel Aviv University*

## *Abstract*

*The social mobilization (Hirak in Arabic) started in Lebanon on 17.10.2019 has been an unprecedented event in the modern history of Lebanon, for it has lasted for more than half a year, but most importantly, for being a cross-sectarian and cross-regional mobilization in state based primarily on sectarian structure and on a sectarian-based sharing of power. The present mobilization has put the foundations of the Lebanese regime at stake. This article attempts to trace Hezbollah's reaction by following the trail of the speeches held by the organization's secretary-general about the mobilization in the first two months, as Hezbollah is the main force largely dominating the Lebanese regime, and how the present mobilization has rendered Hezbollah the main advocate for a regime which Hezbollah (at its outset) sought to uproot. The article demonstrates that Hezbollah is somewhat 'embarrassed' at the grass-root level, for its muqawama (Resistance) project would seem deficient unless it provides all the Lebanese with a clear-cut answer regarding the socio-economic situation, something that the party has not done yet.*

## **Introduction**

During the past twenty years, especially since the liberation of South Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah has managed to obtain great sympathy from both large various groups inside Lebanon and the Arab world in general due to its embodiment of the culture of resistance against colonialism and against the Israeli occupation. This sympathy increased particularly after the July 2006 war that Israel launched against Lebanon. During that war, Hezbollah withstood for 33 days which was considered by the party and its supporters as a 'Divine Victory'.

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Various academic studies have shown how Hezbollah transformed from the stage of a small military and fundamentalist organization that was concentrated on resistance/Jihad against Israel, to the stage of Lebanonization and openness at the end of the nineties and the beginning of the 21st century (Worrall, Mabon and Clubb 2016; Abboud and Muller 2012; Alagha 2011; Norton 2007; Alagha 2006).

The image of Hezbollah, the embodiment of the project of resistance in Lebanon and the Arab world, has received several strikes. Yet, none of them has been completely deadly. A major one was a result of the party's attitude towards the 'Arab Spring'. Although Hezbollah has welcomed this spring in Tunisia and Egypt, it has turned against it when protests reached Syria, as the party fell into a dilemma: either to support the downtrodden popular masses or to stand by the Syrian regime, which was an important partner and supporter of Hezbollah's resistance against Israel.

The organization has justified its intervention in Syria by deeming itself the protector of Lebanon and all groups that sustain the country's unique character. Hassan Nasrallah has put it this way in the speech delivered in October 18, 2015: 'The Muqawama protects all the nations of this region- the Christians, the Sunnis, the Shiites and the minorities; on the right of partnership and freedom of opinion' (Nasrallah 2015).<sup>2</sup>

In October 2019, demonstrations erupted in Lebanon. Quickly they turned into demonstrations against the Lebanese system as a whole and against the sectarian regime that has prevailed in Lebanon since its inception about a century ago. Moreover, they were against the sectarian quota and corruption rampant in it since the Ta'if Accord that ended the Lebanese Civil War in 1989 and which actually established the second republic.

Hezbollah was one of the central opponents of the Lebanese regime as well as one of the permanent demanders to terminate the sectarian quota. It has also introduced the method of proportional elections in Lebanon and was in favor of other demands that the protesters are raising nowadays in Lebanon (against corruption, in favor of social justice, among other things). On the other hand, these demands have coincided with a period in which Hezbollah, with its sectarian roots, has succeeded in controlling the joints of the Lebanese system through cross-sectarian alliances.

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<sup>2</sup> Hassan Nasrallah's speech 18.10.2015 <http://www.alalam.ir/news/1750378> (accessed March 15, 2020).

In this article, I argue that the nonsectarian identity of the Lebanese uprising has sharpened the Hezbollah dilemma. In the following sections, I will depict the unfolding dimensions of Hezbollah's dilemma regarding the uprising, how Hezbollah's leaders have dealt with the uprising in the first two and a half months and how this period illustrates the dilemma of Hezbollah. The article will also illustrate the differences in Hezbollah's reaction towards 'Lebanese mobilization/Hirak' versus the 'Arab Spring', and how these differences would affect the credibility of Hezbollah in the eyes of its supporters, especially those who are affiliated with the Leftist circles.

The article points to the seeds of discord among part of Hezbollah's close environment and supporters regarding the party's position towards the Hirak in Lebanon. Moreover, it underlines Hezbollah's difficulty in maintaining the contradiction between its position against western imperialism in the international arena, on the one hand, and its collaboration and protection of the sectarian and capitalist system in the Lebanese arena on the other hand. Consequently, in the article I argue that Hezbollah has lost part of its credibility as a resistance movement due to its decision not to join the rising mobilization against the oppressive Lebanese regime.

The article is based mainly on analyzing the five central speeches of the party's Secretary-General in the first two months of the Lebanese Hirak (speeches he held on the following dates: 19.10.2019, 25.10.2019, 1.11.2019, 11.11.2019 and 13.12.2019). I have chosen these speeches in this particular period, as they were primarily concerned with the Lebanese Hirak in its infancy when the protests took all of the Lebanese political class by surprise. Consequently, the reactions have been more spontaneous and largely reflecting the abstract understanding of the political class (including Hezbollah) of these developments. In addition, at the beginning of 2020, the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani (the commander of the Quds Unit in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard) and the possible outbreak of a regional war and regional tension between Iran and USA overshadowed the issue of the Lebanese Hirak in the speeches of Hezbollah and Nasrallah.

Later, especially since March, the Corona pandemic took the lion's share of the focus of all the countries around the world and local players in Lebanon, including Hezbollah. Thus, the pandemic and the precautionary medical measures have had an impact on the Hirak's intensity and strength (although it was not completely eliminated, and renewed again as a result of the great economic deterioration and the reduction of the first wave of the pandemic.)

In addition to Nasrallah's speeches, I have surveyed the Lebanese and the international press during the first stage of the Lebanese HIRAK, especially al-Akhbar newspaper, which is close to Hezbollah and on the other hand, it positions itself in the leftist camp.

Likewise, in order to compare the dominant narrative in Hezbollah's discourse in general and Nasrallah's in particular about the Arab Spring with the one about the Lebanese HIRAK, I have analyzed four main speeches delivered by Nasrallah in the early stages of the Arab protests/revolutions that took place in what will be known later as the Arab Spring (These are the speeches that Nasrallah gave on the following dates: 7.2.2011, 19.3.2011, 25.5.2011 and 25.5.2013.)

In order to analyze Nasrallah's speeches, I have used the political discourse analysis method (PDA), concerned with understanding the nature and function of political discourse and with critiquing the role discourse plays in producing, maintaining, abusing and resisting power in a contemporary society (Van Dijk 1997).

While analyzing the speeches, I contextualize them by connecting them to the specific historical events which are taking place and which invoked the necessity of holding these speeches in the first place. Simultaneously, I shed light on the particular use of terminology employed by Nasrallah and the transformation of his discourse from a supportive and democratic discourse at the beginning of the Arab Spring and later-on at the beginning of the Lebanese HIRAK, to resistive, anti-colonial and anti-imperialistic signifiers that accentuate the conspiracy paradigm in order to justify Hezbollah's unsupportive actions later on.

The article is divided into three main parts. First, I will provide a fast scanning of the Lebanese sectarian political system and the background upon which Hezbollah has emerged in addition to the main changes in the perceptions of the party. Second, I will survey how Hezbollah has dealt with previous demonstrations and uprisings in Lebanon and in the Arab world since the 'Arab Spring'. The last and main section of the article deals with the way Hezbollah has conceptualized the Lebanese October uprising, what are the reasons for the confusion of the party in dealing with the uprising this time and to what extent did the unsectarian nature of the uprising sharpened Hezbollah's confusion.

## The growth of Hezbollah's project in Lebanon —a brief review

Since its establishment as an independent state and separate entity from Greater Syria, Lebanon is considered a special and distinct system from the rest of the Arab regimes in the region. Political scientist Arned Lijphart (1977) considered that Lebanon falls within the group of consensual democratic countries, which depend on a system of balances and participation among elites with different backgrounds that are compatible with power-sharing in a manner that preserves the rights of different elites of the sectarian/national/ethnic groups that constitute the common entity.

The Lebanese 'national pact' and constitution, based on the 1926 mandatory constitution, have provided the main framework for the Lebanese political life throughout the whole period preceding the Civil War. The national pact (1943), a 'gentlemanly agreement' between the Zu'ama' (sectarian leaders in Lebanon) of the two major communities at that time (the Maronites and the Sunnis) was a compromise between the two communities.

Sectarian and socioeconomic disparities alongside regional conditions and changes, led to the outbreak of the blood-soaked civil war, which lasted 15 years (Salloukh et al 2015: 21). The Ta'if Accord, which put an end to the civil war, has duplicated the Lebanese previous sectarian system with cosmetic changes and legitimized Syria's domination over Lebanon (el-Husseini 2013).

As opposed to Amal, which demanded a share of the 'sectarian cake' in Lebanon, at its very beginnings, Hezbollah was raising the banner of an absolute revolt on the sectarian Lebanese regime. It called for its uprooting, towards the establishment of a just state with an Islamic regime, following the example of the Islamic republic of Iran, established following the Iranian revolution in 1979 (Hamzeh 2004). This goal was reflected in the name of the nascent organization '*Hezbollah: al-thawra al-islamiyya fi Lubnan*' (the Party of God: the Islamic Revolution in Lebanon). This revolutionary aspiration was natural in the context of the civil war, which was at its peak when the movement first emerged, and which pushed all the Lebanese movements and organizations to their extreme.

However, this discourse was gradually altered into a more pragmatic one, and the Jihad discourse has developed into one of *Muqawama*

(resistance) (Kanaaneh 2018). With the passage of time, and following the end of the Lebanese Civil War, Khomeini's death and the transition to a more pragmatic stream in Iran, alongside the fall of the Soviet Union and other internal and international events, the Lebanese regime reestablished the sectarian system underwritten by a wide-ranging Syrian intervention in the country's affairs. This led Hezbollah to gradually change its strategy to a more pragmatic approach, at the national level, though with its radical positions towards Lebanon's external enemies maintained (Assad Allhi 2004).

Hezbollah has consciously decided to move from the 'blitzkrieg', in its Gramscian notion, to the 'trench war' or to constructing and implementing a politics of hegemony, through which the party seeks gradually to occupy 'hegemonic' positions in the Lebanese society by disseminating and rooting the resistance narrative and rendering it a meeting point for the largest number of forces and populations constituting the Lebanese society, and by transforming the *muqawama* concept into a meeting point for different partners in Lebanon (Kanaaneh 2020).

The Gramscian approach is significant in understanding Hezbollah's development during the last two decades. By moving the focus from the economic dimension to the ethical and political dimension of the society, Gramsci highlights the need of the social class (or group) to be 'leading' before its rise to power. He even deems it a prerequisite to the rise to power:

A class is dominant in two ways, namely it is 'leading' and 'dominant'. It leads the allied classes, it dominates the opposing classes. Therefore, a class can (and must) 'lead' even before assuming power (Gramsci 1995: 136).

He adds elsewhere that:

There can and there must be a 'political hegemony' even before assuming government power, and in order to exercise political leadership or hegemony one must not count solely on the power and material force that is given by government (Gramsci 1995: 137).

On the Gramscian approach, a project becomes hegemonic when:

One concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all taste, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations,

particularly in their intellectual and moral connotation (Williams 1960: 587).

Gramsci explains that a certain social group has to start 'practicing' leadership within a historical bloc that promotes a certain hegemonic project. This social class can establish its leadership in a way that enables it to integrate into debate and synthesis with other bodies, not only with other social classes, but also with different groups that exist in the society. Together, they should build and enhance a common 'popular-national' will in the civil society, around which more forces will gather to occupy the hegemonic position of power, not only in the civil society, but also in the political society (Gramsci 1995: 132-3).

Yet, the Gramscian perception of building such a hegemonic project emphasizes the need of the leading group to be open for joint negotiations and articulation with other forces, so that they can create together a broader and new general will. The ability of certain Islamist movements to lead a historical bloc that promotes a certain (counter) hegemonic project, is not obvious. Yet, to achieve this, these movements should either detach themselves from their 'religious essentialism' or undermine it, and somehow to move to the post-Islamism stage of their development (Bayat 2013). Regarding the case of Hezbollah, I would also add the adoption of another floating/empty signifier (Laclau & Mouffe 2001[1985]), around which they can build the desired counter-hegemonic project. This floating/empty signifier is the *muqawama* concept, and it is an empty or floating signifier because it has remained open enough to enable it to build new connections and dialogue with various political and social groups in Lebanon for whom the *muqawama* against the American imperialism and the Israeli occupation is very essential and attractive.

Hezbollah has constructed its hegemonic project on three main pillars. The first pillar has been transforming its fundamentalist<sup>3</sup> Islamic thought into a 'resistive' Islamic thought in a way that couples between Shiite Islamic thought and the concept of resistance through the paradigms of *Ashura* and the triumph of blood over the sword (el-Husseini 2008). The second pillar being the national openness towards the different populations comprising

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<sup>3</sup> I am aware of the many aspects of this term. I am using it here in its general meaning as a modern phenomenon, including the religious response to secularization and 'modernization' of the society.

the Lebanese society, mainly the Christians, and the attempt to build new Lebanese nationalism and resistance, where the Lebanese imagined community embraces all populations under the wing of *muqawama* (al-Agha 2011). The third pillar is the populist economic concept which divides human societies into two main parties: the marginalized and the tyrants, with Hezbollah being the representative party of the marginalized, regardless of their religious affiliation, and for being the representative of the marginalized, Hezbollah would also stand against tyrants and tyranny within the global system in general, and the Lebanese in particular.

### **Hezbollah and the ‘Arab Spring’**

After the assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, and the withdrawal of the Syrian troops and intelligence forces from Lebanon, the Lebanese political system was shaped very much by the polarization among two main rival camps: The 14 March Alliance with ‘the Future movement’ (*Tayyar al-Mustaqbal*) as the leader of this group and the 8 March Alliance headed by Hezbollah. Despite the effort of the two groups to emphasize the political nature of this polarization, the sectarian division was too strong to be ignored especially between the Shiite sect and the Sunnis of Lebanon. (Fakhoury 2016: 23)

The Arab spring, which started at the end of December 2010, arrived to the Lebanese context while the sectarian polarization was highly entrenched. The way each alliance dealt with the Arab Spring was a function of its regional and international alliances. At the very beginning, Hezbollah’s position towards the Arab Spring was welcoming, for it considered it another victory of the resistance project over the ‘American Imperialist puppets and Israel’. (Nasrallah 2011c).<sup>4</sup> The fall of Zine al-‘Abidine Ben-‘Ali, and most importantly that of Hosni Mubarak, deemed by Hezbollah the worst normalizer with Israel on the one hand, and the party’s worst enemy on the other hand for having restricted the movement of the party’s activists to help Hamas and the Palestinian resistance by arms smuggling, had a direct impact on Hezbollah. (Wählisch and Flesch 2016: 2).

On February 7, 2011, less than a week before the fall of Hosni Mubarak’s regime, Hezbollah held a massive rally in support of the Egyptian

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<sup>4</sup> Nasrallah’s speech 25.05.2011 (accessed June 15, 2020) <https://www.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=20819&cid=141>

revolution, in cooperation with other leftist and nationalist parties. In his central speech at this festival, Nasrallah considered the Egyptian revolution a continuation of a clash between the peoples of the region, their resistance and liberation project versus the colonial projects led by the United States and Israel. Nasrallah considered that the martyrs of the Egyptian revolution are the martyrs of the party and of Lebanon, just as the martyrs of the Lebanese resistance in its war against Israel in 2006 are the martyrs of the Egyptian people and the entire Arab nation, as Nasrallah stressed in the same speech (Nasrallah 2011a).<sup>5</sup>

The rally also included speeches by Michel Aoun, the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, (later the President of the Lebanese Republic and one of the most important Christian allies of Hezbollah), as well as the Secretary General of the Communist Party at the time, Khaled Haddad, the Secretary General of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (Lebanese Party) and others (al-Akhbar 2011).

Yet, things changed as the winds of the Arab spring approached Syria and the Syrian regime. Less than a month later, and as expected, the Syrian protests against the regime of Bashar al-Assad have been received differently by the different alliances in Lebanon. While the leaders of March 14 Alliance in Lebanon believed that the spark of the mobilization against Ba'ath regime in Syria started with the expulsion of the Syrian forces from Lebanon following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, Hezbollah and its allies considered the events in Syria part of a conspiracy against Syria and the Syrian people and regime for their support to the resistance and not for any other reason.

The contradiction between the party's position towards the Arab revolutions at its beginning and its position on the events in Syria was grabbed by the party's enemies, especially in the Gulf States but also among the March 14 alliance, who hastened to attack the party's credibility and to accuse Hezbollah of sectarianism, maintaining that the party's stance with Bashar al-Assad's regime is due to Bashar's sectarian identity. (Ranstrop 2016: 41). They also claimed that the party's support to the demonstrators in Bahrain and in Yemen is also due to the sectarian identity of the leaders of the opposition in these countries. (Al-Agha 2014).

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5 Nasrallah's speech 7.2.2011 (accessed June 15, 2020) <https://www.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=19822&cid=142>

Despite its position, Hezbollah avoided direct and official intervention in the Syrian crisis for almost two years, until it attempted to take the role of an intermediate between the Syrian regime and some factions of the Syrian opposition to encircle the Syrian crisis before it becomes a civil war, and later a war between regional and international forces on the Syrian lands (Kizilkaya 2017: 222).

It was clear that what governs Hezbollah's position towards the Syrian revolution is the extent to which this revolution affects the ability to protect the party's gains and the resistance it leads in the face of the risks threatening its weapons and its presence following the loss of its Syrian logistic backup, which was a major element in the party's endurance in its last war with Israel (July 2006). The prioritization of the military resistance above all other values which Hezbollah had previously called for is not strange, especially as the party's leaders have always declared that the resistance precedes any other social or political gain, or as articulated by Hassan Nasrallah in his speech following the first parliamentary election Hezbollah participated in: 'If [we] were to choose between the Muqawama and the parliament, we would leave you the parliament' (Al-'Ahd 1992).

Moreover, the relationship between Hezbollah and Syria has further developed following the death of the Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, to be succeeded by his son Bashar al-Assad, when Syria not only allowed the delivery of Iranian weapons to the party to confront Israel, but also opened the Syrian army's stores, enabling the party to have access to very developed weapons which it did not have before (Ranstorp 2016: 35).

Despite the apparent contradiction in the party's position towards the revolutions, Nasrallah was clear since the beginning of the Arab revolutions, when he announced the standard by which the party will approach these revolutions. Nasrallah considered that the nature of the regimes and their regional and global alignments are crucial elements for the party's position towards these regimes. (Nasrallah 2011a). Consequently, it was clear that this statement would take a different position later, if the revolutions spread to reach countries and regimes opposed to American hegemony in the region, something that actually happened after the protests reached Syria.

In May 2013, Hezbollah moved to the stage of officially declared intervention, affirming that the party is not defending the Syrian regime against the Syrian people, but rather defending the Syrian regime and people, and most importantly the Lebanese people, against the monster of

penitential forces in Syria, and the danger of its infiltration into Lebanon, constituting an existential threat not only to Hezbollah and the resistance and the Shiite community in Lebanon, but also to Lebanon. To legitimize its intervention in the Syrian crisis among the different populations constituting the Lebanese people, Hezbollah referred to basic components of the Lebanese patriotic ethos; namely the multiculturalism and the religious pluralism. Based on this perception, Hezbollah declared involvement in the Syrian war to protect the multifactional and multicultural Lebanon:

There are two sides in the struggle; the first is the US-West-regional Arab side, relying on the *Takfiri* movement's [expiatory movements – A.K.] performance in combat fields. After all, those *Takfiris* behead people and cut their chests, dig up graves, and ruin the past that has existed for 1400 years! For long, followers of different religions have lived there, and so have mosques, churches, shrines, and tombs. That kind of cultural variety has survived as most of the governments ruling were Sunni. But now, they've begun to ruin the past, present, and future, refusing any political solution and insisting on further combat! [...] On the other side is a state or a regime with a clear stance on the Palestinian cause, resistance movements, and the Zionist scheme. At the same time, that regime is constantly ready for dialogue, political solution, and reforms (Nasrallah 2013).<sup>6</sup>

Hezbollah also referred to the importance of protecting the Shiite holy places, like the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, from the attacks launched by al-Qa'ida and ISIS, to affirm the significance of the party's intervention in the war taking place in Syria. Hassan Nasrallah also asserted that protecting the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, being also a holy shrine for the Shiites, would prevent the *Takfiri* movements from transforming the war into a purely sectarian one by inflaming sectarian spirit between the Sunnis and the Shiites, as these movements had previously targeted holy shrines in Iraq (Ranstorp 2016: 38).

The organization encountered an embarrassing situation due to the paradox between the position of the resistance party and the advocate of the most marginalized people, and the demands of the marginalized Syrians.

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<sup>6</sup> Nasrallah's speech 25.5.2013 (accessed June 15, 2020) <https://www.english.alahednews.com.lb/25839/454>

Yet, the alteration of the Syrian revolution into a cosmic war on the Syrian territories, alongside the recruitment of jihadist and Salafist movements and the Israeli and American support to the anti-Syrian regime mobilization, have turned the Syrian crisis from a dilemma for Hezbollah into an opportunity that should be seized in optimal ways. The resistance narrative has retaken its superior status over any other narrative, and the conflict with the American tyranny and Imperialism has reoccupied the largest part of the general image of the conflict in Syria:

Syria has been the cherisher of the Resistance, so the Resistance can't stand still while that cherisher is being ruined! Acting otherwise would mean we're absolutely dumb because it's only someone dumb who does nothing in time of conspiracy, death, and besiegement! In contrast, a sane, responsible one acts very responsibly. Brothers and sisters, if Syria falls in the hands of the US, 'Israel,' *Takfiris*, and US puppet regimes calling themselves 'states', then the Resistance will be besieged, and 'Israel' will invade Lebanon to impose its conditions and achieve its greedy schemes again. In that case, an 'Israeli' era will mask Lebanon! If Syria falls, then Palestine, the Palestinian resistance, Gaza, the West bank, and the Holy *al-Quds* (Jerusalem) will be lost! If Syria falls into the hands of the US, 'Israel,' and the *Takfiris*, then the peoples of our region will experience one extremely harsh era! (Nasrallah 2013)

What helped Hezbollah gain appreciation, not only on the part of its Shiite supporters from the Lebanese Shiite community but also in the part of the Christian population and the leftist and nationalist movements both in Lebanon and the Arab world, was its successful counteraction against Islamist Salafist and jihadist movements, especially al-Qa'ida and ISIS, and Hezbollah's success in expanding the connotations of the signifier *muqawama* beyond resistance to Israel and the United States, to include resistance to Salafist *takfiri* Islam too. In due course, this has supported Hezbollah's claims regarding its protection of Lebanon and the national ethos in Lebanon and the Levant from the "new external barbarism", represented by these movements.

Many polls have demonstrated increase in the support to Hezbollah's intervention in Syria among Christian respondents. For example, one of the

polls published by the Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar* shows that two thirds of the Christians in Lebanon believe that Hezbollah protects Lebanon from expiatory forces operating in Syria (al-Akhbar 2014). This demonstrates that Hezbollah's discourse about defending the homeland, with all its communities, does not apply only to the Shi'ite community in Lebanon, but also to the Christian.

In general, these Arab revolutions did not affect the party's positions inside Lebanon due to the Lebanese political system uniqueness. The Lebanese state, in light of the diversification of the centers of power, and the multiple players on the one hand, and the developed civil society, relative to the other Middle Eastern states on the other hand, has summoned another type of politics, namely hegemonic politics. It requires all political-social groups in Lebanon to integrate into alliances and continuous negotiations with the other groups. The aim is attaining control, broadening the impact zone and taking over more positions in the long-term 'trench warfare', and not through the 'blitzkriegs' that are more common in other Middle Eastern states, where the civil societies are not well-developed.

Therefore, we see that Hezbollah was keen to take advantage of the Arab revolutions, especially in its beginning, and to reframe these revolutions in order to fit them to the party's theory of resistance and to its main project: the confrontation with American imperialism, Israeli occupation, and the Arab regimes affiliated with the USA.

## **The background of the Lebanese Hirak and its main characteristics**

The Lebanese territories have witnessed tensions and conflicts for so many years since the beginning of the Arab Spring, and the Syrian arena has constituted a very significant arena in which the different forces in Lebanon fought against each other, without leading to a civil war within Lebanon. This enabled the growth of some Salafist movements in Lebanon, and some factions of the 'Future Movement' smuggled weapons and participated directly in the Syrian war alongside the different opposition factions against the Syrian regime and its allies, especially Hezbollah (Gade 2017: 188).

The direct reason for the Lebanese Hirak starting on 17.10.2019 was the Lebanese government's intent to impose taxes on WhatsApp calls, broadly used among the populace and the middle class in Lebanon, for its enables free communication via internet (although the tax was called the WhatsApp

tax, it was intended to other free calls apps like Facebook, *inter- alia*) (al-Akhbar 2019a). This tax was the straw that broke the camel's back, following long-year accumulation of complaints and reproaches against the Lebanese political and economic system, saturated with corruption, favoritism and sectarian-based sharing which impoverished the state's treasury, while the sectarian leaders and their friends accumulated their wealth at the expense of the great majority of the Lebanese people.

The Lebanese mobilization in October 2019 was preceded other smaller protests, namely the one called 'You Stink', which was launched in 2015 against the crisis of accumulated litter in Lebanon, associating it with the inefficiency of the state and its deficient performance, in addition to the health and environmental hazards that threatened the citizens at the time (Saade 2015). However, these protests led by young civil society activists lost momentum due to sectarian division, for the protestors disagreed which leaders should be held responsible for the crisis.

Later, in 2019, a few days before the outbreak of the Lebanese Hirak, more than 100 great fires broke out in different places in Lebanon as a result of the dry weather and the high temperature, burning huge amounts of trees and vast areas of what was left of the forests in Lebanon, which was called the Switzerland of the East and one of the most beautiful regions in the Middle East (BBC News 2019). Having yielded three victims and several dozens injured, these fires have touched a raw nerve in the Lebanese ethos with respect to the nature and beauty of Lebanon, proving again the state's inability to handle this natural disaster, for several players have held the state and its sectarian regime and the endemic corruption responsible for these fires and their outcome, and its inability to handle it, mainly as they had only three firefighting aircrafts, all invalid due to their high maintenance costs.

A few days later, the governmental consultations for the approval of the 2020 budgets yielded the aforementioned WhatsApp tax (in addition to other tax increases, mainly the 2% increase in VAT) pouring fuel on the fire, and leading to unprecedented mass protest all over Lebanon, rising above sectarian divisions in a great scene that brings to mind the mass demonstrations that broke out after the assassination of prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Yet, the demonstrations this time were devoid of the sectarian dimension and the vertical political division between March 14 Alliance and March 8 Alliance, to be an unprecedented event in Lebanon in

terms of magnitude and importance after *al-Ta'if*.

This transcendence of the vertical division between members of different factions is somewhat embodied in the slogan 'All of them means all of them' (are corrupt) which is directed against the political class as a whole, from all sects and denominations, regardless of the doctrine or religion of the politician or the leader. Meanwhile, it can be said that this slogan is mainly directed towards the raw nerve of Hezbollah because it is the latest to reach the ruling class in Lebanon, and because it considers itself as a representative of the resistance and the popular masses, in addition to the general belief that the party's hands are clean in terms of financial corruption. Therefore, the party considers that this slogan came to cause confusion among the masses.

Indeed, various parts of the HIRAK refused to include Nasrallah in the list of 'All of them means all of them', considering him to be different from the other leaders, at least because his own son (Hadi) is a martyr who was killed during the resistance operations against the Israeli occupation and for the liberation of the Lebanese lands. Clashes took place between different groups of the HIRAK and supporters of Hezbollah to stop this slogan and the more specific one 'All of them means all of them, Nasrallah is one of them' (Al-Monitor 2019a).

On the other hand, some protesters from various areas in Lebanon, and not only from the Shiite community, asked Nasrallah 'to be with us' or to 'join us' in the HIRAK and not to defend the corrupt politicians from the other parties and movements (Al-Akhbar 2019c). The HIRAK included protestors from all the Lebanese sects, including the Shiites from the south the *Biq'a* in the east and from the *Dahyih* of Beirut. Part of Hezbollah's supporters who participated in the HIRAK followed Nasrallah's instructions to withdraw from the HIRAK, others decided to continue protesting despite Nasrallah's position, while the rest admitted that this was the first time, since their involvement in political activism, they find themselves on the opposite side of Nasrallah and Hezbollah (Al-Monitor 2019a).

The uncertainty of Hezbollah's position towards the HIRAK led part of the Hezbollah and Amal movement's supporters in the south in Sidon, Nabatieh, Tire, and Beirut, to attack the peaceful demonstrators, under the pretext of blocking the streets and chanting against Amal movement's Chief, Nabih Berri, who is one of the main actors in the Lebanese political system during and after the civil war. Since 1992, Berri has assumed the position of Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament (which according to the Lebanese

sectarian system is devoted to the Shiite community) and is accused of accumulating a large wealth as a result of corruption. Yet, he is a staunch ally of Hezbollah within the Shiite community, and therefore one of the main factors of stability inside the Shiite sect, especially in south Lebanon, one of the crucial areas for Hezbollah's struggle against Israel (Al-Akhbar 2019b). It is important to note that the sit-in youth in the southern regions are affiliated mainly with the Lebanese Communist Party and other left and secular forces, as well as to non-partisan groups, although they support Hezbollah on the issue of resistance against Israel and the United States (al-Akhbar 2019d).

One of the main features that emerged in the first months of this HIRAK is the orientation and attempt to liberate areas and real estate in the various regions of Lebanon, particularly in Beirut, from the hands of investors and beneficiaries of the political class, who managed to lay hands on these places in different and devious ways. One of the HIRAK's most important goals is the resistance against the corrupt neoliberal system in post-Ta'if Lebanon, with the former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, being one of its most important founders and symbols. On November 5, hundreds of young demonstrators attacked the waterfront at Zaituna Bay, owned by Solidere, a development company founded by Rafiq Hariri to carry out a rebuilding project in Beirut following the civil war. This company has become a symbol of corruption on the one hand, and of neoliberal brutality on the other (Al-Monitor 2019b).

Another central target of the protesting youth is the banks, especially the Central Bank in Lebanon and its governor, Riad Salameh. Leftists and other groups affiliated with Hezbollah's environment have attacked banks, given that these banks are the main representative of the existing Lebanese system, responsible for the deteriorating economic situation that the Lebanese state has reached (BBC News 2020a). In the case of Hezbollah, the Central Bank of Lebanon and its governor, Riad Salameh, who has held the position since 1993, are considered central opponents of the party in particular, as the latter cooperated with the US in imposing sanctions on banks that cooperate with Hezbollah and in narrowing the economic screws on the party (BBC News 2020b).

## **How has Hezbollah received the Lebanese HIRAK?**

In his first speech directed to the protestors a few days after the outbreak of the Lebanese HIRAK, Nasrallah considered it a real national mobilization

caused by the real problems and challenges facing the poor strata in Lebanon. He also affirmed that this mobilization is not incited by foreign embassies or intelligence agencies:

The importance of your recent mass mobilization lies in its being genuine and spontaneous, I would stridently confirm that no one can claim that there is a certain party or organization or a foreign embassy standing behind, because we have the tendency to talk about conspiracy theories. No one is standing behind these demonstrations (Nasrallah's speech 19.10.2019).<sup>7</sup>

It was clear that Nasrallah's speech aimed to express support and alleviate the anger of the masses towards the Lebanese political system as a whole. However, Nasrallah was actually defending a corrupt regime by refusing the demonstrator's calls for the government's resignation, led by Sa'd Hariri, one of Hezbollah's prominent political adversaries, in an attempt to avoid the political vacuum, which would aggravate the crisis. Nasrallah also warned against targeting the president Michel Aoun, Hezbollah's important ally among the Christians in Lebanon. Nasrallah directed his speech to the Christian parties within the political sectarian-based structure in Lebanon so that they would not deem it an opportunity to target the 'Christian' president to inherit him and to strike Hezbollah too.

In response to the embarrassing contradiction between the party's slogans and actual action, Nasrallah explained that Hezbollah's abstinence from organized participation in the demonstrations meets the interests of the mobilization itself, for Hezbollah's participation would lead the mobilization towards a political polarization and intervention of regional forces. Therefore, despite Hezbollah's support of the protestors' needs, it would not take part in it in order not to harm it:

I do not want to delve further into this point, I would just tell you that if Hezbollah had joined you on the day after, the mobilization would have reached elsewhere; it would have simply become a political conflict, a conflict between different axes. Iran send America a letter via Riad Al-

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<sup>7</sup> Nasrallah's speech 19.10.2019 (accessed June 15, 2020) <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=12148&cid=148>

Solh [square], doesn't it? (Nasrallah speech 19.10.2019)<sup>8</sup>

This point is a clear indication of the dilemma Hezbollah is encountering, and which will increase between its military and regional dominance and between achieving local and internal goals for which the party was established, at least at the declarative level.

On the other hand, the party tried to highlight the differences between the state's institutions and Hezbollah and the *muqawama* by shedding light on a sensitive issue, being the confidence in the state's institutions:

Despite all sanction, why would people give their money to the muqawama, why would women give their jewelry to the muqawama, why would some people give up their houses for the muqawama, why would families send their children to fight for the muqawama? For a simple reason, they have confidence in the Muqawama. They know that the money that goes to the muqawama does not get stolen or wasted, it is rather spent on defending our land, our honor and our dignity. This is the equation we currently need in this state, there is a serious mistrust issue between the Lebanese people and the state, with all its institutions, for whatever is said is unbelievably. What is important for the citizen is what he sees not what he hears, so let us show him the truth that we can create with strong will and steadfastness (Nasrallah speech 19.10.2019).

In this paragraph, Hezbollah confirms, through the speech of its secretary-general, that the main problem lies in corruption and stealing, and not in the roots of the Lebanese economic and political system which constructs an economy dominated by a group of ruling oligarchy and commercial and banker bourgeoisie under the cover of Lebanon being the 'Switzerland of the East', a point repeated in the speech of Hezbollah regarding the economic issue in Lebanon.

In his next speech, less than a week later, on 25.10.2019, Nasrallah's tone about the mobilization changed. He moved from absolute conviction about the absence of foreign intervention to raising doubts about certain demonstrations, drawing attention to the attempts of some political parties, the partners in power for 30 years, to ride the wave of the mobilization and

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8 Nasrallah's speech 19.10.2019 (accessed June 15, 2020) <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=12148&cid=148>

take it away from its real and just goals, and to undermine Hezbollah and its armament. Nasrallah added that if the demonstrators' main goal had been to overthrow the sectarian system and the sectarian-based distribution of power, Hezbollah would have been the first to support this mobilization, but he maintained that this is not the case. Therefore, Nasrallah called the *muqawama* supporters to leave the streets due the vague identity of a part of the mobilization leaders.

An interesting point in the speech was the cultural discussion conducted by Nasrallah about the reference to Imam Husayn (the third Imam in the Shiite belief) by some of those who reproached Hezbollah for its non-participation in the Lebanese mobilization. The former maintained that Hezbollah stepped out of al-Husayn's camp (the revolutionary camp) by its abstention from participation in the demonstrations and by urging its supporters to follow its path. Nasrallah argued that the Lebanese mass mobilization had just slogans and goals, but it lacks a clear leadership, like that of al-Husayn, and lacks a clear alternative like the one offered by al-Husayn, hence his opposition to this comparison, which has clearly caused some embarrassment to Hezbollah.

In his following speech held on 1.11.2019, Nasrallah clearly addressed the dilemma, which Hezbollah encountered, as he stated that Hezbollah is:

Honestly walking on the edge, for on the one hand, there are just demands and sincere feelings of the aching people, and there is extravagant corruption in the country and in the regime, on the other hand, the country would end up in a very dangerous situation as a result of the political vacuum, and this would lead to an economic and financial collapse (Nasrallah's speech 01.11.2019).<sup>9</sup>

However, what prevents the party from joining the masses is its fear from the possibility that mobilization changes from a social into a political one, as stated by Nasrallah himself. Nasrallah admits thereby that the advocate of the poor and popular classes cannot join the mass demonstration of the popular classes because its weakness lies in its being a sectarian party related with external axes. This does not necessarily mean that the party is corrupt

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9 Nasrallah's speech 01.11.2019 (last visited on 15.03.2020) <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=12617&cid=148>

or dirty-handed, it simply reflects self-awareness, as the party is encountering a dilemma that can be handled only through readdressing the mobilization by an anti-colonialist discourse, which Nasrallah did in his following speech in November, about one month after the mobilization was started and the resignation of Sa'd Hariri's government.

In this speech, he tried to place Lebanon within a broader context and within the regional and international contexts, in which Hezbollah exhibits a better performance, and which are less complicated than the internal Lebanese arena. To achieve this, Nasrallah offered some suggestions to revive the Lebanese economy, in a way that does not demand subjection to American pressure. Nasrallah suggested specific solutions: opening the Lebanese market to Chinese and Russian investments, opening the Lebanese market to Iranian investments, providing opportunities for investment in reconstructing Syria, opening thereby the doors for a Syrian-Lebanese cooperation and profiting from the countless opportunities lying in the reconstruction of Syria after the civil war. He also suggested entering the Iraqi market and exporting the Lebanese agricultural and industrial products to the Iraqi market, a step that requires challenging the American administration, because products are exported through land borders, namely the Syrian-Iraqi borders, thus refusing whatever the American dictations are for these borders (Nasrallah's speech 11.11.2019).<sup>10</sup>

In this speech, Hezbollah tries to put Lebanon within an 'imagined' regional position which is different from the long-year dependence of the Lebanese political and economic system on the West, via France and the United States, in addition to the Gulf states' investments which developed and supported the Lebanese service economy at the expense of productive economy for so many years. In fact, Nasrallah suggested a primary holistic economic and political vision for an axis that departs from Lebanon towards the reconstructed Damascus, and then towards Baghdad that is releasing itself from the American fist, of course, with a Russian-Chinese-Iranian backup.

This speech is a return to Hezbollah's safe zone, which is the resistance to the western colonialism and to the United States, without addressing the

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10 Nasrallah's speech 11.11.2019 (last visited on 15.03.2020) <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=12960&cid=148>

essence of the Lebanese system, be it the sectarian-based political essence or the extremely liberal capitalist essence which strikes the productive agricultural and industrial sectors.

This approach was adopted by Nasrallah in his next speech held at the zenith of the consultations about entrusting the new government to handle the crisis. It was very important for him to open his speech by referring to the American position articulated by the American Secretary of State Pompeo and other officials who try to ride the wave of the Lebanese mass mobilization to launch a strike against Hezbollah, which seems evident to Nasrallah. He confirmed in his speech that the United States does not seek to solve the problem of Lebanon, adding that solving the problem of America and Israel lies in undermining the power of Lebanon, namely the *mugawama* that protects the Lebanese resources, mainly the gas fields on the Lebanese coasts and the borders demarcation between Lebanon and Israel (Nasrallah's speech 13.12.2019).<sup>11</sup>

Only after referring to the regional situation, Hezbollah addresses the different forces operating within Lebanon, and urges them to work together on the formation of a national unity government that represents the main forces in Lebanon. By the main forces, he means The Free Patriotic Movement, being the most powerful movement among the Christian Lebanese, Amal Movement despite the ongoing controversy about the corruption of some of the movement's officials, and the Future Movement, being the main representative of the Sunni population in Lebanon. Thus, the solution proposed by Hezbollah is the recycling of the sectarian-based distribution of power with the same players in the Lebanese political arena, deemed responsible for the accumulation of reasons behind the Lebanese revolution. This demonstrates again that Hezbollah, which has defined itself as the revolutionary party in Lebanon, is doing its best to procrastinate any change in the present reality, claiming that it seeks to prevent *fitna* (discord) and political vacuum that would threaten the entity of the Lebanese state.

This position by Hezbollah has been repeated and reiterated by Nasrallah in the comprehensive interview with radio *al-Nour*, long after the formation of the government without the Future movement, when Nasrallah stated that 'The tools of change in the Lebanese internal arena must take into account the country's composition and the fears it contains' (al-Ahed

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11 Nasrallah's speech 13.12.2019 (last visited on 15.03.2020) <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=14083&cid=148>

news 2020). In other words, Nasrallah admits that there is no way to 'fix' the Lebanese system and he surrenders to the very sectarian regime that the protesters revolted against in the first place.

These economic ideas of Hezbollah did not meet the minimum demands of the youth and movements strongly involved in the social protests. In spite of their different affiliations and orientations, the economic demands of these movements start from a fundamental change in the Lebanese political system to liberate the Lebanese state from sectarian quotas and from leaders of sectarian parties, who directly control the country's economy. In addition, they demand a fundamental transformation in the Lebanese economic structure, in which the state plays a major role, stopping privatization processes that did not keep much of the state's property and calling for progressive taxes on capital owners and other issues.<sup>12</sup>

With the strident refusal of the Future Movement to join a national unity government, the government formation mission was assigned to the economic expert and lecturer at the American University of Beirut, Hassan Diab, who is a Sunni (as determined in the Lebanese constitution), with the support of Hezbollah and its allies. Therefore, the reigns of the three main authorities in these hard times ended up in the hands of Hezbollah and its allies: the republic is headed by the strongest ally, general Michel Aoun; the parliament is headed by the chief of Amal Movement Nabih Berri, and the government is headed by Hassan Diab. Although not directly affiliated with Hezbollah, yet, his government was formed thanks to the parliamentary majority led by Hezbollah. Consequently, Hezbollah has become the main reference for solving the crisis that hit the Lebanese regime. Hezbollah has taken the role of the reformer of the corrupt regime after al-Ta'if, of which it was not a part for a long period, but rather an opponent at the very beginning, and has officially become responsible for reforming the present situation.

## **Trapped between two Resistances**

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12 See for instance the 'Citizens in a State' Movement's program, here: [https://mmfidawla.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/The-tragedy-is-not-fated\\_FINAL-1.pdf](https://mmfidawla.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/The-tragedy-is-not-fated_FINAL-1.pdf) (accessed June 15, 2020); and the Lebanese Communist Party's program, here: <http://www.lcparty.org/en/statements-en/item/31737-political-and-socio-economic-program-regarding-the-uprising-and-the-transitional-phase> (accessed June 15, 2020).

The Iranian-American researcher Hamid Dabashi radicalizes the resistive nature of Shiite Islam. He challenges Shiite activists in general, and Hezbollah in particular, with a difficult dilemma. He demonstrates that Shiite Islam is a resistive Islam, an Islam of the marginalized versus the tyrants. He argues that 'Shi'ism is a paradox. It dies at the moment of its success. It succeeds at the moment of its failure' (Dabashi 2008: 96). Dabashi maintains that since Husayn is 'Mazloun' (oppressed) and symbolizes all the oppressed people worldwide, he cannot win and establish his state. However, he is capable of and obliged to continue struggling and resisting oppression, and his triumph is actually his murder and 'his loss'. The ability of Shiite Islam to seize power and practice it without losing its essence is nonexistent according to Dabashi. Upon seizing power, the Shi'a, like any other state, is supposed to expropriate the absolute legitimacy of using power (according to Max Weber's definition of the state). Therefore, and by virtue of this definition, the Shi'a will lose its resistive essence; it will project its resistance on others, and will consequently lose its Shi'ism (Dabashi 2008: 71).

Dabashi argues that Shiism and resistance had been interwoven together, until the Islamic revolution in Iran lost its Shiite essence once it seized power and moved from the side of the oppressed people to that of oppressive power. It thus lost its essence and the basis of its legitimacy. Dabashi examines Hezbollah as opposed to Iran, and maintains that the former is also likely to lose its Shiism (resistance) (2008: 154). Yet, he indicates that a pluralist state like Lebanon (unlike Iran, where 90% of the population is Shiite), which has multiple ethnic and political groups, has the potential of constituting an interesting synthesis that would preserve the resistive essence of Hezbollah, and pose a serious challenge to Israel (the Jewish state).

Hezbollah, in its transition from the so-called ideological purism into a stage of 'openness' and Lebanonization, has partially attempted to develop this potential by raising the banner of *muqawama* and by building the *muqawama* project, as a counter-hegemonic project, that renders Hezbollah the leading authority in a historical bloc founded on different players, without seizing absolute power, which would (theoretically) lead to undermining Hezbollah's existence and legitimacy.

Hezbollah has attempted to maintain the built-in tension between its being an embodiment of the pure resistive Shiite project on the one hand, and its being a significant player who strives to achieve a certain form of control in the internal Lebanese arena on the other. This is achieved by hybridizing the *muqawama* signifier with the religious discourse on the one

hand, and with the economic-national discourse on the other, in order to unify between additional social and political forces in the pluralist Lebanese arena.

Although Hezbollah was an actual and effective national resistance against Israel and against US imperialism, the resistance that is no less important and through which its project could develop and mobilize more popular and leftist players in the Lebanese arena, is the resistance to the existing Lebanese system. But the party's position towards this system has changed, which was expressed by the party's general secretary:

Hezbollah has changed, and its priorities have also changed based on circumstances [...] There was a time when we used to see Lebanon as a colonial construct that was part of the Ummah [...] That was in our early days, and the country was going through a Civil War. All parties were calling for a Nation that fit their liking [...] Today, conditions have changed. We believe that this country is our country, and that the flag of the cedar is our flag that we need to protect, too. At this stage, our priority is to protect the state in Lebanon and to build it. (al-Akhbar English 2013).

In one way or another, Hezbollah has stepped back from the stage of building a real counter-hegemony with the possibility of leading the Lebanese system towards a real progressive, democratic and egalitarian regime to the stage of defending the existing system under various pretensions, thus turning into the guardian of the system and preserving it instead of revolting against it or changing it.

The Lebanese Hirak seems to accentuate the negative answer to 'the fundamental question' that the sociologist Asef Bayat has raised regarding the Islamist movements in general, which 'is not whether Islamism challenges imperialist interests, which it does. Rather, the question is to what extent, if any, this struggle entails an emancipation of the subaltern population in Muslim societies' (Bayat 2017: 79).

Hezbollah, in particular, could have formed a model different from the rest of the Islamic movements. Its presence in a unique pluralistic arena comprised of different sects allows it to be an example of openness to other powers and still provides real economic answers to the popular classes in Lebanon.

However, Hezbollah has evolved from a small party to one that represents not only the popular classes but also a broader society, as the former Director of Hezbollah's development think-tank Abd al-Halim Fadlallah said: 'Hezbollah is not a small party anymore, it's a whole society. It is the party of the poor people, yes, but at the same time there are a lot of businessmen in the party, we have a lot of rich people, some from the elite class' (cited in Daher 2016: 91).

Even the economic vision that the party gave as an answer to the protesters and the activists, which calls for economic integration and openness to the East (Russia, Iran and China), falls under the existing economic system in Lebanon. In fact, it enables the emerging Shiite bourgeois class to take hold of new and important joints in the Lebanese economy in place of the former hegemonic Maronite and Sunni bourgeois class. Consequently, this economic plan, which is oriented to the East, will be transformed if it merely applies a cosmetic change to the sectarian quota system in Lebanon instead of changing it from the foundations. Consequently, this HIRAK demonstrates that the existing conflict is a struggle between different bourgeoisies with different sectarian backgrounds who benefit disproportionately from the economic system and from the existing financial corruption in Lebanon, against which the Lebanese rose up from the beginning.

As I had previously argued, Hezbollah's hegemonic project was built on three central pillars: revolutionary Shiite Islam; imaginative new Lebanese nationalism, which emphasizes 'resistance' as a central signifier to link its various components. The third and weaker pillar is the economic foundation that is supposed to provide an alternative to the existing Lebanese economic system, which has largely pushed Hezbollah's constituencies out of influence over decades.

This project of Hezbollah is capable of living without a conclusive position on the economic issue as long as the basic discrepancy in the Lebanese arena is framed by the dual understanding of the world which is divided to two main components: The axis of resistance in its anti-imperialist version, versus the axis of American imperialism, (including the Israeli occupation, and the Arab states affiliated with the United States including the allies of the USA in the Lebanese arena). Consequently, Hezbollah's ability to frame the Arab mass mobilization in general, and inside Lebanon in particular, within this dualism during the first Arab Spring period helped the party evade the economic question and thus from giving an alternative comprehensive

project to the ruling Arab regime in general and to the Lebanese regime in particular.

In other words, Hezbollah has not been able yet, as is the case with the various Islamic movements, to present a complete liberation project and not just a project to fight American imperialism, or as the sociologist Asef Bayat argued:

Any struggle, however heroic, that replaces imperialist supremacy with domestic forms of oppression will not serve the well-being of the subaltern population. An emancipatory project may not deserve its name if it falls short of being inclusive, egalitarian, and universal. [...T]he central question, then, is not just how to challenge the empire but how to realize liberation; for the ultimate end is not simply anti-imperialism but emancipation (Bayat 2017:91)

The Lebanese HIRAK, for the first time, has confronted Hezbollah directly with its central dilemma as a resistance movement, and with its own public, as it emerged as a resistance movement and as a movement defending the popular masses. The HIRAK challenged Hezbollah to give a clear and non-elusive answer about the party's position towards the possibility of integrating the party's resistance against imperialism on the one hand with the resistance against the core of the Lebanese sectarian and oligarchic regime on the other hand, namely the regime attached to the global imperial system against which the party stands.

While Gramsci's theory of hegemony accentuates the type of leadership that aims to help the masses to express, deepen and strengthen their self-engagement for socio-political transformation (Thomas 2013: 26), it seems that Hezbollah has failed in fulfilling its role in dealing with this HIRAK in Lebanon. Instead of deepening the popular masses' engagement in a revolutionary act the organization stood as the savior of the oppressive system.

### **Conclusion: The dynamics of Hezbollah's attitude towards the Lebanese mobilization**

A look at the change in the speeches held by Hezbollah's secretary-general reveal important points about the party's attitude towards the Lebanese HIRAK, which is different from its attitude towards the Arab Spring about a decade ago.

The party attempts to identify with the demands of the vast majority of the Lebanese people, including the Shiite communities in the South, the Beqaa' and al-Dahiyeh. The party's attitude combines inclusion on the one hand and vigilance on the other hand, placing special emphasis on the endurance of the *muqawama* and the possibility of external intervention in the mass protests to change their direction to achieve the goals of the axes war.

Hezbollah implicitly admits that it is a part of this axes war in the region; however, the interesting point in Nasrallah's speeches is his emphasis on Hezbollah being a main nerve representing one religious community in the complex sectarian structure of the Lebanese society; and due to the different axes war reflected in the Lebanese political arena, Hezbollah cannot take part in the just demonstrations and mass mobilization so that the latter would not be considered a part of this war.

Hezbollah is aware that this approach opens the doors for other forces, like the Phalanges Party, the Lebanese Forces and the Progressive Socialist Party led by Waleed Jumblatt and other forces to ride the wave, thus, the mass mobilization would be fought for it would be considered led by the other axis. Yet, more than half a year after the mass mobilization was launched, its different leaders are preventing its appropriation and sectarianization by the different forces, a thing that would have occurred had Hezbollah allowed its supported to take an active part in the protests.

A closer look at Hezbollah's changing position reveals that what worries the party is the clash between the public demands and the main structure of the Lebanese political system, and this influences the party's reaction at different levels:

1. The mobilization would develop into an extensive attack on them and the whole sectarian-based system in Lebanon, which enabled Hezbollah to hold the reigns and become a dominant force the political system, not through violence but through cross-sectarian coalitions. This position attained by Hezbollah would not be easily renounced by the party, at least not before it guarantees that the alternative would not be the sectarian political forces from the opposite axis.
2. The mobilization against the corruption would hurt Hezbollah's worst adversaries within Lebanon, but it would also hurt its allies from Amal Movement and the Free Patriotic Movement, therefore, this would disrupt balances that Hezbollah have sought to achieve for more than two decades. Therefore, Hezbollah would not allow the fall of any of its

allies, so that it will not stay alone if targeted later.

3. Hezbollah's fear from any American political or intelligence activity is real. It is marketed through reference to different examples like Syria and Iran, both in the past and the present, even countries in Latin America and other places, in which the American hand has always interfered to make gains of any internal troubles that would serve its agenda. Hezbollah refers also to the current United States' intervention in Venezuela and Bolivia to demonstrate that the United States acts against any government or regime, even if elected by the people, if this regime does not comply with the American foreign policies.

Given these elements altogether, Hezbollah tries to walk between the dots without getting wet. It seeks to preserve a regime ravaged by corruption while flattering the mass protests, in an aim to solve the Lebanese crisis by heading again outside Lebanon and by trying to convince its allies, and the Lebanese official regime, to conduct a regional repositioning of Lebanon so that the solution is achieved through economic and political integration with the axis of resistance. However, this tactic is not destined to succeed for two reasons: first of all, it is very difficult for Lebanon, historically destined to be fully affiliated with the West, to become the Eastern axis without undergoing a drastic and cross-sectarian change, for recruiting the different religious groups for this project is unlikely both in the short and the mid-terms. The second reason is that any dependence on external support without creating a drastic change in the internal Lebanese socioeconomic structure will remain superficial and will not affect the sectarian structure of the Lebanese society, therefore, the social crisis will be postponed rather than solved.

In light of this, Hezbollah remains incapable of providing comprehensive solutions to the Lebanese political system, and with the current social protests, the party finds itself in an embarrassing situation in front of its Shiite supporters who constitute a major part of the populations directly affected by the consecutive economic crises caused by the Lebanese regime. The social mobilization has also placed Hezbollah in an embarrassing situation in front of patriotic and leftist movements and forces in the Arab world, which deemed the party a representative of their aspirations, enabling them to confront the Israeli occupation. Yet, to achieve this, it should not be confined to the sectarian Lebanese regime and the sectarian-based distribution of power in order for it to attain a humanistic internationalist status, a goal which Hezbollah has not achieved yet in the current Lebanese mobilization test.

The party's hesitation in providing a clear answer by joining the HIRAK, led a group of Hezbollah's supporters to pay attention to this inconsistency, expressed by one of the demonstrators who identified himself as a supporter of Hezbollah in Lebanon:

His [Nasrallah's] priorities here are different from our priorities, we want to change the system, get ourselves a better life; in short, we want a new life, while Hezbollah's priorities are keeping the system and making sure they're on good terms with their allies (Al-Monitor 2019b).

In other words, at least a part of Hezbollah's supporters began to realize inconsistencies in the party's positions and consequently did not accept half-rights or 'half-resistance.' The popular HIRAK pressures and pushes Hezbollah towards resolving its issue and its position in the Lebanese internal equation. Is it a real and comprehensive 'resistance' movement, or is it rather a resistance movement according to regional alignments abroad, while at home it is the protector of a brutal sectarian and capitalist system. It seems that Hezbollah has chosen to be the savior of the oppressive system.

The HIRAK diminished the credibility of Hezbollah as a comprehensive resistance movement. While the party's credibility had received many strikes, especially during the war in Syria, the party was able to justify and, in some cases, exploit the developments of the global conflict in Syria to obtain gains and rebuild its credibility in the eyes of its supporters from the popular classes. However, the party's stance against the current local popular movement, which stands against one of the most exploiting political systems, is a severer strike to the party's credibility, especially among the factions closest to the party.

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DEBATE - REFLECTIONS

**Glocal Resistance and De-colonisation:  
Civil Society in Khatami's *Islam, Dialogue  
and Civil Society* (2013) and its Relevance  
to our Reading of Popular Protest and  
Political Participation<sup>1</sup>**

Ane Marie Ørbø Kirkegaard<sup>2</sup> *Malmö University*

*Abstract*

*This piece concerns civil society as conceptualised in Khatami's book *Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society*, and in a wider sense the *Dialogue among Civilisations and Cultures* paradigm and the UN year of *Dialogue among Civilisations* (2001). In this particular text, Khatami discusses civil society in relation to de-colonising spaces, with particular references to West Asia, the Islamic world and the 'West.' However, his discussion bears relevance to other spaces with experience of colonial imperial domination and occupation, historically and contemporarily. While first published a decade before the Arab Spring, it bears relevance also to the clamours for political participation and social development, which so pervaded the risings in West Asia and North Africa, including the oft forgotten Sudan. In this particular discussion of civil society, the focus is on showing the global relevance of Khatami's conceptualisation of civil society as it emanates from the *Dialogue among Cultures and Civilisations* initiative, in a world where strategic disorder seems to be an increasing answer to resistance practices following local demands for political participation as well as independence from Western political economic structures of dominance—i.e. in spaces attempting to decolonise.*

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2 [ane.kirkegaard@mau.se](mailto:ane.kirkegaard@mau.se)

In the civil society that we espouse, although it is centered around the axis of Islamic thinking and culture, personal or group dictatorship or even the tyranny of the majority and the elimination of the minority has no place (Khatami 2013a:22).

## Introduction

In 1998, the UN decided to make 2001 its official year of Dialogue among Civilisations (Picco et al. 2001). The initiative originated from then President Seyyid Mohammad Khatami of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI)—one of the front runners of state-based resistance to Western economic, military, political and cultural global dominance. While the initiative itself is the focus of a research project at Malmö University,<sup>3</sup> this piece concerns one particular aspect of the initiative, i.e. the role of civil society in de-colonising contexts as explained by Khatami in the collection of speeches and essays on *Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society* (2013a). This is one of three main original collections of texts by Khatami on the Dialogue initiative so far reaching an audience beyond Persian speakers. The volume was first published in Karachi (Pakistan) in 2000 by The Foundation for the Revival of Islamic Heritage,<sup>4</sup> and is a collection of speeches and essays by Khatami, written both before and after his election to President of the IRI, and hence some of the items in the collection also predates the Dialogue among Civilisations initiative. There are two other collections, *Islam, Liberty, and Development* (1998) and *Dialogue among Civilizations: A Paradigm for Peace* (2001, edited by Bekker and Pretorius), both of which in part overlap with the 2000 and 2013 edition of *Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society*. Together these collections make up the main body of collected speeches and essays on the Dialogue initiative by Khatami in English. For reasons of simplicity this article focuses entirely on

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3 The *Dialogue among Civilisations and Cultures: The Politics of Security Networking and Global Ethics* research project (Malmö University, Dept. of Global Political Studies) was initiated in 2017. With a point of departure in the decolonial conceptualisation of interstate relations in the Dialogue initiative, the project aims at understanding the resistance discourses and practices of the currently unfolding geopolitical and global economic shifts, as expressed in both local and global contexts, e.g. from the political organisation of immigrants in France, to the Astana-Sochi Syrian peace negotiations and the process of de-dollarisation.

4 What differs between the 2000 and 2013 editions is page numbers.

the 2013 edition. *Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society* is explicitly centred on a discussion of civil society in a context of decolonisation of Islamic societies. Hence, this particular collection focuses mainly on Iran and the wider *umma*, which explains the Islamic focus in his deliberations. The essays and speeches in the collection leans heavily on peace as an Islamic philosophical concept and tradition, and is as such (together with other similar traditions) a vital source of inspiration for alternative, and more inclusive understandings of peace as concept and praxis (e.g. Huda 2010, Pal 2011, Mahallati 2016) than those of Western theosophy and philosophy. As such, *Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society* points, together with the two other collections, to the importance of socially, culturally, politically and spiritually resuscitating the Islamic world (the *umma*) on the one hand, and the global community of societies with experiences of liberal colonial imperialism on the other. In so doing, this collection, as a part of the much larger project of Dialogue among Civilisations and Cultures, is central because it links the concept of civil society to the project of decolonisation from within an expressly theosophic standpoint, hence opening up to and embracing the spiritual aspects of anti-colonial resistance movements across the globe.

What is presented below is an attempt at delineating how civil society is understood in a tradition different from that of the Western theoretical models so commonly believed to be universal. Given the global changes from attempted uni- to de facto multipolarity, as well as the widespread protests (armed, violent and nonviolent) seemingly re-visiting the WANA region since the non-violent protests in Lebanon in 2005, it is vital to include in our knowledge base also those traditions emanating from decolonising spaces, as they grow in importance.

### Locating civil society

In 2005 Beirut stopped in silent protest. While Dabashi (2012) disagrees, on sound analytical grounds, with Robert Fisk in defining the nonviolent (mainly urban) Lebanese protests in 2005 as the start of the Arab Spring—it did not really (as Dabashi demonstrates) change the political foundations in Lebanon—the so-called Cedar Revolution speaks to some of the fundamental aspects of civil society-state relations discussed by Khatami (2013a). The Cedar Revolution was, as Dabashi claims, fundamentally colonially framed. While Dabashi (2012) and Khatami (2013a) arrive at the same conclusion, i.e. that anti-colonial struggles pre-Arab Spring were paradoxically ‘side-effects, the

by-products, even the unanticipated consequences, of colonialism' (Dabashi 2012, 423), they sharply diverge concerning the role they envision to be played by religious (in this case Islamic) resistance to in particular secular, liberal colonial imperial occupation, dominance and strategic disorder. In other words, while the Arab Spring may be read as an end of postcoloniality, its religio-political aspects are interpreted quite differently. The uprisings in 2011 may be understood both as Arab uprising (political and secular) and as Islamic awakening (political and religious), and to some degree also based in local readings of the political, social, cultural and religious indecency of liberalism enforced in WANA and beyond (Dabashi 2012, Zarif 2016, Bhutto 2019). Among the 2011 uprisings, perhaps the Egyptian case of these diverging readings collided with frightening consequences. Instead of continuing the theoretical debate however, this article focuses Khatami's understanding of civil society in decolonising contexts, in an attempt at an emic reading, and how such a reading makes sense in other contexts with similar experiences, whether Islamic or non-Islamic.

In *Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society* (2013a), civil society is understood as a vital part of a popularly based governance system geared towards decolonisation of society—while being independent from political and judicial structures, it is central to a participatory system of rule, and vice versa. To put it simply, this understanding of civil society includes the market (the 'bazaar'), artists (musicians, poets, visual artists, film makers etc.), intellectuals (university lecturers, philosophers, 'thinkers'); it may be formed around strong-minded and driven individuals operating individually (often generating followers, e.g. Ayatollah Khomeini), or in organisations and movements (NGOs). Space of activity is granted by the state, but civil society operates independently of it; it is responsible for holding government accountable, and guarantees knowledge-based societal dynamism (Khatami, 2013a). Civil society is understood as vital to overcoming the historical impasse at which societies attempting to recover from liberal colonial imperialism find themselves (see e.g. Mbembe 2003 and Dabashi 2015 for critical readings of the shocks of colonialism in differently colonised spaces), i.e. in a state of passivity—or mimesis—as a result of the decline of colonised societies over the last 500 years, and hence unable to respond to or defend themselves against cultural, political and military invasions (Khatami 2013a, see also any of IRI's UNGA speeches from 1979 until today). This shock also means that civil society must be built back consciously and allowed time to develop at its own pace:

The civil society we champion is based on our collective identity whose attainment requires the continuous and ceaseless endeavours of intellectuals and thinkers. It is not a treasure that can be unearthed overnight, rather, it is a fountain of life and morality from whose constant effusion we will benefit. Therefore, enjoyment of this treasure is gradual and is dependent on scrupulous cognizance and re-examination of our heritage as well as our doctrinal and intellectual tradition on the one hand, and sophisticated scientific and philosophical understanding of the modern world on the other (Khatami 2013a:23).

As a matter of urgency in struggles for independence, civil society plays a central role in reviving indigenous knowledge and historical experiences, while avoiding extremes (e.g. pure authenticity, which is exclusionary/isolationist/racist), and keeping afoot in relation to the present. The goal is to increase society's knowledge of itself, based in individual self-betterment (see e.g. Mottahedeh 2009, Elling 2019 for discussions of the importance of this process, embedded in the concepts of *adab*, *ihsan* and *jihad*), for the creation of peaceful societies based on Islamic peace philosophy (Khatami 2013a).

The focus of civil society, i.e. the revival of indigenous knowledge, traditions and social justice, is at the very core also in Badshah Khan and Mahatma Gandhi's principled nonviolent activism, as well as in the African *négritude* movement—hence pointing to its resonance beyond Iran and Islam. Islamic civil society, as explained by Khatami, has a distinctly *nonviolent* approach to activism (violence is perceived of as an uncivilised, immoral and corrupting form of communication), and the state is seen as benevolent, the guarantor of social, legal, economic and territorial security. Should a government deviate from its fundamental role as provider of securities, civil society must hold it to account, based on well-functioning channels of communication between itself and the state/government (Koolae 2009; Khatami 2013a). If channels for venting frustrations are lacking, or communicated grievances systematically neglected, the people must be expected to revolt against the government. In other words, and granted that a society is truly independent of influences from external powers and interests, 'citizens of an Islamic civil society enjoy the right to determine their own destiny, supervise the governance and hold the government accountable. The government in such a society is the servant of the people and not their master' (Khatami 2013a:22). Civil society also intertwines private and public, since the individual is seen as responsible for

educating/bettering himself to become a responsible citizen engaging in the social sphere, and hence civil society (Khatami 2013a). This idea, i.e. of the people as political force, and guarantor against corruption of the state by elites is in fact much older than Islam as are Christian notions of resistance and nonviolence, also shared with Islam.

While being open to inspiration from the European conceptualisation of civil society, as it developed from the political philosophies rooted in the Greek and Roman traditions, and hence the Enlightenment paradigm (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016), which has dominated Western thought over the last two centuries, Khatami (2013) defines civil society in terms of Islamic governance discourse and practice. It is firmly based in Khomeini's conceptualisation of *vilayat-i faqih* (Islamic governance) as presented in *Hukumat-i Islami* (Khomeini 2002), a collection of lectures delivered to students attending religious seminaries. The call to religious leaders to become engaged in politics (Khomeini 2002) can most likely be linked to Mulla Sadra's conceptualisation of action as the defining trait of being human, as the power of becoming through conscious action (2015) in contrast to animal instinct-guided behaviour—action without thought or conscious and informed choice. This, again, is connected to the fundamental notion of individual responsibility in Islam, that is, the individual is seen as accountable for his actions, particularly regarding religious principles, i.e. the regulation of behaviour towards God(s) creation), himself and others (Mottahedeh 2009, Khatami 2013a). In short, the individual person owns the responsibility to think, speak and do good—as a religious requirement.<sup>5</sup> Thinking, speaking and doing good (and in a wider sense *adab* and *erfan*) is tightly linked also to the ability to listen; 'Listening is not a passive activity. It is an active engagement where the listener is exposed to the world created, discovered, or experienced by the speaker' (Khatami 2013a:32). As such the importance of thinking, speaking and doing good, as well as the ability to listen, are all central to the transformation of global relationships, and hinges on the required cognitive move on the part of the West accepting 'that the era of colonialism has come to an end' (2013b:502). Hence, the individual person has the right to education, as education is one of the main routes to knowledge of how to think, speak and do good. Education may come in

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<sup>5</sup> The notion of thinking, speaking and doing good is seemingly inherited from Zoroastrianism, which influenced Christianity and Islam (see Boyce 1982, 1996 and 2001).

many ways, but central is the knowledge of the word not only as spoken by others, but as read by the individual self, and the ability to formulate your own reflections in written text and in conversations with others (Khatami 2013a). This requirement is rudimentary, the very basic. On this build's further education; the sciences, humanities, the arts. Some might take education further, scholastically, literarily or mystically in attempts at reaching the inner essence of meaning and being (e.g. towards *erfan*, excellently explained in Mottahedeh 2009).

The ideal society is a society in which every individual is educated, and not only knowledgeable of, but acting in accordance with the principles of thinking, speaking and doing good. Such a society will, ideally at least, not do harm to its own societal body nor to others. As such this is a pre-requisite for peace—with one self, as well as with others (Khatami 2013a), whether we think in terms of self and others as individual persons, or as, let us say, states. Entities based on such a principle, i.e. an individual's responsibility for others, for society, for its own survival as well as the survival of other individuals, wherever these may be (reminding here of Sa'di's poem *bani adam*<sup>6</sup> inscribed at the United Nations entrance), necessarily must be founded on participatory structures of rule and cognisant of needs and wants in the population—or else, risking an overthrow. The population will act as a counterbalance; educated, a population will demand accountability of those in positions of rule (ibid.). Yet another aspect of individual responsibility and individual education, hence learning to take the responsibility you as a member of a larger whole should strive to take, is the concept of rights. According to Ja'fari, rights are fundamentally, intrinsically, individual (Miri 2012, Ja'fari 2014), and one might suggest, importantly, dependent on your ability to carry, claim, take on increasing responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> Rights, then,

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6 The poem is recited in a number of versions, the one below is from <http://www.zaufishan.co.uk/2011/09/iranian-poetry-bani-adam-inscribed-on.html>

Human beings are members of a whole,  
 In creation of one essence and soul.  
 If one member is afflicted with pain,  
 Other members uneasy will remain.  
 If you've no sympathy for human pain,  
 The name of human you cannot retain!

7 Quoting Ja'fari (2014, frontispiece): 'Among all of the weighty words uttered by man, two are literally of particularly profound depth—"right" and "duty".'

are directly tied to, weighted against, reciprocal to the capability of taking responsibility. With growing responsibility, comes also increasing demands on your correct behaviour, i.e. you are expected to treat others, particularly those of lesser knowledge and standing, with dignity, exactly because of your elevated position, greater knowledge, and increased responsibility.

## Resistance and civil society in de-colonising spaces

Where does this reasoning, as discussed by Khatami, land in relation to civil society in decolonialising contexts? What *is* civil society, what does it *do*? Even if he recognises civil society as an important (and potentially positive) aspect of globalisation, Khatami's conceptualisation is focused on intrastate civil society as a positive, nonviolent force of resistance *and* rebuilding, i.e. creating social and cultural defences against strategic violence, formation of confusion and disorder, disinformation, and devaluation of Self (Khatami 2013a). While remembering that the essays in *Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society* discusses civil society in relation to the Islamic Republic of Iran, I will focus on this understanding of civil society in a context of broader global resistance to and struggles for the independence from Western norms structures and economic dominance. The conceptualisation thus understood has relevance to other Islamic societies, and has transcending elements making this understanding pertinent to other, similar contexts beyond the Islamic world.

## Occidentosis and the Praxis of Resistance

One of the two threads I would suggest is absolutely central in understanding Khatami's conceptualisation of civil society ties in with a notion, which from the 1960s onwards, particularly in relation to the Iranian revolution of 1977-79 and its prelude, gained traction among intellectuals and theologians of various political inklings, perhaps because of its simple way of formulating the very complex experiences of colonialism in Iran; Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *occidentosis* (Ahmad 1983, Khomeini 1986, Mottahedeh 2009, Dabashi 2011a, Bakhshandeh 2014, Mahdavi 2014, Elling 2019). The notion of occidentosis, or more popularly known as *westoxication*, attends to what Khatami (2013) refers to as enchantment of the west, i.e. the uncritical embracing of western ideals, behaviours and tastes, and concomitant rejection of one's own heritage, a disregard of experiences, manners and ways of humanness, as these were formed and negotiated in time and space

through the cross-fertilization with other civilisations and cultures—i.e. the ways in which you become human in a particular social context organically incorporating also outside influences—that which may be summed up in the traditions on which a society's stability rests. Occidentosis results in the erosion of a society's fundamentals, its soul (or in social science terminology, its identity) and hence social, religious, political and moral anchoring points. When colonised peoples 'view themselves [...] in a western mirror and get to know one another through the West' (Khatami 2013a:16) such an erosion has become manifest, and is directly opposed to Khatami's understanding of dialogue, which 'is such a desirable thing, because it is based on freedom and free will. In a dialogue, no idea can be imposed on the other side. In a dialogue, one should respect the independent identity of the other side and his or her ideological and cultural integrity' (Khatami 2013a:16.). It follows of course that 'a genuine meaningful discourse can take place only when the parties concerned find themselves in their own genuine true position, otherwise the dialogue between an alienated imitator and others is meaningless and certainly void of any good or benefit' (Khatami 2013a:21). Civil society is vital in finding ways and means to the own 'genuine' and 'true' position and creates a firm basis from which it is possible to, with self-confidence, engage in meaningful discourse in order to achieve 'sophisticated understanding' contingent on 'the cultural and moral dimensions of other societies and nations' (Khatami 2013a:21).

As a consequence of occidentosis—i.e. being 'no more than inferior and deformed images of the West' (Khatami 2013a:16)—people become rootless, able only to appropriate the outer shell, such as behaviours, views and ideals without being able to access the cultural core of these, because they have no inner (indigenous) attachment or tacit understanding of that, which they appropriate—it becomes pure mimicry (e.g. Ngũgĩ 1984, Bhabha 1994, Fanon 1994, Dabashi 2011b). From such a position of inferiority dialogue becomes impossible. A society so destroyed becomes an easy prey to external domination, an experience many colonised peoples share (e.g. Mbembe 2003, Ngũgĩ 1984, 2009, 2012), an experience which has produced whole intellectual and scholarly traditions opposing colonial subjugation and the structural, cultural, symbolic, epistemic and direct violence involved in the stereotyping and homogenisation of peoples and policies towards the colonised (stretching from apartheid structures of rule of the early colonisation of the Americas to current development aid); the universalisation of provincialities (e.g. *negritude* and postcolonialism, see

e.g. Césaire 1972, Senghor 1974, Said 1978, Dabashi 2008, Wilder 2015); and searches for ‘authenticity’ with political consequences, such as the creation of pan-Arab and pan-African political entities, attempting to create a unified front against western colonial and post-colonial domination—the Ba’ath party taking power in North African and Arab states in the 1950s and -60s; the de-linking policies of Tanzania, Burkina Faso and Eritrea; or the First Nation based un/successful resistance to apartheid-like forms of rule in e.g. Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia and Guatemala.

The concept of occidentosis is, importantly, not a rejection of European civilisation, nor of western culture(s), but a rejection of its claims to universal validity and applicability, followed up by violent and militarised occupation of other civilisations’ and cultures’ lands and peoples, with the aim of transforming and, considering the above, muting and exoticising these. Europeans and European civilisation and culture(s) are considered as *as valid*—to them—as e.g. Iranian civilisational history and culture(s) are to Iranians (Khatami 2013a).

Because of these extreme experiences of liberal colonial imperialism—and its intended strategic attempt at erasing non-western societies’ knowledge, cultures, experiences, histories—civil society in actively decolonising contexts plays a different role than in western political environments. Its purposes must focus on the re-generation of such societies’ souls, anchoring points, humanness—as a defence against annihilation—while acknowledging the absolute historical reality of civilisational and cultural exchanges as pivotal to the organic development, through time, of all human societies. Thus:

The cultural strategy of a dynamic and vibrant Islamic society cannot be isolation. As a progressive religion, Islam shuns building fences around people’s consciousness. Instead, our strategy must focus on making our people immune, raising and educating them to resist the cultural onslaught of the West on their own. Only a strategy of immunization represents a viable solution for today and tomorrow. This requires us to allow various disparate views to engage one another in our society. How is it possible to make the body immune without injecting it with a controlled and weakened virus, so that it can resist the more extensive and threatening invasion of that virus? The way to make the body resistant to viruses is certainly not by preventing any viruses from coming near it. Instead we must see to it that the living organism has the

apparatus to resist the virus itself (Khatami 2013a:68).

Civil society therefore cannot exist in isolation, neither from its own societal roots, nor from other societies; its development as a positive societal force rests on its capacity to engage also regionally and globally (Khatami 2013a). As a force of revival, civil society has multiple foci, none of which can be left out. Societies are complex, and such complexity needs to be reflected in civil society, which therefore encompasses both the arts, religious and educational engagements, the bazaars/market (as economic hubs, tying the local to the global, and as a connection between people and the political sphere), and political movements (Khatami, 2013a). Its existence guarantees local and elite political accountability, as a counterforce to moral corruption—a part of human fallibilities.

## Reflexive Indigeneity as State-based Resistance

This brings me to the second thread: the transposing of individuality as explained above to the societal realm signifying the space in which civil society takes shape, ultimately expressed in situ, in the particularity of place. Societies, shocked by colonial imperialism and hence structural, cultural, symbolic, epistemological and direct violence—i.e. invasion and/or subjugation of mind, faculty and resources, militarily, socially, politically, economically, religiously—cannot become fully independent without a dynamic civil society focused on the regeneration of indigeneity as a matter of dignity and decency, a regeneration which must be allowed time to rise to meet external influences on an equal footing and hence capable of emerging organically from within itself in reflexive dialogue with other cultures and civilisations (Khatami 2013a). This is an absolute of independence, as is popular participation focused on holding government to account, i.e. a government accountable only to its population, not to outside interests or powers (Khatami 2013a). Khatami's transgressing of scales—from the individual to the global—is mediated by a civil society, which 'seeks neither to dominate others nor to submit to domination' and which 'recognizes the right of other nations to self-determination and access to the necessary means for an honourable living' (Khatami 2013a:22). Hence, while civil society is understood as independent from the state, he also repositions the anti-colonial and anti-imperial state itself as a locus of resistance in the global community—the states resisting liberal imperial dominance become a civil society of states on a peaceful mission of global transformation:

The way to oppose thought and culture is not through the use of military, security, and judicial means, for using force only adds fuel to the opposite side's fire. We must confront the thought of the opponent by relying on rationality and enlightenment and through offering more powerful and compelling counter arguments (Khatami 2013a:120).

When Khatami (2013a) refers to 'Western' civil society as originating in the Greek city states, he points to the emerging political theories in the European renaissance (its rediscovery of itself through Islamic civilisation), developing into the Enlightenment, maturing in European modernity (from ca. mid-1700s), organically leading to the emergence of a civil society with a particular focus (e.g. the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolition, labour, women's and peace movements, and the liberties so often referred to in Western contemporary political and media discourses). Building on the experiences of the Iranian revolution, and its first (beginning) episodes in the 1880s and early 1900s, and referring briefly also to similar experiences of anti-colonial resistance across the colonised world, he envisions the continuation of these movements of resistance as the bedrock from which local civil societies appear organically, i.e. from within themselves, focused on remaking, remodelling, reawakening the cultures and civilisations from which resistance once sprang—in constant dialogue with themselves and each other in a strive to become independent of the colonial imperial structures still shackling many of these societies in structural dependency on the West (Khatami 2013a). These structures, and their very real effects are precisely described in his discussion of the future of Islam:

Politically, the West aims to govern all corners of the world and to dominate the theory and practice of international relations. It possesses the material and symbolic forces of power simultaneously, and it will stop at nothing to achieve its goals and protect its interests. Our struggle with the West is of life and death importance. (Khatami 2013a:118)

Resisting such structures requires a civil society endeavouring to bringing whole societies, cultures, civilisations back into themselves, and back onto the global political scene. Civil society—as made up of responsible, disciplined and educated individuals—with that as their main goal, is a precondition, an absolute, for the healing of society and to keep government structures un-corrupted, i.e. from straying from the path towards independence and the possibility of dialogue with other societies, cultures and civilisations on

*equitable* terms. This is fundamental to dialogue as explained by Khatami (2013a). Ultimately, the state is the guarantor of igniting motionless sectors in society with dynamism through its active engagement—while refraining from dominating such activities, granted that these do not counteract revolutionary decolonisation: ‘any system is bound to impose some form of restriction when its whole existence and the fundamentals of its rule are endangered’ (Khatami 2013a:68). Importantly, if the anti-imperial revolutionary system is to be preserved there are ‘no other choice but to offer society sophisticated and adaptive thinking’ (Khatami 2013a:69). The development of such thinking is dependent on all sectors of civil society, from the market to the universities, as well as on educational immunisation because ‘The battle of ideas is far more fateful and determining than political and military conflict’ (Khatami 2013a:72).

While Khatami speaks about the particular Iranian experience, he makes it relevant also to the broader Muslim community (by leaning on the Qur’an, Islamic history and philosophy), as well as to other societies, cultures and states through shared experiences of colonial imperialism and domination. The Iranian revolution of 1977-79 was a popular nonviolent<sup>8</sup> revolt, based in the kind of civil society Khatami defines as Islamic. The Islamic-ness of this revolt fundamentally resides in the rise of a population against a corrupted political leadership, i.e. a civil society—consisting of individuals with followers (such as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini), political parties (left and centre of a classical Enlightenment political scale), religious schools, the business community (the bazaars), banned media—holding political elites and rulers to account. In this particular case on the account of a lack of independence, on the ruler not having stopped, but rather facilitated societal disease; occidentosis. This diagnosis was shared across the political and religious communities; many of whom also defined revolution as the cure (Mottahedeh 2009, Dabashi 2011b, Elling 2019). Civil society did, what civil society should do: revolting, holding to account, it facilitated popular

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8 According to (Zunes 2009) ‘The Iranian Revolution of 1977-79 was the first in a series of mass popular civil insurrections which would result in the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in dozens of countries over the next three decades. [...] The Iranian revolution relied on many methods of unarmed insurrection—such as demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, contestation of public space, and the establishment of parallel institutions—that would be used in the Philippines, Latin America, Eastern Europe and elsewhere in subsequent years.’

participation as resistance to a state which was seen as attacking rather than supporting the populace. That experience is far from particular to Iran—it is shared globally, by the vast majority of the world's population. From the late 1940s through to the present, we have seen a number of revolts among subjugated populations, whether subjugated by groups of their own society or external actors (South Asia, Southern Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, China, South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Kenya, Ghana, Upper Volta/Burkina Faso, Rwanda, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Nicaragua, Haiti, Mexico, Bolivia, Cuba etc.). What is particular to Iran is the active resistance against cultural and intellectual colonisation, carried through by civil society, and the religio-political alternative to formulating the revolution in Enlightenment terms, which resonated with a majority of the population (Leverett and Leverett 2013). We see similar tendencies in the First Nation resistance movements in the Americas, particularly in North America, while in South America these movements have become large-scale popular movements of resistance not only against the apartheid-like, but also classist structures of rule through their Marxist (i.e. Enlightenment) inclinations, attracting the poor majority far beyond the First Nation communities.

## Conclusion

As such, civil society as understood in the Dialogue among Civilisations and Cultures paradigm is based in a resistance praxis of reflexive glocal cosmopolitanism, which is multi-level, multi-site, multi-actor, poly-historical and polycultural.<sup>9</sup> It may take place in formal settings (such as academic conferences, i.e. intellectual diplomacy); in cooperation between artists, musicians, authors; in indigenously grounded, inclusive and glocally reflexive civil society contexts; through tourism and cultural and

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9 It is *polycultural* rather than *multicultural*. In the social sciences the concept of multicultural/ism harbours the very same confrontative conceptualisation as alliance building, as in violent (defined in its complexity by Galtung 1969 and 1990 and Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) struggles of minorities or dominated groups for space, dominance, influence or bare existence and representation in relation to a majority or dominant population's universalising (construed as beneficial) political, religious, cultural and economic authority. Polycultural on the other hand, implies *the existence of* several cultures at the same time, in the same place, with no conceptual connotations to skewed power or violence involved in the relations between these.

educational exchange programmes; in media reporting (suggestive of peace journalism); in the development of personal contacts both in the high-end of international diplomacy and at the lower end, such as friendships based on actual encounters with others, in real-life or on social media; in inter-faith meetings; and in trade and security networking practices. It consists of single individuals (models) and their followers, the economic community, non-state organisations focused on individual and societal self-betterment (e.g. art, education); religious communities and congregations; intellectuals and academics; the economic community (Khatami 2013a).

In conclusion, civil society in a postcolonial or decolonising context is, in short defined as central to the revival of indigenous identities aiming at rebuilding society from within itself, in a reflexive exchange with other societies, cultures and civilisations but must at all times be local, i.e. foreign involvement runs counter to the essential notion of indigeneity and independence (Khatami 2013a). It is expected to work together with the state as long as the state serves the population and guarantees its political participation, and otherwise to revolt, based on broadly shared concerns (i.e. revolt must be popularly widespread and cross-sectional). In this sense, civil society understood as anti-colonial resistance is translatable far beyond the Iranian context, hence speaking directly to the notion of spreading the Iranian—social and anti-imperial—revolution for independence, sovereignty and freedom from domination by the West, and for equitable international relations, marked by dialogue rather than monologue and hegemonic aspirations (Khatami 1998, 2001, 2013a, 2013b).

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## INTERVIEW

### Journal of Resistance Studies'

#### Interview with Elik Elhanan

by **Stellan Vinthagen**, Editor of JRS, *University of Massachusetts, Amherst*,  
*Conducted online Oct 2020*

Elazar (Elik) Elhanan was born in Jerusalem in 1977. A military refuser, Elhanan served in an IDF combat unit from 1995-98. In 1997 his sister, Smadar, was killed in a Palestinian suicide bombing in Jerusalem. Elhanan has been an activist against the Israeli occupation for over two decades. He is a member of the Israeli-Palestinian The Parents Circle – Families Forum (PCFF) since 1998 and is a founding member of Combatants for Peace, created in 2005. He served as the movement's Israeli coordinator from June 2006 until June 2007. In October 2012 Elhanan sailed on board the SV *Estelle* that attempted to break the siege on Gaza, as part of the Freedom Flotilla.

Elhanan received his PhD in Comparative Literature and Middle East studies from Columbia University in 2014. Currently he is an assistant professor of Hebrew and Yiddish literature in City College New York and his work is concerned with the relations between language, identity and nation-building.

I met Elhanan the first time in 2012, on board the same ship, SV *Estelle*, sailing towards Gaza. We both experienced the military assault and kidnapping by IDF on international waters, hindering us from delivering humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza. And we were in jail together, until I got deported (for 'trying to illegally enter Israel' ...). Elhanan, on the other hand, was threatened with harsh punishments (for 'trying to illegally enter Gaza' ...). Since then we have kept in touch.

Professor Elhanan embodies the 'activist scholar', someone that sees the value in letting academic knowledge feed into how to act for social change in the world, and — simultaneously — in bringing hard-earned knowledge from activist struggles into academic knowledge generation. So, of course, we at the Journal of Resistance Studies wanted to interview him, to learn more about his perspectives on and experiences of activism and resistance

studies.

**SV:** *Tell me about how this interest of yours emerged. How did you initially become interested in resistance and nonviolence?*

**EE:** What drew me to resistance were the circumstances of my life and the reality around me; I was attracted to non-violent activism because of the possibility it offered for community building, a thing that I perceive to be as important as any particular goal.

I grew up in a very political household with a strong contrarian personal position. Standing up to the system that produced us was in a sense the only position respected in my family, as it was a position always closely tied with nonviolence. My grandfather, Matti Peled, was a military man turned peace activist who served as an MK [Member of Knesset] for the Jewish Palestinian Progressive List for Peace and was reviled for that; my mother used to take me to anti-war protests as a child. Protests to which my father, a graphic designer, provided posters and slogans. This contrarian position was complemented, however, with a strong commitment to participate in that very system that we opposed, as a way to earn the privilege of protesting. In Israel that meant taking part in a great deal of violence. Thus, my grandfather's authority still stemmed from his past as a general; my father fought in the wars we were protesting against and I, believing that in order to be heard I first had to serve, volunteered after high-school for a special unit in the IDF [Israel Defense Forces.]

I met nonviolence as a political practice when I was a student in Paris. Before Paris, I had adopted a strong position of non-participation, which was personal and to a large degree, very nihilistic. I had finished my military service two years prior, in 1998. My service, which focused on preparing for the bloody attrition war waged to maintain Israel's occupation of south Lebanon, made clear the manner in which violence becomes an end rather than a mean. The mightiest army in the middle east wasted resources and lives in a war that had no ends to achieve, that was not anchored in any government decision or plan. Our mission was amorphously defined as: 'bringing security to the north', a mission in which the IDF constantly failed, using excessive force, often incompetently, thus regularly provoking Hezbollah fire on Israeli villages. On 4<sup>th</sup> September 1997, while I was preparing for Lebanon, my 14 years old sister, Smadar, was murdered in a Hamas suicide bombing in Jerusalem. During the seven days of mourning, surrealist scenes took place as both IDF commanders and PLO [Palestine

Liberation Organization] representatives, settlers and peace activists came to offer condolences; most seemed to share the notion that violence was a tragedy, meaning it was suffering brought about by unforeseen consequence of our actions in an unpredictable or intractable world, the work of a vengeful nemesis. But also, that it was a moral instruction, an experience holding a lesson or a necessary social function. My reaction to this discourse was to shut off, move away and not participate; to distrust everything.

It was with this mindset that I arrived in Paris in October 2000, the day Ariel Sharon ignited the 2<sup>nd</sup> intifada by visiting the Haram Al-Sharif in Jerusalem. The increasing sense of horror and frustration inspired by the terrible news from home pushed me to get involved. I declared I would refuse to serve in the Israeli army and joined the movement Courage to Refuse. As a somewhat self-appointed representative I joined many efforts of solidarity with Palestine. It was this gesture of joining others in protest that opened a door to a world that I knew existed but had never really seen, the world of radical alternative counter culture. I met a huge variety of activists, anti-war, anti-racist, anti-nuclear and antifascists, who welcomed me and were happy to instruct me in their practices, culture, history, which turned out to be my own. Many of the people I met knew my grandfather from his meetings with the PLO and for Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, activities I knew nothing about, maybe because in Israel of the time they were illegal but more probably because we didn't have the language to conceptualize them as meaningful vis-à-vis his 'respectable' military or political carriers. I always saw nonviolence as a personal choice, embracing its weakness and its ineffectiveness, in the name of a moral higher ground. In Paris I came to see nonviolence as the search for a language for community building that allows for self-expression and exchange, while engaging in fierce resistance against the hegemonic discourse.

*SV: What is your own experience of using nonviolent resistance in movements? What have you learnt?*

**EE:** My own experience in nonviolence comes from my involvement in a few movements in Israel/Palestine: the parents circle, a group of bereaved family members from both sides, which my father joined in 1998 and I followed in 2000; Combatants for Peace [C4P], which I co-founded in 2004, united Israeli refusers and Palestinian former political prisoners; and the loose coalition gathered around the popular struggle against the apartheid wall which included members of Ta'ayush, Anarchists Against the Wall and many

others. While the two former groups engaged mainly in dialogue meetings and public outreach, the latter's mode of action includes confrontation with Israeli security services, either as participants in the weekly nonviolent demonstrations or in a variety of direct actions. The main thing I learned from these activities is the power of learning. That is, the constant need to listen, reevaluate and redefine concepts and conventions in all that concerns the definitions of weakness and power, violent and nonviolent as well as success and failure in resistance.

A practical lesson I learned quickly concerns the power of the link between the privileges derived from service and the right to protest, as well as its limits. This link is strongly established culturally and seems almost common sense—a Christological tale of conversion and redemption that rings true and is demonstrably effective. Both the war in Lebanon in 1982 and the occupation of south Lebanon were brought to an end by a nonviolent mobilization in Israel, which managed to change prevailing common sense through the coupling of service and the right to protest; returning soldiers outraged by the government's lies and the massacres in Sabrah and Shatila camps in 1982, or mothers of serving soldiers in the late 1990's. Learning to uncouple these two things—the right to protest and the privileges derived from serving—was probably the most important political development in my life. It allowed me to view nonviolence as a principled concrete alternative to the existing order. Up until that point I saw it more as a personal moralist choice, consisting of standing away from the normal, violent order of things, disapproval rather than an alternative.

This uncoupling came about because such activism never had any effect against Israel's expansionist politics in Palestine. Before the founding of C4P in 2005, I was a member of Courage to Refuse, a movement that very quickly became irrelevant. The reason for that was that it chose to remain spatially, discursively and visually within Israeli discourse, while at the same time really upping the ante in relation to the state. As the movement united more than 500 reservists, combat soldiers and officers, we expected to be heard. So, while the message was phrased in a dovish Zionist idiom, protests were held in habitual sites in the center of Israel, everything was painted white and blue. The movement also questioned radically the Israeli social contract through the act of refusing, i.e., we moved away from the model of the right to criticize that is derived from and balanced by the assurance of service, to the act of denying service until political participation is granted. While being an important and groundbreaking movement, Courage to Refuse, didn't

reach the prominence aspired to; the public support was surprising but so was the backlash and more so the dismissal—this shift in the balance of power was too much for even the most dovish Zionist politician to support.

In our naiveté, we thought that the problem was of advocacy, and that by engaging in dialogue with people who are like us, fighters from the other side, we will be able to get our message across. The initial idea behind Combatants for Peace grew out of the understanding of privilege as a tactical advantage in both societies; as long as service grants me this privilege, I will be heard! And indeed, it was an advantage. This privilege, dearly bought through participation in organized violence, gave us the legitimacy to pass criticism and stand against mainstream discourse. This capital awarded members of C4P unprecedented acceptance in either society, allowing entrance to unique sites, where we inspired some but were dismissed by most.

This was a very confusing and disheartening experience that forced us to reexamine preconceived ideas of who is our audience, what constitutes success, what are the goals, etc. As we tried to apply the principle of 'service grants a voice' as the foundation for our organizations, it turned out that the valorization of service and sacrifice is not useful in the case of Israeli public opinion on the occupation, and it put us in a difficult spot when we constantly had to explain to others—but mainly to ourselves—how the service of a war criminal is being put on par with that of a terrorist. Similar impossible questions presented themselves to the parents' circle, questions such as what grief is representative, what loss is grievable? Do we share in the mourning of the family of a terrorist? What of that of a war criminal? Whose grief do we respect? The mother's or also the brother's? What of a cousin? Surely a wife but what of a girlfriend? These questions, as they were tackled, transformed the parents' circle into the more democratic and inclusive Families' Forum. This is the major lesson from my experience with nonviolent resistance; that simply by engaging with these organizations we transform them as we develop a language that can transcend epithets, a language that acts against the violence that resides in the taxonomies of the state. We had to reevaluate and reexamine every issue constantly, in the light of two political traditions: the Israeli one, which rejected us, and the Palestinian one, which we had to learn. The methods of nonviolent communication allowed us to reflect upon these questions in a profound manner and to see them as deep structural problems. They allowed us to see beyond the official language of the state that defined everything 'they' did as violent and anything 'we' did that, no

matter how horrendous, was not. In this process the terms of success and achievement changed. In the daily work of operating C4P, in the form of endless discussions in coordination meetings and dialogue meetings, while often tiresome and frustrating, we managed to foster a community that spoke our new language, which we used to define and resist the different forms of violence we encountered.

**SV:** *What are the particular aspects that draws you to such activism as the Freedom Flotilla to Gaza and the Combatants for Peace? Both of these are examples of rather high-risk and contentious forms of resistance, or would you not agree?*

**EE:** As an activist I was definitely drawn to high-risk and contentious forms of resistance out of the need to challenge, publicly but also personally, the comfortable envelope of Israeli privilege. In an article from 2012, Tali Hatuka explains that traditionally, peace movements in Israel were issued from the serving elite and as such directed their message to the Israeli mainstream, staging protests in central national locations. Movements like Peace Now or later Four Mothers would gather in Tel Aviv; supported by major parties they would promote a narrative of ‘good old Israel’ gone astray—they’d wave Israeli flags as they showed the nation the way to ‘return to itself’. The drastic change in peace activism that developed after the collapse of the Peace Camp in 2000 was evident in the symbolic choice of theatre for their actions. New movements moved away from ‘Israel’ proper and into the Palestinian territories. Groups like Machsom Watch or Ta’ayush positioned themselves as witnesses or participants outside the confines of Israeli discourse, thus creating ‘transformative zones’ that deeply challenged the hegemonic subject position of the Israeli left, which was always statist and militaristic.

In the work of Combatants for Peace, the act of getting out of Israel proper and meeting Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, on their terms as much as possible, and organizing protest activities there, produced these ‘transformative zones’, where all the conventions were peeled off. It became clear how important it is to examine the roots of one’s beliefs. How, for example, the idea of service in C4P promotes a feeling of symmetry between Israelis and Palestinians that was masking the glaring asymmetry between occupier and occupied, or how the right to protest reproduces the access to service, a major signifier in Israeli racial politics, where service is a privilege of the elite, historically excluding women, non-Jews and non-European Jews. Since our practice was highly contentious and involved confrontations,

advocating for conscientious objection and nonviolence, it was extremely important to us to hammer on these issues, until some understanding was produced.

However, in parallel to the activity in C4P, I felt very strongly the need to dismantle this binding of service and the right to protest as it privileged the rights of certain people to protest, people who fit the definition of service or sacrifice. I felt a need to participate in actions where my past would not define me in such a way. I joined more and more the nonviolent demonstrations, protests and direct actions with the Palestinian Popular Committees in the west bank. Of course, in a reality of occupation one cannot escape these questions and I found participation in the demonstrations to be an embodiment of the debates mentioned above as they encounter political violence. It enabled me and others to understand what it means to take part in a struggle in which one is by definition in a supportive role, which requires trusting one's partners' experience and political analysis, even at the price of discomfort. There, one could experience the asymmetry, as the soldiers brutally repressed a protest that I would not consider violent. It was there that one could exercise different use of privilege, believing that Israeli bodies are not deemed expendable by the Israeli regime and therefore maybe their presence in the protest would mitigate violence. It was there that one could see state violence presented as a pure end: a retribution leveled at the very idea of protest, which is defined as 'violence'.

Beyond all reasoning and theorizing, the decision to board the Estelle to Gaza stands out as a different one. It just felt like the right thing to do. There was some thought about the effect that our presence, Israeli activists, would have on both the takeover of the boat and on the coverage of the event, but mainly we came as individuals, not supported by any organization. The outrage against the siege of Gaza was so great that I felt that as a human being it is right to come there myself to show solidarity, to apologize and protest the terrible collective punishment imposed by my country and ignored by all others.

**SV:** *What are the connections between nonviolent resistance and Yiddish culture? Are there any models or examples? What are the challenges?*

**EE:** Talking about Yiddish culture I am referring to the cultural project of Yiddishism, a national liberation movement in eastern Europe, which existed in parallel to Zionism and was considerably more popular. Yiddishism, born

under the rule of the Russian Tsar, was an ideology demanding general government reform and civil rights, along with particular national rights, expressed as cultural autonomy for Yiddish speaking Jews in Eastern Europe. This ideology loosely united many movements, most notably the social democratic Bund but also liberals and revolutionary parties. While differing wildly on questions of politics, the shared understanding was that national rights and social rights are intertwined; the right to one's culture is a right that must be fought for but can only be attained and assured in conditions of social justice. In stark contrast to Zionist ideology, which fantasized about Jews as a majority in the making, Yiddishism conceived itself as 'Diaspora Nationalism', as a movement of a national minority that operates from a position of weakness and does not seek to take power. Thus, the modes of action selected were democratic, participatory, legalistic, popular and community based, grounded in unionization and mobilization, strikes, boycotts, mutual aid, education and culture. Clear ideologies of nonviolence can be found but are rare, as many did uphold the right to self-defense, class warfare etc., but the actual praxis of these different movements was almost strictly non-violent.

The model presented by the Yiddishist radical culture in the first decades of the 20th century is fascinating with regards to questions of dissemination of knowledge, community building or the production of organic intellectuals. In these respects, Yiddish culture provides inspiring models. Yiddishist movements took a leading role in the 1905 failed Russian revolution and suffered greatly from its outcomes and from the reaction that followed. Many then directed most of their energy to culture and education, producing a system of schools, social and cultural institutions that supplied much needed services to the members of the new Jewish proletariat, while at the same time forming them as revolutionary subjects in a self-reproducing system. Yiddish activists and intellectuals would publish in the movements' presses, work in their institutions or teach in their schools. They would transmit to their students materials that they themselves produced, encouraging them to engage with reality in a similarly critical manner. These networks were joined and interconnected in a variety of ways, creating an opportunity for social engagement that was truly constructive and participatory.

The challenges presented by this model are very relevant to the discussion of protest in our days and it is not by chance that Yiddish radical culture is enjoying such popularity in certain radical circles. The Yiddishist political program of a personal, non-territorial, cultural autonomy undermines today,

as it did then, any idea of a centralized authority or sovereignty. Like what is derisively called ‘snowflake mentality’, it is a program that allows anyone to challenge central authority and assert their particular identity, and thus, in the eyes of some, also disrupt any move towards effective organization and action. Another particular challenge is to the manner one habitually reads history. In Jewish thought on modernity, particularly in its Zionist articulation, the ability to use force and deploy violence was seen as the marker of sovereignty, a right that like self-determination was denied from Jews. The commonplace holds it that this affinity to violence distinguishes the new Hebrew nation from humanist assimilated Jews, who translated the long Jewish tradition of aversion to violence and militarism to a commitment to human rights and to the liberal state, which guarantees their safety. The fact that Yiddishist movements, who tried to formulate a different relation to the state, were the main organizing force in Jewish political life in eastern Europe up until WWII is a very powerful refutation of Zionist claims. By presenting a model for organizing a self-determined community that is effective, aggressive and forceful on questions of class or race but is overall non-violent, these movements also call into question much of the discourse on Jewish modern politics, and cast an intriguing light on the works of scholars such as Hannah Arendt and others who never mention them as a viable alternative to either assimilation or rabid nationalism.

*SV: How does nonviolent resistance link with research and academic work in your life?*

**EE:** In general, I see scholarship and nonviolent resistance as closely linked. While the theory produced in academia often informs the thought and praxis of activists, the production of theory becomes itself an activist act as it participates in challenging conventions, imposing new rules of discourse, attacking and dismantling oppressive canons and in general being disruptive. Scholarship can also be experienced as activism when it produces alternative, oppositional, transformative knowledge. Personally, I am fascinated by the very use of scholarship as a means of resistance. Here I find great inspiration in the legacy of Yiddish culture, which turned the disciplines of humanities and social science into practices of resistance. In the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Yiddishist scholars and activists such as author I.L. Peretz and the famed ethnographer S. An-sky, promoted a method by which the practice of ethnographic, sociological and historical study was harnessed for the mission of building a modern, just and secular Yiddish culture. Young

people were encouraged to conduct studies, were informally trained (An-sky even produced a questionnaire for DIY ethnographic expeditions to conduct in one's own community) and were expected to ground their programs or art in the findings. This gesture of moving from being the object of the academic gaze to being its owner was a powerful move. It constituted the lives of Yiddish speaking Jews as worthy of interest, after a century of hearing from reformers right and left, inside and out, liberals, Marxists or anti-Semites, that it's this very life that is pathologically flawed and is to blame for their sorry state. By doing so, they legitimized the political efforts conducted to deal with issues of this life and defined themselves as the subject of this historical process. This turned scholarship into the treasured patrimony of Yiddishism and gave its intelligentsia a bizarre aura of leadership. Between the wars a new generation of unemployed university educated Jews, rejected from universities due to structural racism, worked in the Yiddishists schools and institutions, engaging in workers' education, teachers' trainings and independent research, producing fascinating works on art and politics, the effects of racial discrimination of gender, class, mental health and many other topics. They used Yiddishist schoolchildren or members of youth movements as both case studies and research assistants, distributing questionnaires and field study kits by mail or through the press. It was the people issued from this system who had put in place the Oyneg Shabess archives in the Warsaw ghetto. Dr Emanuel Ringleblum and other scholars studied life in the ghetto in which they were concentrated and documented every aspect of it in a huge hidden archive, that was to serve as a last line of resistance—documents for the prosecution that they were confident would follow the defeat of fascism.

The subversive potential of scholarship as resistance is clear from the often-quoted witticism of linguist Max Weinreich, the founder of the Yiddish Language Research Institute (YIVO) and the closest thing to a president Yiddishism ever had: 'A language is a dialect with an army and a navy'. By mastering the discourse of the other, he was able to use it to demonstrate how all the hierarchical underlying assumptions are in fact historically and politically contingent. In this fashion, taking over the academic means of production, so to speak, can be a remarkably empowering process for people whose language is reduced to an idiom, whose lives are not represented as grievable, to borrow Judith Butler's words. For people whose very being is defined as transitory, like traditional communities, immigrants, refugees or displaced people, scholarship of that kind is a powerful mode of nonviolent

resistance, capable of supporting and generating many others.

*SV: What recommendations would you give to younger activists entering into academia and to younger academics contemplating a combination of their work at universities with activism?*

**EE:** I would say that my big recommendation to both would be to be positive. I mean to say: we often see great effort to make our active life and our contemplative life sit so well together and great disappointment from the fact that they never do. Academia is never activist enough and activists can be hostile towards rigorous thought, and both spheres are plagued with similar systemic issues. However, one should try to be aware of the manner in which these two experiences are distinct spheres, albeit overlapping and interconnected, each with distinct norms and procedures. These norms and procedures can complement rather than contradict each other, even if the latter impression is more readily available. By complementing each other I mean of course the manner in which theory supports and is inspired by radical praxis, the manner in which transformative knowledge is created and scholarship is a means of resistance. Coming into Israeli academia as activist, especially from the field of Israeli Palestinian solidarity that at the time was new and untheorized, I felt great alienation from the institution. Discussions on topics close to my activism seemed irrelevant and discussions on other topics were of no interest to me. I felt that everywhere, the songs that they constantly played said nothing to me about my life. It took me a while to see that academia and activism answered to very different emotional needs and that there is a place for abstract and detached contemplation just as there is a need for direct decisive action. As long as we don't expect the spheres to reform we can always promote change, or at least have fun by pointing out to professors how oppressive their hierarchies are or by asking activists really hard questions.

*SV: What are the most important things that activists can learn from an academic perspective; and, vice versa, that academics can learn from an activist perspective?*

**EE:** I am thinking of the manner in which these two distinct spheres, activism and academia, can be interpenetrated and disturbed by each other, as the most instructive thing about this encounter. The fact is that academia as an actual, not contemplative, sphere of life makes it a site of conflict between contradicting power structures that is perfect for the deployment of

nonviolent resistance practices. The nonviolent practices of both resistance and dialogue that are to be found in different struggles on campus, on issues of labor, questions of race and gender and so on, could learn from but also instruct a seasoned activist. In the same manner, activism could use some practices of rigorous thought and scientific criticism to balance its facile tendency to quickly understand the world and an academic could definitely learn about, and from, that experience of knowledge that flashes in a moment of danger, the instantaneous understanding that puts everything in place once one picks a side, which is sometimes much more accurate than the most rigorous scientific investigation.

**SV:** *What are the major challenges of combining academic work with activism?*

**EE:** I find that the biggest challenge is mentally accepting that we work and operate in institutions and disciplines that are not party to our struggle. Expecting them to be so is frustrating. Most people, and activists more so, have a rather positive historical perspective according to which knowledge production is geared towards the advancement of humankind and that a work environment or discursive culture is something most people 'like us' would like to see transformed into safe and inclusive spaces. Therefore, there is a bitter disappointment when we see that this is not the case, that universities are not revolutionary environments but liberal institutions set on instilling ideology, perpetuating inequality, justifying racist practices through science and devising new ways to exploit and subjugate while being unsafe and abusive work environments. They do also permit, under artificially created and carefully monitored conditions, free exchange of opinions. For both research and teaching this constitutes a challenge. It is very hard to settle this understanding while committing to an environment of free speech and it is very easy to see the university as just another oppressive system to take down. However, at the same time this is also a work environment and community where one is responsible for other people, and is obliged to maintain for their sake the illusion of a safe space of exchange, in whose value one believes, in spite of everything. One has to devise strategies to make his opinions known and his criticism clear, while not blocking off differing opinions but also without disparaging the commitment the students undertook, by opposing the very institution. It is more useful to point out the places where the university enables activism; but in order to do that one has to understand the university and understand his idea of education as a transformative and radical device.

This is a challenge in the classroom but also beyond as it concerns the manner of teaching as well as the research one does. It is easy to desire to be the voice that would strike a blow at the hypocritical discourse, by force of one's double expertise. It is very tempting to instruct in class or write in a paper as one would in a meeting, with the effortless conviction that what is said is true and that most of the audience already agree. However, this is the best way to find oneself missing out on crucial points that might undermine one's certitude. For example, the need to see Yiddishism as an essentially better alternative to Zionism collides with the fact that its program indeed was unrealistic, that in spite of the difference it shared all the illnesses of nationalism, that its commitment to nonviolence was a product of the circumstances and that many members of Yiddishist movement did see violence as a right deprived from them, which they claimed in sites like national armies, the Red Army of Soviet Russia and the Soviet Union or the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. It is also very easy to dismiss other opinions that would point to these facts, thus alienating one's addressees. Someone whose name is attached to a cause would always be scrutinized more than a 'normal' professor who simply dismisses views, therefore the need to be careful is so much greater.

**SV:** *What do you hope for the future? What kind of academic work and activism need to evolve according to you? Why?*

**EE:** I hope to see the development of solid networks of exchange between activists and academics. Drawing on my fascination with the Frankfurt school I would love to see more independent institutions that are doing serious and engaged research while addressing their publications and instruction to a market that is not strictly academic. Drawing on my engagement with Yiddish culture and my experience working at City College, I hope to see such institutions direct their efforts towards communities where their resources are scarce, and create conditions for independent research by those who are underrepresented. I hope to see more students both in struggles and governance of institutions and hope for greater cooperation. I think a necessary mission both for scholars and activists is to find the effective ways to wage struggles like Black Lives Matter, justice for Palestine and issues of climate and social justice as connected and interlinked. To make revolutionary knowledge now produced around the world available and useful in a way that will enable the imagining of a global theory of change. And mainly assist the inspiring awakening of the radical spirit we see in young activists today.

In a sense, I really hope for something new. I look at my students, at young activists I meet in Israel and elsewhere, and at the risk of sounding old I am eager to see what new strategies and practices, what new models will appear to deal with the unprecedented challenges facing us today. Since I became an activist so many tried methods were proven obsolete, and groundbreaking ideas became old by the dizzyingly changing reality. We refused, we formed dialogue groups and protested in solidarity, we took ships to Gaza; all these actions that were absolutely relevant for their moment did not result in the change we expected and lost a lot of their bite in the maddening flow of things. Now that the coronavirus crisis pushed this feeling of accelerating changes ad absurdum, adding to the crisis of capitalism, the climate crisis, the rise of the populist and antidemocratic regimes, a global pandemic and an economic crisis that lay bare all the failings of neoliberal economy, I must admit I am a bit at a loss. Social distancing and its complementary measures, travel restrictions, closed borders and the abuse of immigrants in the USA, Europe and other places, bring to mind Hannah Arendt's words of the 'existence of ever-growing new people ... who live outside the pale of law,' that is now growing even more due to the fragility of that global class, created by an economy that was all about mobility but has never bothered with stability. It is fascinating to see what this new reality—all the talent which was sedated by cheap flights and lucrative opportunities—where would it head now?

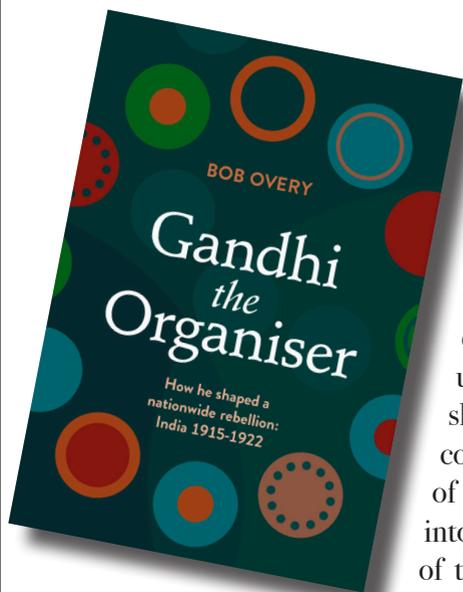
I'm interested in that spirit and its movements for my own selfish reasons as well. One surprising, totally unforeseen aspect of the new radical turn is a rise in the interest in Yiddish studies, which no one could predict when I started my PhD. Young Jewish Americans developed a keen interest in Yiddish culture, which I see as part of the renegotiation of their relation to Israel, the state which in its heavy-handed clericalism, its on-going romance with the American right and its abuse of human rights, fails as an anchor of identity for young liberal Jewish-Americans. Some, like members of JVP [Jewish Voice for Peace], one of the fastest growing organizations today, take a particular interest in the radical aspects of Yiddish and other in its culture. In any case, it is a golden moment to introduce a discussion about radical culture, social justice, cultural activism etc. Yiddish anarchists, gathered in Warsaw in the 1920's, many of whom were students with visa issues, aspiring immigrants stuck along the way as well as proper exiles and refugees, came up with theories of displacement, defining it together with the lawlessness and homelessness that accompany it, as a key experience in

fashioning a radical new culture. A culture which they created in the image of a modernist collage, where debris from past traditions were fused together with the energy of revolt. I think it's a kind of thinking that might be relevant in this day and age.

*SV: Thank you very, very much Elik Elhanan for this interview! Thank you on behalf of the JRS and our readers.*

## BOB OVERY

### GANDHI THE ORGANISER, HOW HE SHAPED A NATION WIDE REBELLION: INDIA 1915-1922



This book is a unique contribution in two ways. Firstly, it puts the focus on the least understood element of the Indian anti-colonial liberation struggle, yet the one emphasized by Gandhi himself: the constructive program, or the building up of self-governed institutions and skills, enabling real autonomy from colonial rule and local empowerment of ordinary Indians. Secondly, it goes into the empirical detail of key campaigns of the liberation struggle, showing how the constructive work in a dynamic way connected with the resistance against British colonial rule.

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## CLASSICAL BOOK REVIEW

## Hamid Dabashi: *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*

Zed Books, 2012

Reviewed by **Craig Brown**, *UMass Amherst, USA / Journal of Resistance Studies*

The world is not divided between East and West. You are American, I am Iranian, we don't know each other, but we talk and we understand each other perfectly. The difference between you and your government is much bigger than the difference between you and me. And the difference between me and my government is much bigger than the difference between me and you. And our governments are very much the same. Marjane Satrapi (Goldberg & Satrapi, 2005).

In 2012 I began my PhD research in earnest, which originally had the broad and optimistic aim of studying dynamics of nonviolent resistance across the entire West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region during the so-called Arab Spring. Entire books on the events had already been released by 2012, seeming to mark a rush to provide expansive analyses of the processes and implications of the so-called Arab Spring. Two of the earliest texts I read for my research offered entirely disparate assessments: Bradley's (2012) *After the Arab Spring: How Islamists Hijacked the Middle East Revolts*, appearing remarkably reductionist and assumptive for an analysis produced while events were still very much in flux; Dabashi's *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* offered the counterweight to this text.

### Introducing the Book

In contrast with the swift pessimism of Bradley, and Castell's (2012) more sympathetic yet tenuous retrofitting of his established theories, the tone of Dabashi's texts struck me as markedly different. This is perhaps summed up by his note in the acknowledgements that, 'The writing of this book is much indebted to that global sense of awe, admiration, and solidarity with the Arab Spring' (p.xiii). It is Dabashi's sense that the WANA revolutions marked a recovery as well as departure point for the region and the world,

and the prescience that regardless of counter-revolution and contestation—something perhaps borne out by events in Syria and Iraq—this authentic narrative of the Arab Spring as a recovery and departure point would have to be fought for.

## Broad Overview

*The Arab Spring* is perhaps not the most accessible text for students new to the issues.<sup>1</sup> However, Dabashi's structuring of the text possibly helps open up the analysis to a reader. At the beginning of each chapter he tends to depart from a particular individual, event or theory, weaving this in with a restatement of the central themes and arguments, therefore accreting the new concepts or focuses into the overall narrative. This is particularly evident onwards from Chapter Two: Towards a Liberation Geography, where Dabashi considers President Obama's lack of identity or affinity with Palestinian children, across the (manufactured) 'West'/'East' divide generally, which he ties to historical elements of Orientalism. Chapter Three: A New Language of Revolt, builds on this, while introducing Hannah Arendt's conception of public space. Drawing on literary and aesthetic theorists from across the WANA region, Dabashi supports his crucial position of the Arab Spring both as a departure point for an open-ended revolution, but also as evidence of the presence of alternative political, economic and social organisation that have long been present in the region.

In Chapter Four: Discovering a New World, Dabashi considers the significance of Tahrir Square as a crucible for a new public space, drawing on literature as well as linguistic and semiotic analysis. The subsequent chapter links the emergence of Iran's 2009 Green Movement with the Tunisian revolution, which suggests an important expansion of the 'revolutionary period' in the broader WANA region as beginning in 2009—even if concrete dates are somewhat contrived in relation to episodes of resistance. Moreover, Dabashi significantly questions the presence of a severe Shi'ite-Sunni divide in the region; while there have been various examples of horrendous violence justified on sectarian grounds, it is notable that Iraq and Lebanon's protests in the past year have been considered non-sectarian, as were Syria's 2011 protests to a certain extent. Chapter Six is concerned broadly with Israel and Iran's politics and influence in the region.

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1 I am grateful to Majken Jul Sørensen for sharing student feedback on Dabashi's text as part of her course teaching at Karlstad University.

Chapter Seven elaborates on the ‘Arab Spring’ as The End of Postcolonialism, as well as more broadly the end of ideology as the basis of revolution. This will be returned to below, although relatedly Chapter Eight: Race, Gender and Class in Transnational Revolutions, should be noted as one of the profoundest aspects of Dabashi’s analysis in the book. Dabashi points to the legacy of resistance in the region along the strands of race, gender and class, as well as their intersection, while noting the importance of these aspects to justice and the enduring success of the ‘Arab Spring’ processes. Particularly at the time of publication in 2012, Dabashi’s calling out and condemnation of racism in the region, his emphasis that women are not simply meek but empowered (p.193), as well as connection of economic migration to colonialism, historical subjugation and the structural problems that resulted in the revolutions (p.194), were overlooked certainly in mainstream analyses of events. In Chapter Nine, Libya: The Crucible and the Politics of Space, the historical support and connections of the West to the Gaddafi regime are elaborated, with the subsequent NATO-led intervention in the country pointed to as part of the counter-revolution against the new public space. The final chapter and conclusion provide a summary or restatement of the Arab Spring as a sign and signifier of an open-ended revolt.

Dabashi’s book is not one that provides detailed country-specific narratives—this is not to say it is not well-grounded in events—although this would not necessarily have aged well given the lack of in-depth analysis that existed at the time of writing. In fact, there are certain notable details that have fallen out of focus nearly a decade on: the connections Dabashi makes to the 2009 Green movement in Iran; the support for the region’s ‘ghastly dictators or theocratic tyrannies’ by Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales, despite being ‘champion[s] of the poor’ at home (p.130); some on the traditional left showing ‘support—passive or active—of murderous tyrants like Bashar al-Assad’ (p.241) and his Iranian government and Hezbollah supporters (pp.110-111).

While these may not seem like the most pertinent details to the events, the classical book review is intended to be a more personal account, and for me Dabashi’s prescience regarding the stance of some on the left is important to my own interrogation of resistance practices, in this regard solidarity with the oppressed. During my local activism in West Yorkshire in support of the Syrian people’s resistance to the Assad regime, I was deeply troubled by some peace activists’ alignment with the regime, as well as Russian and Iranian support of it. In Bahrain, as the UK trained and armed the country’s

security forces and the US ‘turned a blind eye to the murderous regime’; rather than being an Iran-backed uprising, Dabashi argues that ‘The only influence the Islamic Republic has had on Bahrain is to teach the ruling regime, by example, how to quell a democratic revolt—the same role it had for the even more bloody crackdown of Bashar al-Assad’ (p.151). When first reading *The Arab Spring* in 2012 his comments on the left had not really registered with me, but it is poignant to read his summation: ‘Those among the “left” who oppose the Green Movement and the Arab Spring—in a bizarre combination of a politics of despair, political Orientalism, and nihilistic anti-imperialism—are trapped inside their sclerotic, retrogressive imagination’ (p.164). In the following sections I will show why I consider Dabashi’s book to provide an authentic corrective to this.

### **The End of Postcolonialism**

Dabashi’s explanation of the 2010/11 WANA revolutions as the end of postcolonialism is essentially that they mark an end to various ‘false binaries’ (p.9) broadly separating ‘the west’ from ‘the rest’. They are an end to both a ‘politics of replicating “the West”’ (p.xviii) or challenging it from an ideological basis, ‘from Third World Socialism to anticolonial nationalism to militant Islamism (vintage postcolonial ideologies)’ (p.10). Fundamentally reflecting an established post-ideology paradigm including in relation to resistance, as well as sub-analyses such as post-Islamism (see Bayat, 2013), Dabashi extends the revolutions to marking the end of postcolonialism in ‘having overcome once and for all the thick (material and moral) [manufactured] colonial divide’ (p.xix). Dabashi explains the evolutions as overcoming the ‘Islam and the West’ binary (pxix), the ‘forced categories of “Religious” versus “Secular”, “Traditional” versus “Modern”, “Eastern” versus “Western”’ (p.9), because ‘these revolutions are collective acts of *overcoming*. They are crafting new identities, forging new solidarities, both within and without the “Islam and the West” binary [original emphasis]’ (p.xix). As well as an ‘overcoming’, the revolutions are a ‘shift towards the *restoration* of a repressed and denied cosmopolitan culture rather than a blind revolution with a limited and cliché-ridden political agenda [emphasis added]’ (p.9). In asserting ‘*Huriyyah, Adalah Ijtima’iyah, Karmah*, “Freedom, Social Justice, Dignity”’ (p.10), there has been a restoration of revolutionary potential and a definite rejection of westernism (which Dabashi identifies with exploitative capitalist relations):

Recovering precisely the cosmopolitan worldliness in which alternative notions and practices of civil liberties and economic justice can and ought to be produced. Thus this cosmopolitanism is precisely the opposite of ‘Westernism’; it is in fact the end of ‘Westernism’ as an exhausted and depleted mode of bipolar knowledge production (p.10)

Reflecting a decolonisation and sharing of ‘the centre’, Dabashi posits that the WANA revolution herald a global shift—having helped to inspire movements internationally in 2011—‘we are on the cusp of discovering emerging new worlds, a liberation geography, that will require and produce a new organicity for the intellectual—this time involving the citizenry and civil liberties’ (p.12), plus an ‘emerging world I identify as being characterised by *cosmopolitan worldliness*—which [...] has always been innate to these societies and is now being retrieved with a purposeful intent toward the future. This purposeful retrieval I call *liberation geography*’ (p.14).

In the wake of events in the past decade it may be tempting to dismiss Dabashi as too utopian, idealistic and romantic about this change. One counter would be that the Western-backed restoration of dictators, plus the emergence of ISIS’ so-called caliphate, could be labelled as counter-revolutionary forces—but there remains those who see these as somehow inevitable outcomes of the so-called Arab Spring; they are of the Arab Spring rather than external to it. On this point we may reiterate Dabashi’s suggestion of the cosmopolitan worldliness of the ‘Middle East and North Africa’ or the ‘Arab and the Muslim World’ being retrieved, as the ontologically prior process—although for Dabashi this cosmopolitan worldliness is ‘existential (Heidegger’s designation): historical, lived, experienced, remembered, acted’ (p.114). Thus, we can move past a ‘revolution’, ‘counter-revolution’ binary too (see also Abdelhamid’s (2020) article in this issue for why this binary is problematic) by extending the temporal and spatial basis of the revolts in time. They are premised on a far larger and more expansive recovery of subjugated history and experience.

## Presistance

However, the so-called Arab Spring is being contested at the level of meaning, significance and culture, indeed bringing into question and (mis)representing the nature and reality of individuals, groups and culture (p.82,154) this raises a deeper question about what or who is in a position of resistance and what is being resisted. When entire alternative ways of life,

living and lifestyles, cultures (in all their human complexity) that exist as part of the world are identified for ‘othering’, subjugation or elimination, posited in a manufactured opposition to something, this may serve to not just posit them as being in resistance to or for something. Rather it also requires an acknowledgement of their prior existence or presence simply as being, a prior position of not being in resistance, thus positioning them as being in ‘presistance’ (presence and resistance).

I would emphasise that neither Dabashi nor myself reject that people and groups in West Asia and North Africa are engaged in resistance. Moreover, being in resistance can become a significant aspect of identity, for example in the Zapatista declaration of ‘500 years of struggle’ (Carrigan, 2001, p.419) and that position of being compelled or forced into resistance to and for something must be acknowledged. As Dabashi states generally but also specifically in relation to women’s resistance that was evident during the so-called Arab Spring, it ‘did not emerge from nowhere. They are the voices and visages cultivated in the public domain for decades and centuries [...] It is a North American and Western European calamity that these women are thought of only in Oriental harems’ (p.189,191). Furthermore, with the revolutions being less ideological-driven, Dabashi identifies more of a cultural context:

We will witness a shift towards the restoration of a repressed and denied cosmopolitan culture rather than a blind revolution with a limited and cliché-ridden political agenda. There has always been a cosmopolitan worldliness about these cultures, which are otherwise hidden beneath the forced categories of ‘Religious’ versus ‘Secular’, ‘Traditional’ versus ‘Modern’, ‘Eastern’ versus ‘Western’ (pp.9, 80-81)

Alternatively, Dabashi talks of this as an aim to ‘retrieve the multiple worlds that have existed prior to and coterminous with “Islam and the West”’ (p.115). Therefore, at least at the level of culture—and acknowledging that of course these may involve alternative political and economic systems—when it is clearly in a subjugated and marginalised position and needing to be in resistance for its continued existence—yet existing nevertheless—is there a way of situating and acknowledging an alternative way of life that facilitates its ‘retrieval’ or ‘restoration’? Does this existence or ‘presence’ while in ‘resistance’ necessitate a new term such as ‘presistance’—hardly a significant advancement in understanding, although a form of alternative-

affirming terminology nonetheless? This may be a minor contribution in the vein of Dabashi suggesting that ‘The only way that this debilitating, self-raising, other-lowering world (called ‘the West’) can be overcome is by the recognition of other worlds (p.87).

## (Nonviolent) Revolution

Dabashi’s critique of violence as ‘the cornerstone’ of the state, of ‘violent despair’ as underpinning the ‘theoretical terms of politics’ from Hobbes and Rousseau to Marx and Weber (p.170), is central to his text, and his call for a redefinition of humanity as a more universal form of solidarity. It is notable that Dabashi considers ‘nonviolent civil disobedience’ as crucial to the revolutionary processes symbolised by Tahrir Square, ‘the categorical denunciation of violence’ (p.87). He also considered that the ‘most important challenge that Egyptian and other revolutionaries face [...will be] to posit the will of the people and yet systematically to translate that raw power into political forms’ (p.96). This is reflected in the common question over how uprisings, particularly in the wake of the 2010/11 revolutions, which seem to have a more disparate leadership and reflect the unity and coming together of many different groups in society, hold together when confronted by counter-revolutionary forces. Dabashi suggested that the splintering unity among resisters is something that could in fact be a strength:

These fractures will expand the public space, not diminish it. That societal expansion of the bedrock of politics will not be along ideological lines. The ideals remain open and grand, as they must, but demanding and exacting their realization require painstaking and detailed work by particular voluntary associations beyond the reach of the state—labour unions, women’s right (sic.) organisations, student assemblies—all by way of forming a web of affiliation around the atomised individual, thus protecting her, thus enabling him, to resist the ever increasing power of the emergent state (Dabashi, 2012, p.xx, p.95)

I think it is notable, and I remain convinced by, Dabashi’s position that fundamentally, forms of constructive resistance are required to perpetuate the revolutionary aims, which he puts in stark terms:

Nonviolent civil disobedience will never be successful unless and until the movements begin to interface with the grassroots social formations of labour, women, and student movements. The mobilising of these formations is precisely the factor that can guarantee the success of the revolutionary uprisings [...] what is needed are enduring, grassroots, voluntary associations that will demand and achieve civil liberties and democratic rights in particular and detailed terms (p.216).

This is fundamentally an optimistic position on the likely progress of events, although one could easily remark that the creation and strengthening of these voluntary associations in the WANA region and indeed elsewhere has not seen a concerted effort. Nevertheless, this year the prospects and potential of mutual aid in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic has shown the possibilities in the face of an often callous state (See Brown, 2020a).

Dabashi's main argument about the progression of the so-called Arab Spring is that the revolutions are 'inconclusive and open-ended, wherein national politics will have consequences transnationally, and vice-versa' (p.12). The sense of an 'open-ended unfolding of these revolts is related to the process of the individual being reinserted into the expanding public space (p.xx). The open-ended revolution in Dabashi's conception is based heavily on Arendt's analysis of revolution, with him devoting Chapter Three to this. Dabashi suggests Arendt 'posited the public domain as the *nexus classicus* of the political—a space in which freedom from fear and the liberty to exercise democratic rights is realised', and presented an 'articulation of politics as a domain that protects the citizen against state violence' (p.246). The Arab spring exemplified this conception of open-ended revolution as opposed to an ideologically driven 'total revolution': 'Protection and expansion of the public space (Tahrir Square write large) is only possible through the means of an open-ended revolution' (p.246). As with the state needing to consistently re-secure and reassert itself in the face of an elusive final act of divine violence leading to ultimate security (see Dillon 2008), this concept of open-ended revolution is a 'move away from the idea of a total, sudden, and final revolution/resolution, a metanarrative of emancipation that further implicated the knowing subject as its agent in a self-defeating project' (Dabashi, 2012, p.246). It is an acknowledgement of the need of the citizen to continuously re-secure and reassert themselves and the context of freedom, liberty and dignity.

One could argue that a focus on political organisation, as well as the conceptualisation of the revolutionary processes as a reduction to the achievement of dignity, gives insufficient attention to the crucial economic marginalisation and discontent of people. However, Dabashi's emphasis on the slogans around *karamah* or 'dignity' during the revolutions I do not think is misplaced (p.127), and it is useful precisely because it can be an all-encapsulating concept, with dignity meaning many different things to many different people, having political, economic and social implications.

Moreover, Dabashi situates the need for new forms of political organisation clearly in relation to the end of the economic exploitation, marginalisation and injustice that was sought through the revolution, stating: 'the masses involved in the Arab revolts are right to demand that their economic plight be addressed, being as they are on they receiving end of the ravages of a militantly globalising neoliberalism' (p.61). Given that he suggests 'the ravages of neoliberal economics, unfettered greed, and an irresponsible orgy of deregulation have suddenly made Keynesian economics a plausible strategy for survival, *albeit only in the short term* [emphasis added]' (p.61), Dabashi is again sceptical of the state. It is through civil liberties and freedom enshrined in voluntary associations that 'protect the otherwise atomised individual from totalitarianism, as well as the most vulnerably, namely the working class, against the wanton disregard practised by neoliberal predatory capitalism' (p.62). Likewise, the civil liberties and freedom typically associated with democracy are worthless without economic justice (p.64).

Dabashi clearly aligns his anarchist position and suspicion 'of all state formations' (pp.247-248) with Arendt's analysis of revolution, as exemplified in her 'dismissal of the revolutionary process in both French and American cases' (pp.247). This is of significance because a severely overlooked element of Gene Sharp's (1980, pp.150-156) analysis is his sympathetic assessment of Arendt's work, which highly aligns his anarchist position and his position on the need for voluntary associations, parallel institutions and decentralisation of power with Arendt's (1969) favourability towards decentralised council systems being the 'authentic extension' of revolutionary processes (p.124; see Brown, 2020b). However, it must be restated that, especially given the misplaced emphasis on the influence of 'Sharpian pragmatic/strategic' nonviolence during the WANA uprising (Brown, 2019, pp.42-48), this connection between Dabashi and Sharp's views on nonviolent change via Arendt is a rather exciting constellation. If we broadly consider this work

towards decentralised power under ‘constructive resistance’, there is much to be explored empirically in the WANA region in relation to this concept and Dabashi’s still highly pertinent analysis of the so-called Arab Spring.

Ten years on, my personal impression is that Dabashi’s *The Arab Spring* offers one of the profoundest analyses of the 2010/11 WANA revolutions and their intricacies. At the time of its writing it brought together multiple strands, both of an established and major nature—the implications of orientalism—as well as those still largely overlooked, for example abuses of migrant workers and their resistance to. The latter cases, as well as other issues Dabashi raised early on in the processes such as some left-wing activists and groups’ support for Assad over a grassroots, popular revolution, remain largely understated as phenomena. Furthermore, his analysis recognises that in many instances there are years, decades and generations of resistance struggles in many countries that cannot be discounted or reduced to a revolutionary ‘outburst’. Meanwhile, the manner in which Dabashi situates the practical political and economic alternatives is in accordance with ideas around constructive resistance. Much assessment of the success or failure of the so-called Arab Spring has looked at the institutionalisation of revolutionary goals, democratisation or autocratisation at the state level. Yet such bottom-up changes are crucial, particularly if Dabashi’s assessment is to endure in practice of an open-ended revolution as explained above, as a constant striving, defence and reassertion of individual dignity in solidarity with others.

Particularly in the wake of open resistance in numerous states internationally, roughly from the end of 2018 to early 2020—but with many latent or ongoing uprisings despite coronavirus—with neoliberalism and corruption being significant factors, Dabashi’s analysis of the malaise in the WANA and wider region has been borne out. Personally, I find Dabashi’s message imperative; despite pessimism, counter-revolution and maybe even a sense of insurmountable repressive systems, the values the WANA revolutions signified in 2010/11 must and will be perpetuated. In this manner, Dabashi advocated ‘for the idea of open-ended revolutions, work-in-progress [...] to keep the tenacity of these revolutions alive theoretically’ (p.241), and for ‘listening carefully’ (pp.68-69). For those of us engaged in academic work and indeed actions of solidarity with resisters in the region, Dabashi’s call is necessary to help realise those values; the quote from Marjane Satrapi’s at the outset evocatively captures the potential of such engagement.

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REVIEW ESSAY

**Reflections on researching  
Palestinian resistance**

**Michael J Carter: Palestinian popular struggle:  
Unarmed and participatory**

Routledge, 2019

**Raja Shehadeh: Going home:  
A walk through fifty years of occupation**

Profile Books, 2019

**Ramzy Baroud, ed.:  
These chains will be broken: Palestinian stories of  
struggle and defiance in Israeli prisons**

Clarity Press, 2019

Reviewed by **Andrew Rigby**, *Emeritus Professor of Peace Studies,  
Coventry University*

I have had a close interest in the ongoing disaster that is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for four decades – since my first visit in 1980. I have spent a significant section of my professional life researching and writing about how Palestinians and Israelis have struggled to somehow change the course of this ongoing catastrophe. During this time I have developed close friendships with Palestinians and with Israeli citizens, and with that has come a deeply personal concern about the manner in which their lives have been damaged and contaminated by the unrelenting colonial expansion of Israel over increasing areas of Palestinian territory, the abuse of Palestinians' basic human rights, and the associated weakening of those democratic values and practices of which Israeli citizens were once so proud.

As someone who has always prided himself on his 'professionalism' as a researcher, with a deep value commitment to nonviolence as both a method of action and as a philosophy of life, I have puzzled long and hard over the nature of my relationship with the Palestinians and Israelis who have been the subjects of my studies. I have never had any illusions that my

research has been value-free—my values have directed my research interests. Moreover, the respect and admiration for the activists I have studied over the years has been an important factor in establishing the basic trust relationship between us. The main problematic for me has been a consequence of this trust relationship—a reluctance to be too critical of the subjects of study, particularly in relation to the claims made by them about the significance and the effectiveness of their activities.

Over the years I have settled on adopting the role of a critical friend: someone who shares the basic values of the activists—a trusted friend—who seeks to support their endeavour by providing different perspectives, interpretations and critiques of their projects. As such I have tried to act as a constructive yet critical accompanier.

These reflections were occasioned by my reading of Michael Carpenter's *Palestinian popular struggle: Unarmed and participatory*, shortly after I had completed reading Rajah Shehadeh's *Going home: A walk through fifty years of occupation*. I enjoyed reading Carpenter's book, knowing the locations and communities where he carried out his fieldwork and familiar with some of the movement-networks with which many of his informants were affiliated. But I finished with a big reservation. I felt that Carpenter had written a book to laud the activists within the Palestinian popular resistance movement, and in the process had failed in what I consider should have been his prime role—a *critical friend*.

Carpenter is a Canadian academic with a clear libertarian/anarchist political commitment, who carried out his doctoral field research on Palestinian unarmed popular resistance during 2013-14. He starts his book with a brief review of three significant instances of unarmed Palestinian resistance that took place in 2017-18: i) The Temple Mount protests in Jerusalem that took place during July 2017 after Israel installed metal detectors at the entrance to the mosque complex, following the killing of two Israeli border police by three Palestinian citizens of Israel; ii) The protests sparked by the arrest of a 16 year old girl in the village of Nabi Saleh after she had slapped an Israeli soldier, which was caught on video camera; iii) The commencement of protests in Gaza in March 2018 called the Great March of Return, demanding the lifting of the Israeli blockade and reaffirming the Palestinian refugees' right of return.

There can be no doubt that for those involved in these protests they were of significance, as evidence that Palestinians were still protesting against

the ongoing occupation and associated abuses. But Carpenter, I am afraid, lapses into hyperbole when he claims:

By 2017, popular struggle became the clear expression and substance of Palestinian resistance. It was used in small and large cases, planned and spontaneous, and recognized by the global community. Nothing suddenly changed in 2017, but a slow-building critical mass came into itself. There was no mass uprising, and very little unified resistance, but the paradigm of Palestinian struggle had shifted, for Palestinians and the world (p. 30).

I confess that I do not understand what is meant by the reference to a ‘critical mass came into itself’, but what I do know is that on the basis of the research carried out by myself and Marwan Darweish there can be little doubt that by 2017, the energy had waned from the popular resistance movement in the occupied West Bank.<sup>1</sup> It was no longer ‘popular’. In some protest actions there seemed to be more foreigners and Israeli solidarity activists participating than local Palestinians. And far from being ‘spontaneous’, there was a definite routinized quality to the weekly Friday protests taking place at a limited number of locations. There were many reasons for this waning of the movement—and to be fair Carpenter does allude to some of them in his study, mentioning disagreements between local popular committee activists at the grassroots level and obstructionism by the Palestinian Authority. Indeed, despite his laudatory appreciation of the different activities initiated by the village-level popular committees, Carpenter acknowledges at one point in the text that there was no mass uprising and very little unified resistance!

I would suggest that one reason for this apparent contradiction in the author’s analysis is his failure to resolve the tension between the social scientist’s role as observer and their personal commitment and support of a just resistance struggle. So, at one level, he reports on the phenomena he has witnessed in the course of his fieldwork, and at another level he makes claims about the significance of what he has witnessed within the wider context of the overall popular resistance struggle which, I am afraid, remain unsubstantiated. Just one illustration: he refers to the establishment of the

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1 M. Darweish & A. Rigby, *Popular protest in Palestine: The uncertain future of unarmed resistance*, London: Pluto, 2015

Popular Struggle Coordinating Committee, in 2008, which received some financial support from Italian and other sources, and with the emergence the following year of an ongoing popular resistance struggle in the village of Nabi Saleh he concludes: ‘This was no longer a rural movement against portions of the separation barrier. It was a popular committee-led global coalition against the occupation. [...] The movement was just getting started.’ (p. 114) The movement might have been ‘getting started’ in his eyes, but does cooperation between Palestinian and Italian activists constitute a ‘global coalition’?

Since those years the occupation has continued to deepen and deepen, and for those of us who persist in seeking answers as to how to reverse this process I am afraid Carpenter provides few insights, other than a necessary condemnation of the role of the Palestinian Authority—a judgement that many would endorse, particularly the Palestinian lawyer and author Raja Shehadeh.

Shehadeh was one of the founders of the Palestinian human rights organisation *Al Haq*, and acted as an advisor to the Palestinian delegation involved in the Madrid peace talks of 1991. The first book of his that I read was *The third way: A journal of life on the West Bank*.<sup>2</sup> On the title page there was a succinct explanation of the title: ‘Between mute submission and blind hate I choose the third way—I am *sumid* (the steadfast)’. Reading his latest book, *Going home: A walk through fifty years of occupation*, one gets the clear sense that Shehadeh has had to struggle incredibly hard not to submit to extreme bitterness and hatred or complete disillusionment. As he writes:

There was a time when we hoped that we were getting rid of the occupation and I worked and lived for that moment. But it dissipated twenty-four years ago with the first Oslo Accord, and since then I ‘ve lived without hope, constantly trying to adjust to life and accept that it will only go from bad to worse as the occupation becomes more entrenched, grabbing more of our land and tightening the noose around our necks (p. 169).

In essence, his books have been about how he and others have tried to adapt and cope with the ever-tightening strangle-hold of the occupation, without losing their humanity and giving way to blind hatred or abject submission.

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2 R. Shehadeh, *The third way: A journal of life in the West Bank*, London: Quartet Books, 1982.

Writing has been one of the ways he has continued to assert his commitment to his Palestinian identity, culture and way of life.

In his latest book, Shehadeh reconstructs his walks around his home town of Ramallah, each of them prompting memories and stories of how the Israeli occupation has impacted on his life and experience. After half a century of life under the sway of the Israeli occupation he recalls:

For many years I raged in anger at my fate. Now when I look back over my life, I can see that the occupation has provided me with an immense amount of work and great challenges, not only in how to resist but in how to live under its ruthless matrix of control as a free man refusing to be denied the joys of life (p. 40).

For someone like me, of a similar generation to Shehadeh, the richness of this book lies in his honest reflections on the everyday challenges of coping with, and thereby resisting, an ever-more tenacious occupation. This is what faces Palestinians living under occupation every day of their lives—how to summon up the steadfastness necessary to maintain resilience in the face of relentless oppression. This is *sumoud*<sup>3</sup>—doing what is necessary to live one’s life as a human being under inhuman conditions: ‘to exist is to resist’.

One of the most pungent reflections in the book is prompted by a visit to the Arafat Museum and Mausoleum. Like all national memorials, the historical narrative represented is selective; the main story line is of the Palestine Liberation Organisation’s (doomed) armed struggle—with absolutely no recognition of past mistakes nor any representation of the *sumoud*/steadfastness of those living under occupation. For Shehadeh, there is the painful recognition that, after fifty years of trying, the Palestinians have not succeeded in forcing Israel to end its occupation. But ‘the struggle is neither over nor won, and what keeps it going is nothing other than our *sumoud*’ (p. 182). Moreover, in the process of struggling to retain their humanity the Palestinians have, in the words of Shehadeh, brought:

Israel to self-destruct. The country that occupied us half a century ago bears little resemblance to the Israel of today. By forcing them to justify the unjustifiable, that which is patently illegal, we have helped them destroy their legal system and, through their open discrimination, the

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<sup>3</sup> Alternative spelling is *sumud*.

rule of law and respect for international law. We have also helped destroy the socialist aspects of their system by providing them with cheap labour. We have certainly not won, but neither have they (p. 155).

In one of the chapters in *The Third Way*, Shehadeh told of a visit he made to a newly released Palestinian political prisoner called Khalil. It was clear to the author that the veteran prisoners had made a great impression on the young man, moulding the poor impression he had of the level of resistance shown by those on the outside. ‘What’s this freedom you think you have?’ he asked. ‘... everyone is frightened. ... At least in prison you are not afraid. You have nothing to lose. It is there that you find the brave men. And it is they who are really free.’<sup>4</sup>

My personal knowledge of prisons is limited, confined to teaching peace studies to a couple of long-term prisoners at a local jail, one of whom happened to be a Palestinian. We have remained in touch and I plan to share with him a third book on Palestinian resistance—*These chains will be broken: Palestinian stories of struggle and defiance in Israeli prisons*, edited by a US-Palestinian Ramzy Baroud. The book consists of twenty personal accounts by contributors about their experience as political prisoners. Some are desperately sad—people consumed by bitterness and hatred, driven to acts of lethal violence, forfeiting so many years of their lives whilst enduring the everyday pain and desperation of the long-term incarcerated. But others are positively uplifting and inspirational. Let me just share just one of them.

Hilal Mohammed Jaradat, from Yamoun in the north-west of the West Bank, was arrested in September 1987, charged with involvement in the killing of three armed settlers, and sentenced to 30 years. He was released in 2011, aged 46. By the time he was released he had learned 16 different languages, some of them with the aid of fellow-prisoners who had studied and lived in different countries. He had also taught hundreds of his comrades English and Hebrew. He writes, ‘Reading allowed me to escape, in my mind, to a world beyond the prison walls, where there are no metal gates, no watchtowers and no sadistic prison guards, to places where people are equal and where possibilities are endless’ (p. 73). Reading and learning languages was Hilal’s means of escape, it was also his joy. But it was also his mode of resistance, his way of asserting and maintaining his identity as a Palestinian intellectual, his form of *sumoud*—steadfastness. He writes:

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<sup>3</sup> Shehadeh, *The third way*, p. 25.

As soon as I was arrested, I grasped the nature of the long fight awaiting me. It is the same fight faced by all prisoners before me and those who are left behind. The Israeli prison administration basically tries to break our spirit, to keep us isolated and uninformed, while we struggle to maintain a semblance of our humanity, to retain a sense of order within the most chaotic surroundings (p.74).

‘Struggling to maintain a semblance of humanity’—that phrase resonates with me, as I am sure it does with many who have accompanied Palestinians (and Israelis) over the years in their struggle for a sustainable peace. As the occupation deepens, as the likelihood of any significant change diminishes, so it becomes ever-more difficult to sustain hope for the future. And this brings me full-circle back to the dilemma of the researcher as critical friend. Of course we have a responsibility to be analytical, to identify weaknesses and strengths, to explore possibilities for change as well as identifying the many factors and processes that stand in the way of a new future—but surely we also have a moral and human responsibility to help sustain hope.

## References

Darweish, M, & A. Rigby. 2015. *Popular Protest in Palestine: The Uncertain Future of Unarmed Resistance*, London: Pluto.

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## REVIEWS

**Millán, Mágina, Lucía Linsalata and  
Daniel Inclán, ed.**

**Modernidades Alternativas**

Ediciones Del Lirio, 2016

**Millán, Mágina, ed.  
Prefiguraciones De Lo Político**

Ediciones Del Lirio, 2018

Reviewed by **Ryan A. Knight**<sup>1</sup>, *National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico City*

*Modernidades alternativas* (Alternative Modernities) and *Prefiguraciones de lo político* (Prefigurations of the Political), are the two latest releases from *Modernidades alternativas y nuevo sentido comun: prefiguraciones de una modernidad no capitalista* (Alternative Modernities and New Common Sense: Prefigurations of a Non-Capitalist Modernity), a book series coordinated by Dr. Mágina Millán Moncayo of the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Taken together, the two collected works provide a critical group of essays exploring the crises of contemporary capitalist modernity, and the practices, possibilities, and potential of alternative forms of non-capitalist social organization.

Facing the contemporary civilizational crisis head on, the essays within these two collections offer varied approaches to the politics and practices of radical social change. Drawing from variants of Indigenous, feminist and critical Marxist thought, with a predominant but not exclusive grounding in Mexico, these two collections move us away from the tired debates of the ‘revolutionary left,’ creating their own unique conversation around alternative anti-capitalist politics, grounded in prefiguration, contingency and possibility.

Both collections draw extensively from the political and social thought of Latin American Marxist philosopher, Bolívar Echeverría—a figure

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1 All translations done by the reviewer.

relatively unknown in the English-speaking world. The first collection, *Alternative Modernities*, opens up a dialogue specifically around Echeverría's approach to modernity, and alternatives to the dominance of capitalism in contemporary society. The compilation outlines the inherent contradictions in the development of capitalist modernity, between the potential latent in modernity and its 'capitalist, colonial, patriarchal or heteronormative configurations' (Millán, et al. 2016: 12). Put in another way, the tension between 'the present evanescence of identity cultivation and the totalitarian and fundamentalist fixation necessary for the realization of value on a global scale, embodied in concrete subjectivities' (Millán, et al. 2016: 12). Amidst these contradictions, this collection traces a non-capitalist modernity as is embodied, 'in forms of organization, in the economy, in knowledge and in living cultural practices' (Millán, et al. 2016: 19).

The idea of contingency is fundamental to this collection, an idea again influenced by Bolívar Echeverría's thinking on modernity. Echeverría theorized modernity as a long process of contradiction and dynamic conflict, between the potential inherent in modernity, and the empirical or dominant manifestations of modernity. For Echeverría, the potential of modernity—the past that always remains present, the possibilities of what has yet to develop—is always harassing the empirical or dominant modernity. Meanwhile, the empirical is always trying to prove the non-existence of the potential of modernity. As the introduction to the collection states, 'Thinking from contingency allows us to attend to and understand the potential of collective projects that have been subsumed, defeated or silenced by dominant forms of existence' (Millán, et al. 2016: 11-12). Thinking from contingency resists mechanical approaches to reality, illuminating a politics of potentiality and possibility.

In the vein of critical Marxism, *Alternative Modernities* digs beneath hegemonic capitalist modernity, de-normalizing the temporalities, practices, relations, and logic inherent to it. The first section of the book, 'Toward a Non-capitalist Material Culture,' explores the historical development of the separation between the economy and subsistence with three essays, one from Jean Robert Jeannet, another from Carlos Alberto Ayala Osuna, and a collective essay from Rodrigo Hernández González and Rodolfo Oliveros Espinoza. These three essays invite us to think about the possibility of again unifying economy with subsistence. The next essay by Victor Manuel Bernal García looks at the community of Magdalena Mixiuhca in Mexico City, which in 2010 began a community project oriented toward constructing

their own means of exchange, ‘ending dependence on institutions, banks and governments’ (Millán, et al. 2016: 80). This essay provides a practical example of a non-capitalist local economy grounded in alternative interpretations of value beyond exchange value celebrated by capitalism. The section closes with an essay by Daniel Inclán on the contradictions within the techniques of modernity, and the potential for techniques of reciprocity and solidarity to overcome capitalist modernity.

The second section, ‘Episteme and Modernity,’ destabilizes some of the conventional epistemological assumptions inherent to modernity. Maria Jaidopulu Vrijea leads us into a discussion of the constant negotiation and construction of a multiplicity of space-times in everyday life, and the possibility of alternative space-times being constructed from below in the practices of everyday life. Sylvia Marcos Tueme provides an insightful essay on the way in which Indigenous thought and practice, Indigenous theology, has influenced and reshaped the Catholic Church of the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. The complex constellation of an embodied theology of the Indigenous Maya, characterized by prophetic dreams, myth as history, and the impossibility of the separation between thought and practice, intervene and reshape the direction and character of the Catholic Church. In another essay, Daniel Inclán offers an important approach to thinking about historical time and the manifestation of history in the present. He argues for the need to think through the dialectic of temporalities, taking into account possibilities latent in the present, to understand that, ‘actuality is not a necessity, but a contingency’ (Millán, et al. 2016: 187). Lastly, Susan Buck-Morss, provides an essay stressing the need to rescue fragments of the past erased by official history, ‘basing it in a de-privatized and de-nationalized structure of collective memory’ (Millán, et al. 2016: 198).

An excellent essay by Bolivian social theorist, Silva Rivera Cusicanqui, ‘A Ch’ixi world is possible: Memory, Market and Colonialism,’ takes up a great deal of the middle section of the book, and serves as the heart of the book as a whole. In accordance with the collection’s aim of investigating alternative modernities, Cusicanqui problematizes the current dominant social order, engaging the multiplicity, diversity, and contradictions of contemporary Bolivian society. She offers us the idea of the ‘barroco ch’ixi,’ as ‘a way of not searching for synthesis, of working with and within contradiction, of developing it, insofar as synthesis is longing for the return to the one’ (Millán, et al. 2016: 311). From contradiction and diversity, from the ‘barroco ch’ixi,’ derives the possibility of liberation, the possibility

of a society animated by a profound history against the dominant modern colonial order.

The final section of the book, 'Another Politics and Common Sense,' takes us into the politics of the commons, social reproduction and the capitalist war against autonomy and subsistence. The first essay by Jean Robert Jeannet looks at the politics of modernity, as the ongoing destruction of the autonomous subsistence of society, and the ever-encroaching dynamic of alienation brought by capitalism. The second essay, collectively written by María Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, Mina Lorena Navarro Trujillo and Lucía Linsalata, 'Rethinking the Political: Keys for the Discussion,' guides us through the reproductive work of the commons, which inherently resists the logic of capital accumulation. The book ends with an essay by Gustavo Esteva Figueroa, who argues for a (re)invention of society beyond capitalism and patriarchy, abolishing the separation between means and ends, and reconnecting with the past in order to (re)invent a future beyond the horrors of capitalist modernity.

In a graceful step forward, the collection 'Prefigurations of the Political,' leads us through a series of essays exploring in depth a politics of prefiguration, showing the possibility of different forms of organization, distinct from capitalist modernity. The strength of this collection lies in its subtle critique of the revolutionary politics of the past, of the dogmatic interpretations of historical materialism, and of the restricted understandings of where the politics and possibility of social change inhabit. Clearly influenced by Bolívar Echeverría's use of the idea, 'lo político,' this collection defines 'lo político' as 'the field of creative tendencies that emerge from the social body, from the permanence and persistence of concrete life-worlds, with their corporal axis and their ethos, in which life full of attributes opposed to bare life is put into play' (Millán, 2018: 11). In an attempt at highlighting the prefigurations of such politics, this collection directs us toward the politics of everyday life, of the ongoing practices of social and material reproduction, of the forms of organization and political practice that lie outside the frameworks normally denominated 'the political.'

From beginning to end, this book reads as a more cohesive collection, with a clearer thread tying the different essays together. The introduction, written collectively by Mágina Millán and Daniel Inclán, along with the first two chapters, one written by Millán and the other by Inclán, do a superb job of laying out the characteristics of the current crisis of capitalist

modernity and the prefigurative possibilities of another politics existing there within. Next, Susan Buck-Morss provides an essay covering the politics of the global multitude, and the strength of global diversity in the multitude's makeup, rather than a totalized subject as theorized by conventional Marxist thought. Diana Fuentes gives an essay on the critique of capitalist modernity from romanticism, with the persistence of romanticism in contemporary society, and the role romanticism plays as a source from which contemporary resistances draw influence, in opposing capitalist modernity.

The collection moves on with two essays that explore the feminist critique of totality, one from Guiomar Rovira Sancho addressing feminist activism online as connected networks and multitudes that resist totalization, and another from Silva L. Gil that engages feminism to critique the concepts of hegemonic modernity. In her essay, 'Doing from the impasse: Rethinking universals from feminism,' Silva L. Gil tells us:

The above-mentioned feminist contributions offer clues to go beyond; a politics not of totality but of the unfinished (always in process); a politics of desire, but attentive to the differentiated and unequal ways in which desire is fixed in bodies; a politics not of dichotomies, but of connections; a politics not of unique subjects, but of irreducible differences. A politics that does not renounce the affirmation of a universal aspiration, but manages to do it in another way (Millán, 2018: 238).

Further along there is an essay by Rita Canto Vergara thinking through the 'modes of political existence that emanate from desire' (Millán, 2018: 276), and another essay by Rafael Mondragón Velázquez exploring the politics of telling stories related to violence: 'Through a set of vignettes, we have made the careful use of the word a theme in a certain art of narration, an ethic of listening, a search to build new languages and a rethinking of the aesthetic dimension of organizational processes' (Millán, 2018: 357). There are also two essays located in specific contexts, one by María Jaidopulu Vrijea on the space-time of the Greek financial crisis and Greek resistance, and another by Rodrigo Hernández on the experience of democratic confederalism in Kurdish territories in Northern Syria. Taken together, the essays throughout the collection continually bring us back to the subtle practices and potential of another type of politics, beyond the politics of capitalist modernity.

What I found particularly interesting from these two collections was their commitment to the idea, derived from Bolívar Echeverría,

that modernity itself is full of alternative possibilities. What might be a controversial argument in some anticapitalist, antistate and anticolonial circles, these two collections argue that alternative modernities are present and possible, beyond the exploitative logic of capitalism and the authoritarian logic of the state-led techno-scientific organization of society. The pivotal point I drew from this argument, and from these two collections as a whole, is that modernity is not a monolithic, solidified, all-dominating civilizational project. It is rather characterized by contradiction and conflict, by a multiplicity of practices, processes, forces and logics, which embody alternative possibilities, and which open up all sorts of radical potential.

On a more critical note, after reading both collections, I was left longing for more voices from practical experiences of these alternative modernities and prefigurative politics. The two collections lean heavily on theoretical insight, eluding to alternative modernities and prefigurative politics mostly through the lens of political and social theorists. While there are practical experiences in both collections, I think a more robust dialogue with communities and peoples embodying or practicing the alternative politics theoretically highlighted in these collections, better uniting the theoretical with the practical, would have gone a long way.

Relatedly, I was also left longing for insight into concrete ways of engaging politically in the world in the face of the civilizational crises laid out in both collections. It is clear that the intention of the editors of both collections is not to provide ready-made plans or a blueprint for emancipatory political practice, but to open discussions into political possibilities and potentialities within and beyond capitalist modernity. I still kept asking myself how we can act proactively in the world with this insight. I think a more developed exchange between the theoretical insights offered here and the voices of prefigured political practice, would have perhaps opened up an avenue into thinking more practically about the possibilities and potentialities of emancipation from capitalist modernity.

Generally speaking, these two collections join a growing body of literature—including autonomous, feminist, anarchist, Indigenous, critical Marxist and other currents of social and political thought—that orient us toward a politics of embodied practice at the level of everyday life. There were times when the essays felt somewhat repetitive, with the overwhelming influence of Bolívar Echeverría in the theoretical and conceptual framing of the two collected works. Feminist and Indigenous politics animate a number

of essays in both collections, but I wanted to see to see a deeper engagement with their insights and inquiries. Furthermore, perhaps due to personal bias, I felt an essay or two mobilizing the insights of anarchism would have greatly enriched this discussion of anti-capitalist and prefigurative politics. On the other hand, the influence of Bolívar Echeverría, and the eclectic mix of essays within the two collections, provide an important alternative entry point into thinking about prefigurative politics and alternatives to capitalism that has not been so thoroughly covered in other texts.

Overall, I want to praise these two collections in opening up a multiplicity of new and unique approaches to thinking about alternative political and social possibilities. I think it is fundamental that we study and take seriously the insights put forth in these collections. It's a shame that this literature, along with the vast majority of Bolívar Echeverría's work, has not been translated into English. At the very least, I hope this review serves as an introduction to some of the ideas coming out of these critical discussions.

## Majed Kayali

### nqāš āslāḥ.. qrā' ʕ fy škālīyāt āltǧrb ʕ āl' skryš ālfstynyš

[*Discussing Arms: A Reading in the Complications of  
Palestinian Armed Experience*]

Arab Institute for Studies and Distribution, 2020

Reviewed by Nadia Naser-Najjab, *University of Exeter, UK*

After the establishment of the PLO in 1964, armed struggle became synonymous with the Palestinian national movement. The PLO adopted a militaristic iconography and symbolism and individual and collective acts of armed resistance became deeply embedded in its historiography. When the PLO entered into peace negotiations with Israel, Hamas effectively co-opted this culture and tradition and presented itself as the standard-bearer of armed Palestinian resistance. In the Palestinian context, it would therefore be a mistake to ascribe purely religious connotations to 'martyrdom' in the service of armed resistance, as it also has a secular meaning and significance.

The memory of those who sacrificed themselves for the national cause is still celebrated by Palestinian institutions and the general public, and

Majed Kayali's *Discussing Arms* therefore presents a controversial thesis when it attributes the militarisation of the Palestinian struggle to a general failure of insight and perspective. His closeness to the national movement does however mean that he is almost uniquely well-placed to offer a retrospective critical assessment of Palestinian armed struggle since the Mandate period. He shows how the adulation of armed struggle produced emotional decisions and imposed clear limitations that excluded non-violent alternatives.

Kayali's criticisms do not seek to dispose of the more general concept of resistance and can, in actual fact, more accurately be described as an attempt to salvage the concept from the limitations and constraints that have hitherto been imposed on it. He affirms that *Discussing Arms* 'is not about the legitimacy of Palestinian struggle against the occupation...it is about the forms of struggle and not to limit it to armed struggle... how to invest it and to manage it in a rational way with least losses' (p 154). Kayali's critique requires a cultural shift and a whole new way of thinking, that comprehensively breaks with this inheritance in order to preserve the sanctity of the principle of resistance.

His critique also argues the celebration of armed resistance is detached from reality ('[i]t is more about imaginative and a wishful thinking rather than a realistic possibility') (p117) and this is confirmed by the fact that the rhetorical celebrations of a number of political parties do not refer to concrete achievements; conversely, the act of resistance is in itself deemed to be worthy of celebration.

Kayali is equally critical of the thinking that turned 'peace' into an unquestioned imperative, which was to be pursued in the absence of critical scrutiny. Both were products of a rigidity and inflexibility of thought that culminated in the ongoing annexation project that was presaged by the U.S report *Peace to Prosperity* (White House, 2020). Kayali similarly dismisses the call for Palestinians to adopt methods of Gandhian non-violent resistance without international and regional support, by observing that they are poorly adapted to Israeli settler colonialism. (p168).

The adulation of armed resistance has been accompanied by an equally pernicious myth of 'Arab solidarity', which has occluded the realities of the situation in which Palestinians find themselves. But Kayali does not confine himself to observing the limitations of this solidarity or the efforts of particular Arab states to co-opt the struggle. Instead, he proceeds to the considerably more controversial claim that Arab regimes were, at a time

when they were ostensibly committed to the destruction of Israel, actually interested in ensuring its stability, on the grounds this would help maintain the status quo.

But such questions were essentially rendered ‘off-limits’ by the ‘worship’ of armed resistance, which produced a rigidity of thought and tactical and strategic stagnation. Critical thought was also discouraged, as those who sacrificed themselves to the national struggle were instead to be celebrated and valorised. It was deemed more appropriate to unquestioningly shout slogans, such as Yasser Arafat’s *Sha’ab Al Jabarreen* (‘the mighty people’), while submitting to the limitless wisdom of the leadership.

This conformity came with a clear cost, which was paid by Palestinian civilians in Jordan, Lebanon and occupied Palestine. In any case, armed resistance was also limited in its own terms – as Kayali observes, traffic accidents claimed more Israeli lives than Palestinian acts of resistance or wars with Arabs. (p152) But the dogma of armed resistance prevented an acknowledgement of this, in addition to Israel’s military superiority and the international/regional context. It also detracted from Palestinian institution-building.

Throughout its history, the Movement was also limited by its reluctance to learn the lessons of past defeats. The interlude between the outbreak of the 1936 Arab Revolt and the 1948 War was, he observes, wasted as the leadership failed to develop a clear strategy or address existing weaknesses. While he accepts that the establishment of Israel was perhaps unavoidable, he contends that the loss of 77 percent of Historical Palestine was not.

He also cites the example of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* and notes that Palestinian attacks on Israeli civilians rallied Israelis behind Ariel Sharon and enabled him to reoccupy Palestinian areas, destroy Palestinian infrastructure and further fragment Palestinian land. But rather than acknowledge these counter-productive effects, Palestinian political parties instead commemorate the event’s anniversaries and sacrifice (p115). He is also critical of Hamas missile attacks on Israel, which similarly helped Israel’s Right to advance its political agenda. He attributes Hamas’s tactical oversight to its detachment from the national movement, which is perhaps surprising, as he is so critical of the latter’s tactical and strategic shortcomings.

Just as the PLO once celebrated the ‘sacrifices’ made during Israel’s 1982 siege of Beirut, Hamas valorises the ‘bravery’ and ‘endurance’ of the besieged Strip. But it is no great betrayal to observe that, in this latter case,

the main contribution of this 'resistance' has been to strengthen the locks of a wretched prison that insults the most basic notions of human dignity. And nor is it an insult to contend that Israel's 2005 withdrawal from the Strip should have been regarded as a colonial tactic rather than celebrate it.

Kayali correctly observes that the example of non-violent struggle by Palestinians within Israel for equal rights has not been adapted by Palestinians. But this is more attributable to the general weakness, or wholesale absence, of rights within the OPT and specific Arab countries. In any case, it could be argued that it is not realistic to expect imitation of this kind, as Palestinians will develop approaches, tactics and strategies that are appropriate to their specific (legal and political) context.

The limitations of Palestinian strategy are not just shown by its failure to achieve specific goals but also by the extent to which colonial power has strengthened and consolidated. For example, since the First *Intifada*, Israel has successfully co-opted parts of the national movement, and this has in turn created division and disunity. The emergence of a Palestinian 'client class' and the extent of Palestinian-Israeli 'security' cooperation confirm just how successful it has been in these respects.

These developments have helped Palestinian political parties to reach a shared consensus that Israel is a settler colonial state. The PLO originally upheld this position, which was enshrined in its commitment to liberate Historical Palestine. However, it was then gradually diluted as the organisation incrementally moved towards accepting the two-state solution from the mid-1970s onwards. The many failures that accompanied this transition mean that there is a clear and ongoing need to define goals, identify means of resistance and set out an encompassing vision (p102). Critical thinking, open-mindedness and research are the necessary preconditions and corollaries of genuinely revolutionary struggle, and must be welcomed by the leadership rather than resented as an encroachment on its exclusive prerogatives.

I strongly agree with Kayali's assessment of the First Intifada, and more specifically his claim that it provides a model of popular and non-violent resistance that can be applied to contemporary challenges. In my own work, I have also discussed the proposition that the 'militarised' Second Intifada narrowed the horizons of revolutionary action and limited the range of participation (Naser-Najjab & Khatib, 2019).

I would however take issue with Kayali's observation that the current regional and international environment is not conducive to Palestinian struggle. Before the First *Intifada* broke out, the 'Palestinian Question' was very low on the international agenda, and in any case the claim that Palestinians should wait for the international environment to change strikes me as too closely resembling fatalism. I would also argue that the project of internal renewal must be defined in relation to Palestinian needs and requirements, and not the limitations imposed by the wider regional and international environment.

In making this assertion, I do not propose to dispose of 'internationalism' in all of its forms and dimensions. Rather, I intend to reject the form that was embodied in the abortive Oslo Accords, which situated Palestinians as grateful supplicants who would take whatever was on offer from powerful international states and organisations. In its place, I would instead propose 'anti-colonial internationalisation', which is outlined in more detail by Salamanca et al:

Such an alignment would expand the tools available to Palestinians and their solidarity movement, and reconnect the struggle to its own history of anti-colonial internationalism. At its core, this internationalist approach asserts that the Palestinian struggle against Zionist settler colonialism can only be won when it is embedded within, and empowered by, broader struggles – all anti-imperial, all anti-racist, and all struggling to make another world possible. (2012:5).

BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) is a clear example of this 'anti-colonial internationalism', which is clearly rooted in the historical antecedents of the struggle against South Africa's Apartheid regime. It also recalls Kayali's thesis because it seeks to explore the possibilities of non-violent resistance and envisages engagement across a wider range of points.

Historically, theorists such as Fanon celebrated violence as a cathartic act that would rid the colonised of the shame and humiliation of his/her degraded state. More recently, revolutionary nationalist groups sought to 'borrow' the actions and symbols of militarism for the purposes of revolutionary action, apparently unaware that, in so doing, they transferred a specific and rigid mode of thought that reified 'sacrifice' and hierarchical discipline while simultaneously restricting revolutionary alternatives and

modes of struggle. In many cases, armed resistance did not just fail to achieve its ends, but actually became a problem that needed to be traversed.

Kayali's analysis has far-reaching implications and I therefore think that *Discussing Arms* will be of interest to a wide readership. Although academics will find much of interest, I primarily view it as a practical contribution that seeks to extract the principle of resistance from the cloying and suffocating embrace of militarism. While I would recommend that members of the current Palestinian leadership should read the book, I would suggest that they do so with some caution, as its discussion of an ossified and anachronistic tradition of 'struggle' is in many respects an damning indictment of their failure to explore and develop revolutionary alternatives.

I find much to recommend in *Discussing Arms*, and my concluding suggestion is that it should be translated into English and other foreign languages, as this will help it to reach the wider readership that it undoubtedly deserves.

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**Alistair Horne:  
A Savage War of Peace**

NYRB Classics, 2006

Reviewed by **Jonathan William Alexander Hills**, *Independent Researcher*

Since early 2019 Algerians have been engaging in open resistance against President Bouteflika, who resigned in April 2019, and subsequent remnants of his regime. This resistance also seeks a resolution to entrenched economic issues and corruption in Algeria. Meaningful consideration of Algeria's period of postcolonial struggle is needed to properly comprehend both the significance of these events, as well as the choice of Algerians to engage in broadly nonviolent resistance in recent years.

Accordingly, *A Savage War of Peace* (*SWOP*) presents an appropriately gruelling narrative of the Algerian War. Comprehensive without being exhaustive, *SWOP* manages to consider the War's many factions and partisan perspectives into a cautiously objective yet compelling narrative.

If the narrative of *SWOP* is to be dichotomised it is into external (that of de Gaulle, Ben Bella, metropolitan France, and the GPRA) and internal (that of ALN and the FLN operatives within Algeria, French paras, the OAS, and General Salan) aspects. Global themes and narratives, such as post-colonialism, Pan-Arabism, and the then-new Soviet–US paradigm are very much secondary to events and processes pertaining to Algeria and France directly. For example, Nassar's empty promises to the FLN (who the French were convinced, even until late in the War, was the main sponsor of FLN insurrection); the uneasy and standoffish relationship between the FLN and the Soviets (as well as to a lesser extent, the PRC); and global (especially US) sentiments concerning Algerian independence and reflected voices at the UN are all mentioned and considered, but do not occupy a central position. This provides a possible lesson for historians researching resistance movements: despite the ostensible precedence of global/regional paradigms, processes, and international political influences, the complexities of internal country-specific dynamics must also be acknowledged—especially during sustained periods of widespread resistance.

Similarly, according to the aforementioned internal–external dichotomy, the internal takes precedence over the latter in *SWOP* (with the key exception of De Gaulle, who is given considerable, if not *Ex Machina*-like precedence). For instance, concerning the FLN itself, the role of the

GPRA and the exterior are portrayed as instrumental, but their narrative is secondary to that of *fellaghas* in the Aurès, or FLN bombmakers in Algiers.

Macrocosmically, Horne sees the Revolution as emerging from, though not caused by, a new global dynamic—that which emboldened nationalist movements such as those of Tunisia, Vietnam, and Egypt. While not being categorically stipulated as such, *SWOP* portrays the Revolution as being caused by the ending of the old imperial age rather than the beginning of a new Soviet one; most importantly, however, is the emergence of a literate and educated class in Algeria, one that could exploit the fading imperial power responsible for its creation and education.

The French response to the Revolution is stylised by a weakened post-war France, particularly France's tumble from her position as a leading power and her 'loss of face'—which had a particular severe effect on the French military—following the 1940 surrender to Germany and in 1954 with *Điền Biên Phủ*. More than anything *SWOP* is concerned with Algeria and, as far as she is connected with it, France, as well as the people and affected populations within these regions.

*SWOP* repeats the historical saw that, in times of violent conflict, those individuals that are most easily forgotten by history are often those with the most piteous experiences. Those who fared worst in the Algerian War were the moderate, 'third force', and liberal voices; Horne notes the crucial lesson for contemporary conflicts. Individuals such as Guy Mollet and Ferhat Abbas, who found their position increasingly untenable as the War became increasingly violent, were forced to radicalise or be silenced.

Accordingly it is the experiences of *people*, both individually but especially collectively, that remains the focus of *SWOP*. More than anything else the reader is left with a strong sense of pity for those 'forced into' the War. Those individuals who, in 1956 or even by 1959, did not identify with either the FLN or the FAS (whose Muslim membership reached 40% during the War), but who were subsequently forced into being pro- or anti-Algerian independence according to identities they could not hide nor relinquish. With the exception of the tragic Harkis, by 1962 the Muslim–non-Muslim dichotomy had been realised, and every individual gobbled up by the War's savage conviction.

Horne makes it clear that, before the War, the generally ambivalent of Algeria comprised the vast majority: Arabs and Kabyles pressured into funding or joining the FLN after FLN bullying, indiscriminate and heavy-

handed *ratissages* by French paras, or wanton and racially charged *pieds-noirs* (European colonists) violence; *petits blancs* (poor *pieds-noirs* with wealth relative to many Muslims who Horne likens to the Boers of South Africa, or the poor whites of the Deep South) ideologically exploited or else terrorised by the FLN and FAF/OAS into becoming militantly and ideologically bound to *Algerie Francais*; Harkis fighting out of loyalty and not ideology, promised repeatedly that France would never abandon them. All would be caught up in the ‘gristmill’ of the War and the immovable positions of the FLN and *pied noir* ultras, positions towards which they—sooner or later—would be forced to gravitate or even adopt.

However, above and between these two positions stood, first authoritatively then dejectedly, an arbitrating French government and military. As Algeria reduced itself into two opposing polarities, France’s government and her military would tend increasingly toward a self-immobilising plurality, and indeed an actual plurality in the case of the military due to the General’s putsch. These ostensible arbitrators also saw shifting role as the War continued, reflecting a strange almost-oxymoronic progression; ultimately, France herself would become the OAS’ enemy more than it had ever been the FLN’s. Initially pro-*pieds-noirs* and set on pacifying this untenable breakaway from the Fourth Republic (apropos of the ‘Ici c’est France’ mentality of Algeria and her being a singularly ‘integral part of France’), the French government would, under an increasingly wearisome and metropole-oriented de Gaulle, eventually adopt a ‘handwashing’ policy, abandoning all desires on Algiers and her Saharan underbelly.

Finally, the complicated position of the French army further erodes the notion of the War as a two-sided issue. From the laudable heroes of the *pieds-noirs* following their victory at the Battle of Algiers (Horne mentions that red para berets filled *pieds-noirs* shops in Algiers for Christmas 1957), to besieging the *pieds-noirs* OAS stronghold at the Battle of Bab El Oued (1962), then standing by while *Harkis* were massacred within eye-shot by the FLN later that same year.

Horne is careful to note that for every ultra or OAS assassin there were a dozen *pied noir* forced into the conflict, one that would remove them from their homeland and the homeland of their fathers. Nevertheless, when taken as a whole (there were many poor *pied noir* but barely any wealthy Muslims) the material disparities of the European and Muslim populations in terms of land, money, and civil rights were extreme. Extremely pernicious

and unhelpful to the situation was *pieds-noirs* bigotry toward Muslims, their insecure inferiority–superiority complex toward metropolitan France, their macho ‘*mediterranéens-et-demi*’ outlook, and their mulishness in preventing assimilation. Often, this makes sympathising with the *pieds-noirs* difficult when reading *SWOP*, at least until their tragic exodus of 1962.

Only the FLN, in its single-minded and uncompromising terms and *modus operandi*, emerges victorious from the Algerian War. Set against a far stronger and more effective enemy, the FLN managed to realise all of its initial aims. Horne repeatedly notes that these aims were stipulated in the initial ‘excessively grandiloquent’ FLN declaration before All Saint’s Day 1954, the (generally unsuccessful) launch of the FLN campaign. Despite this, the FLN would achieve every one.

True to overall tragedy of the War, *SWOP* finishes by covering post-War difficulties experienced by the FLN and its key players. Ben Bella’s proto-personality cult and his ascendancy to power, FLN purges, and authoritarianism under Ben Bella and Boumediene—all ruined the initial principles of the FLN as much as France or the OAS might have during the War itself. This raises the question of the brutal cost of FLN victory and, reflecting the outcomes of numerous other violent anticolonial struggles, the immense difficulty of avoiding the emergence of an ideological-driven, postcolonial elite.

The first spark of the War-to-come, 1945 Sétif massacre, shows that the aforementioned change was not the origin of the War. *SWOP* portrays Sétif as a surprising explosion of hitherto-unanticipated emotion, a warning that France (both Algerian and metropolitan) failed to heed, an indication of the escalating brutalisation to come, and the related difficulty of realising a rational resolution. Horne argues that desire for change among Algerian Muslims before the War did not necessarily mean desire for independence. Keen resentment, sometimes hatred, for the *pieds-noirs* of Algeria stemmed was somewhat justified due to the latter’s privilege. If *pieds-noirs* outlook towards Muslims was initially one of racist contempt and condescension, then this evolved into hatred once they had been forced to take the Muslims seriously following events such as Sétif, the Philippeville massacre, and the subsequent FLN campaign.

The portentous Sétif massacre also highlights the aforementioned Muslim–non-Muslim disparity. After French forces killed several individuals at a generally peaceful Algerian-independence demonstration, 100 *pieds-*

*noirs* were killed in reprisal. Horne notes that there were certainly proto-FLN activists at Sétif, armed and set on violence, an indication of the FLN's more militant and inflexible aspect that would ultimately triumph against its own moderates and France alike. Subsequently 500–600+ Muslims were killed in related indiscriminate village air-raids by the French military, with a further 1,000 being killed in the reactionary *pieds-noirs ratonnades* (a racially charged *pied-noir* term for anti-Muslim violence). Perhaps even more than FLN bombings and assassinations, these *ratonnades* and subsequent Muslim reprisals would expedite the vicious circle of violence, evidence the superior position of the *pieds-noirs* Algerians, and radicalise and drive the general population into FLN and OAS arms, respectively. More than the resentment caused by the stinging European–Muslim disparity, and more even than France's hesitation to stand up to the powerful *pieds-noirs* lobby and facilitate true assimilation, was the catalyst provided by France herself: education of the prospective FLN leadership.

*SWOP* presents unity and utter rejection for any rival group or internal inconsistency as key to FLN endurance and success. A founding tenet of the FLN that remained throughout the War (and later even exemplified under Boumediene's presidency) was the FLN's complete rejection of the personality-cult. Horne remarks on the absence of plaques in Algiers commemorating revolutionary heroes of the Algerian Revolution, which was from the beginning, he says, a movement of collectiveness: 'of collective leadership, of collective suffering, and collective anonymity'. Leaders of the FLN and GPRA presented a united front without cracks or heterogeneity during the War itself. This especially true concerning those militant and conservative figures, such as Ben Bella and Boumediene, who would dominate the latter War and be ascendant within independent Algeria at the expense of more moderate figures such as Ferhjad Abbas and the Kabyle Krim Belacem.

Excepting simple tenacity and endurance, the FLN's ability to compartmentalise itself to avoid wide-scale discovery and dismantlement, FLN's leaders' ability to solve or (more often) expunge internal threats or dissident activity, and the organisation's capacity to keep its internal struggles hidden were not necessarily key to its victory, but are certainly why the FLN did not fail despite moments of intense pressure and hopelessness.

Given the considerable emphasis on the problems of 'leaderless' nonviolent resistance movements (those nevertheless characterised as

having considerable unity, including those of 2019 Algeria), the presence of a cohesive even if anonymous leadership able to coerce unity lends itself towards more authoritarian political organisation following the movement's success. Nevertheless, unity of leadership despite organisational compartmentalisation, shared or disparate leadership, ideological reticence, and homogenisation present themselves as important dynamics for resistance movements to consider.

At the inception of the Revolution, the FLN arranged Algeria into six *wilayas*, each run by a *wilaya* leader. Despite FLN unity being threatened often due to heterogeneous practices (such as the Marxist and egalitarian system of *wilaya* 4 under Si M'hamed's leadership) or else overly ambitious or politically individual *wilaya* leaders (such as the Kabyle Abane Ramdane), the FLN was tenacious in maintaining unity. The anti-cult-of-personality principle that resulted in the killing of Ramdane (friend of Frantz Fanon, appointer of 'reformists not revolutionaries', and 'architect of the revolution') not only illustrates the importance of the principle itself, but possibly also its exploitation for serving other means—in this case, Boumediene's paving the way for his future personality-bereft government following his 1965 coup to depose Ben Bella.

The FLN leadership managed to keep many of its internal tensions that emerged following Algerian independence silent throughout the War itself. This helped the organisation position itself as the sole contiguous representative of Algerian independence by 1960. Still, unity came at a cost. Roughly one tenth of Algerian casualties were due to internal purges and the destruction of rival forces (such as the massacre of over 301 MNA troops by the ALN in 1957). Similarly, the tip-off that resulted in the liquidation of the Soviet-aligned *Kabyle rouge* by September 1956, a short-lived rival to the FLN, was likely FLN-sponsored.

The plight of Algerian women also reflects this 'conflict–peacetime' disparity in resistance movements. Instrumental throughout the war—both as medics in the *bled* of the Aurès and as bomb-placers, message-takers, and gunrunners in Algiers—Muslim women saw the erosion of the keenly paternalistic Algerian culture and greater equality when they were needed in wartime. Following peace and independence their plight returned, even worsened, as Arabisation and, later, Islamification was imposed and exploited under authoritarian leadership. The notable participation of Algerian women in opposing Bouteflika marks a possible echo of this trend;

accordingly, there is a lesson of caution for all resistance movements here regarding the depletion of rights and means afforded to repressed groups during and following resistance struggles.

The lack of exposition of FLN characters does not apply to Fahad Abbas nor many FLN players (FLN's female bombers under Ben Mhidi) in the Battle of Algiers, nor their experiences therein. Almost singularly in *SWOP*, chapters on the Battle are more human-oriented and story-like. Perhaps this is merely because the narrative and setting of the Battle, such as covert attacks launched from the Kasbah—it lends itself to a more character-driven narrative. The author also notes that the *Battle of Algiers*, which helps to 'flesh out' the experiences of these players with admirable objectivity, is referenced by Horne, and makes a singular accompaniment to the reading of *SWOP*.

Regardless, throughout the War FLN leadership remained collective. It is for this reason that the struggle does not fit easily into the postcolonial Arab-nationalism paradigm of Nassar or Bourguiba, despite the attempts of both of these men to ensure it did so. Accordingly, the movement could not be stopped merely by the removal or countercheck of any individual, as evidenced with Ben Bella's hijacking. If this collectivist character was culturally retained in Algeria, it may have proven beneficial during Algeria's 2019 Hirak movement. Nonviolence, like every human movement, must struggle against that aspect of mankind that leans lazily toward celebrity, heroism, and apotheosis.

The vicious cycle of violence, with each side seemingly trying to outdo the other, is perhaps *SWOP*'s most staying theme. Horne conveys the ubiquitous terror/war fatigue, which was rife among *all* Algerians by 1962, but which had not been enough to prevent Algerian independence altogether. The lesson for current resistance movements is ambiguous; even without moral considerations the indiscriminate use of terror is not recommendable as clearly terror both won (for the FLN) and lost (for OAS and ultras) the War. The number of times 'the violence escalates' is used in *SWOP* seems absurd, and yet the author substantiates each instance. Nevertheless, the most violent acts ultimately had their strongest effects in the outrage they caused, not their practicable outcomes (i.e. military or civil damage).

Similarly, the use of torture by the French authorities, though effective in the Battle of Algiers, was likely the most damaging of policies for *Algérie Française*. *SWOP* shows the effectiveness of terror in turning ambivalent

Muslims into FLN supporters, but also how OAS terror guaranteed the exodus of *pieds-noirs* in the final year of the war.

Highlighting uncertain outcome of violent revolution once the ‘cat has been taken out of the bag’ is an important point for nonviolent movements seeking to remain pacifistic in times of keen stress or the utilisation of violence and terror by the opposing force.

It is worthwhile for those engaged in resistance to seriously consider the utilisability of outrage, or even offence. One limitation on the FLN’s terror was that it did not target leading French officials, de Gaulle, or—most importantly—civilians in metropolitan France. While OAS tried numerous times to assassinate de Gaulle, if the FLN had succeeded in doing so French, and possibly world opinion would likely have moved towards that of the *pieds-noirs* ultras. Even when FLN terrorist incidents on mainland increased in the wake of de Gaulle’s return, they were targeted at non-civilian targets: policemen, the Eiffel tower, etc. Despite this, not one act of promiscuous bombing against civilians, such has been commonplace in Algiers (or as seen in IRA bombings in Britain 15 years later), took place in France herself.

The disparity between violence in Algeria and metropolitan France is exemplified; such a difference allowed metropolitan French (and indeed world) opinion to maintain its trend towards sympathising with the FLN following the Battle of Algiers and de Gaulle’s return.

Comparatively, the 1961 Paris massacre of Algerian FLN protesters by French authorities and the OAS bombing and assassination attempt on Minister Malraux—which mistakenly saw four-year-old Delphine Renard blinded and maimed—put the nail in the coffin for *Algérie française* and, therefore, the ‘clothes in the suitcase’ for the OAS’ ostensible protectorates. This attempt on Malraux’s life, even as late as 1962 ‘would have been regarded as little more than an everyday event in contemporary Algiers’, but in a comparatively ‘less hardened’ Paris it proved momentous.

This event caused a crowd of 10,000 chanting ‘O.A.S. As-sas-sins’ to amass in Paris the next day, an ensuing aforementioned massacre by Parisian police, then a subsequent half-million-strong procession under the sentiment ‘it must end’. Clearly the role of violence was far less significant when compared with the specific direction and population towards which it was directed. Concerning specific/targeted violence, the FLN practice of murdering native policemen in Algeria, and brutally exhibitionist murders of loyal or ambivalent Muslims in the Aurès, resulted in mass defections

to the FLN, destroyed morale among native policemen and civil workers, and redirected French military efforts from anti-ALN missions towards policework (i.e. policing the police as well as the Algerian population). This point in particular is highlighted by Horne as a lesson for 21<sup>st</sup> century resistance/anti-resistance fighting.

The causes of success for the Revolution's violent side is twofold: first, force recognition among international media concerning the cause of Algerian independence, utilising this support when anti-colonial sentiments were ascendant; second, it forced the French government to resort to extreme measures, which would thereby destroy international and mainland support for *Algérie française* and the *pieds-noirs* ultras. Interestingly, neither of these concern violence as an end in itself; both advocate violence as a catalyst or cause of a secondary phenomenon.

The former becomes more complicated when one considers—in accordance with the narrative of SWOP—that domestic, then international attention was only piqued after the violence became sufficiently 'newsworthy', that is, egregious and extreme, and when the word 'torture' crept into news reports during the Battle of Algiers.

Excepting the *pieds-noirs* and sympathetic military contingents, the exposure of torture certainly did more eradicate support for *Algérie française* than FLN bombings of civilians did to bolster it. In combination with the General's coup and OAS terrorism in mainland France, torture was ultimately responsible for destroying metropolitan French support for the *pieds-noirs* and the 'Ici, c'est France' mentality. The power of utilising the opposing force's violent means and ends does not escape the modern reader, nor did it escape the victorious FLN.

Despite Algeria ostensibly being 'integral' to France, and her separation from France being unthinkable, the end of War proved otherwise. Following FLN victory, the paras, ultras, and *pieds-noirs* did indeed have somewhere else to go: France. Comparatively, FLN members had no such option throughout the War: they were forced to stoically endure a continuous military storm, often with risible medical and military means, low morale, and distrust of fellow-FLN members. They patiently waited for the slow political realisation that would win the War and a free Algeria. This, if anything, is SWOP's lesson for all resistance movements today—force radicalisation, ensure your key activists are ready to weather conditions 'made enduringly unendurable' by the opposing force, suffer relentless hardship without glory, and experience

near-annihilation by superior forces before making repeated recoveries without respite. In the meantime regional or global opinions must be change or be changed in your favour for a political solution and victory.