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The “Arab 1848”: Reflections on US Policy & the Power of Nonviolenceⁱ

For Eqbal Ahmad

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“In a world built on violence, one must be a revolutionary before one can be a pacifist... human beings acquiesce all too easily in evil conditions; they rebel far too little and too seldom... Those who can bring themselves to renounce wealth, position and power accruing from a social system based on violence and putting a premium on acquisitiveness, and to identify themselves in some real fashion with the struggle of the masses toward the light, may help in a measure—more, doubtless, by life than by words—to devise a more excellent way, a technique of social progress less crude, brutal, costly and slow than mankind [sic] has yet evolved.”ⁱⁱ

A.J. Muste, nonviolent revolutionary



The interconnected wave of revolutions of late 2010 and early 2011 that have swept the Arab world have invited many comparisons, with at least one perceptive analyst labeling them the “Arab 1848” (Ali, 2011; see also Sperber, 2005). This analogy is of special interest, as some time ago, Giovanni Arrighi, Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein (1989, 1992), in their landmark *Antisystemic Movements*, argued that there had been only two world revolutions, 1848 and 1968, with the subsequent revolutions of 1989 seen as a continuation of 1968. How then, might we see what Immanuel Wallerstein (2011) has called “the Second Arab Revolt” taking place today? One perspective was provided by the *Wall Street Journal*, the main paper of the US business establishment. In a front page article entitled, “A Pivotal Moment for America,” journalist Gerald F. Seib (2/12-13/11) started off by noting that “The fall of the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak marks a historic shift in the Middle East, away from the power structure America has leaned on for the past three decades and toward a new one still

be shaped by a demographic and technological wave *that the U.S. and its allies haven’t learned to control* (emphasis added).”

Similarly, in a revealing February 17, 2010 interview, CBS journalist Katie Couric asked Richard Haass, former head of Policy Planning in the US Department of State under President Bush from 2001 to 2003, and currently President of the Council on Foreign Relations, one of the most important US Establishment think tanks, “How great a threat are these latest protests to the United States?”; Haass replied, “They are, particularly the one in Bahrain; this, for really half a century has been a centerpiece of the US naval presence in a critical part of the world because of the energy resources,” going on to note that the “stakes [are] great” and emphasizing that the US was particularly concerned about the stability of the Saudi regime. Indeed, according to a recent story in the New York Times (2/19/11) “...the Saudis are closely watching American diplomatic gestures toward Bahrain.

Any wavering of American support for Bahrain's Sunni monarchy, analysts say, would provoke a deep sense of betrayal, and could create an unprecedented rift in a partnership with the United States that has been a pillar of Saudi policy since 1945."

Of particular concern is that Bahrain has a Sunni minority ruling over a Shia majority, thereby posing a challenge to Saudi Arabia, a Sunni majority state, albeit with a long oppressed Shiite majority population in its Eastern Province just adjacent to Bahrain, and where much of its massive reserves of oil are located. An added aspect of geopolitical intrigue and rivalry here has been the threat posed to the Saudi regime by the Iranian revolution with its Shiite majority. Iran has long been locked in a battle with the US and America's Sunni allies in the region. Indeed, the desire to combat Shiite radicalism and the influence of Iran was one factor in the long-time support of the US, Saudis, Egypt and their allies for the Islamic mujahadeen fighting the Soviets in response to the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan. This process of support for radical Islamic fundamentalists put wind in the sails of the global jihad, which subsequently turned against the United States, as evidenced in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (see Lubeck & Reifer, 2004).

In fact, Saudi Arabia is one of the region's most radical fundamentalist regimes while simultaneously one of America's closest allies, and home to the world's greatest reserves of oil. And indeed, one way to look at the current Arab Revolt is that it is animated by a desire for freedom and justice that pushes up against the structure of power in the Arab World. This structure of power is in many instances supported by outside power brokers, most notably the US, which seek to the control the peoples and resources of the Arab Middle East and North Africa (see Henry & Springborg, 2010; see Chomsky, 1991).

Yet US policy has not gone forward without challenges, even within the US, however mild. Soon after the beginning of the Egyptian protests, many progressive US academics signed an open letter to President Obama, calling on the administration to support the

demands of the protesters for the removal of Mubarak and a transition to democracy and the rule of law. Soon thereafter, when some of the signatories were invited to a meeting at the White House, many saw reason for hope. Indeed, as the protests in Egypt intensified in early February 2011, many were hopeful too when President Obama expressed solidarity with the demands of the Egyptian people for democracy and social justice. But soon enough, the administration made clear publicly through its emissary Frank Wisner that they were casting their lot in with President Mubarak, while the head of Egypt's dreaded security forces, and recently appointed Egyptian Vice President Omar Sulieman waited in the wings. The administration subsequently distanced itself from Wisner – almost declared a *persona non-grata* – but then promptly indicated that they basically agreed with everything he said. And as Phyllis Bennis (2/19/11) noted, Robert Fisk's (1/7/11), reporting from Cairo soon thereafter revealed that Wisner's lobbying firm has long represented the Egyptian dictator and his regime, a fact not lost on the Egyptian and Arab masses.

Indeed, to many, it seemed that the appointment of the head of the infamous security forces, Omar Sulieman, as Vice President, would be a happy and quite suitable alternative to Mubarak for the Obama administration, especially as he was affectionately known as the CIA's man in Cairo. And yet, it appeared that the personal nature of the dictatorship had bound many of Egypt's powerful institutions to President Mubarak, making them reluctant to usher in his immediate departure. Yet in the end the power of the people overwhelmed the opposition and Mubarak was forced from power. The moment has great significance not only for the Egyptian and Arab peoples but also for the global struggle for peace, democracy and social justice.

Egypt has long been a critical country in the Arab and Islamic worlds, both culturally and politically, and the military has long been a central institution of Egypt's various authoritarian governments (Abdel-Malek, 1968, 1989; CUP, 2008). Despite the structure of power arrayed against them, activists in Egypt and their supporters throughout the Arab world and beyond,

squarely confronted the power of the regime *and* their foreign supporters, notably its lead ally, the US.

Despite some commentary about the unexpectedness of Egypt's revolution, many analysts have been predicting for some time the possibility of more unrest in Egypt and throughout the Arab world, based on important changes in their social structure combined with the continued humiliations of authoritarian rule. Another critical aspect in the social explosions has been an ever widening divide between the haves and have-nots in the so-called neoliberal era. For example, Linda Herrera's (2010: 128) "Young Egyptians' Quest for Jobs and Justice," in *Being Young and Muslim*, notes that:

Arab States that are characterized by a youth bulge contain among the highest regional average of young people in the world, with 65% of the population younger than 25 years old, 20% of whom are in the 15- to 24-year age bracket. The Middle East and North Africa region holds the inauspicious distinction of being the fastest growing labor force, which, since the 1990s, has 25% youth unemployment--the highest regional average and almost double the global average, which is 14%. In the coming decade, some 34 million jobs need to be created in the region to absorb the emerging labor force (World Bank, 2008). In Egypt, unemployment is highest among the young (youth unemployment accounts for 80% of the country's total unemployed population), and among youth, it is proportionately higher among females and the educated; a staggering 95% of unemployed youth have secondary or university education....

Indeed, the wave of protests in Tunisia set off by one such high school educated youthful street vendor, and accompanied by the soundtrack to the revolution via Tunisian hip-hop artist El General, expressed powerfully the dynamics of transformation in the region brilliantly analyzed in a series of recent books by Iranian born Middle East scholar Asef Bayat (2010, 2007, 1998), in his *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* and related works (see also *New Yorker*, 1/24/11).

Despite all the talk of democracy promotion by the US in the last ten years, the American elite still seem to believe that power comes out of the barrel of a gun, not

surprisingly perhaps, since many of the guns, like the tear gas canisters fired at the protestors across the Middle East, are inscribed, "Made in the USA." Not exactly the best export for democracy promotion abroad, one might think. But for decades now, the US has been the Mubarak dictatorship's strongest supporter, having funneled some \$62 billion in military and economic aid to Egypt's authoritarian government by the end of 2006, making it the second largest recipient of US foreign aid in the world after Israel, with an average of over 2 billion dollars in aid going to the country annually according to leading scholars and the Congressional Research Service (Rutherford, 2008: 5). The Pentagon and CIA have incredibly close relationships with their counterparts in Egypt, including via America's extraordinary rendition programs, whereby suspects in the so-called war on terror – often innocent – are kidnapped by the CIA and sent to Egypt to be tortured, a fact not lost on the Egyptians who have suffered years of torture under Mubarak (see Cohn, 2011).

Indeed, the demonstrations in Egypt have seen the publication of hidden truths in the US press, for the first time in recent memory. Leading neoconservatives have pointed out that to a great extent, Al Qaeda and the 9-11 attacks were born and bred in the torture chambers of Egypt's infamous prisons. Mubarak's repressive regime fueled the emergence of the Egyptian contingent of Al Qaeda, often considered the brains behind the organization, notably in the person of Al Qaeda's number two man, Ayman al-Zawahiri. In fact, just about a month ago, Ross Douthat started out his *New York Times* piece, "The Devil We Know," provocatively writing: "As the world ponders the fate of Egypt after Hosni Mubarak, Americans should ponder this: It's quite possible that if Mubarak had not ruled Egypt as a dictator for the last 30 years, the World Trade Center would still be standing" (see also Gerges, 2005, 2007).

Thus, for the first time in quite some time, there is some questioning in the US press as to whether US support for Mubarak's brutal dictatorship really made Americans safer; perhaps, these neoconservative commentators

mused, it instead fueled the rise of anti-American terrorism, most notably on 9-11. As leading neoconservative and Iraq and Af-Pak war supporter Max Boot noted, *"It is no coincidence that al Qaeda started essentially as an Egyptian-Saudi organization run by citizens of two of our closest and most repressive allies"* (WSJ, 2/1/2011; NYT, 1/31/31). The Wall Street Journal (2/8/11) even published a powerful piece by the leading Egyptian democracy and human rights activist, and founder of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development, sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim, who was Egypt's most well known political prisoner from 200-2003, entitled "Mubarak's Interests are Not America's."

Yet only a week after Ross Douthat's above mentioned op-ed piece, "The Devil We Know," pointing out the reality of terrorist blowback emanating from US support of Mubarak's dictatorship, not to mention emanating from the US support of its other client states in the Persian Gulf, notably Saudi Arabia, the columnist revealed that the American power elite had dispensed with the idea of Mubarak's retirement, at least in the immediate future. Or at the very most, the US power elite want Mubarakism without Mubarak. As Douthat (2/6/11) noted, *it's clear that the administration's real goal has been to dispense with Mubarak while keeping the dictator's military subordinates very much in charge. If the Obama White House has its way, any opening to democracy will be carefully stage-managed by an insider like Omar Suleiman, the former general and Egyptian intelligence chief who's best known in Washington for his cooperation with the C.I.A.'s rendition program...It's cold-blooded realpolitik."* Douthat made clear his approval of this policy, which was quite a retreat from his earlier argument that the "long-term consequences of a more populist and nationalistic Egypt might be better for the United States than the Mubarak era, and the terrorism it might inspire.

Even then, though, Douthat hedged, adding: "But then again they might be worse. There are devils behind every door." As to the consideration of what the Egyptian people want, that is not considered appropriate for discussion and debate, a reflection of an

imperial culture, in which the powers that be know what's best for others, or don't even consider the question at all.

Leading Egyptian feminist, and former Egyptian political prisoner now back in Cairo, Nawal El Saadawi (2011), clearly outlined in a recent radio interview on *Democracy Now*, the plans of the powers-that-be to uphold the Mubarak dictatorship and/or Mubarakism without Mubarak and put the democratization genie back in the bottle. In fact, the US history of "detering democracy," as Noam Chomsky (1991) once referred to it – what might be called dictatorship promotion – has a long history. Indeed, the US support of the Mubarak dictatorship has gone hand-in-hand with US support for the human rights abuses of both the US and Egypt and related attempts to cover up these simple truths. For example, in December of 2004, a group of mostly Cairo-based Arab intellectuals leaked to the press their draft of the landmark 2004 Arab Human Development Report, "Toward Freedom in the Arab World," part of a whole series of reports produced under the auspices of the UN Development Program.

The report had been blocked by the US as it exposed the role of the authoritarian states of the region, including Egypt and many of the Gulf states, notably Saudi Arabia, and their foreign supporters in the US, in the dismal development indicators in the region in terms of poverty, health, education and social and cultural development, not to mention human rights and democratic governance, including for women (Singerman & Amar, 2006: 6; see also Bayat, 2010: 27-39). Adding insult to injury, the very next month was when President Bush used the annual January 2005 State of the Union address to broadcast US support for democracy worldwide, following up his earlier remarks in November of 2003, promissory notes that once again were not honored. Despite all of Bush's criticism of America and the West's 60 years or more of support of authoritarian regimes in the region, a fact that he argued did not promote real stability, following through on the support of democratization was another story, and was basically ignored in actual practice. As Noam Chomsky has long noted, citing the work of Thomas

Carothers, the US only supports democracy when it accords with its strategic and economic interests.

Yet despite the US's continued support of authoritarian rule in Egypt and throughout the Arab world, in 2004 and 2005, a broad democratization movement against the Mubarak regime emerged in Egypt. This largely non-violent mass movement brought together some 26 human rights groups and civil society organizations, including secular, liberal and Islamist groups, across the Arab world, including Cairo. The precursors of the movement, in fact, went all the way back to 2000, starting off originally as a movement in support of the Palestinian's second intifada, and thereafter going on to protest the US invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, 2004 and 2005, after which time they increasingly turned their sights onto the Mubarak regime (Singerman and Amar, 2006: 4-6; Mansour, 2009; Bayat, 2007: 181-186). Of particular importance in this Egyptian Movement for Change, commonly known as Kifaya (or "Enough") and subsequent April 6th youth movement, were the protests of Egypt's workers, tens of thousands of whom went out on strike in support of the protestors in Tahrir/Liberation Square, thus helping to bring about Mubarak's downfall (see Benin, 2009, 2011).

Arguably among the most significant aspects of the Arab Revolution is its largely and consciously nonviolent character, with an emphasis on the struggle for both democratic rights and social justice (NYT, 2/14/11; 2/17/11). In these movements, the tactical, strategic and moral advantages of nonviolence have been subject to careful study, application, and brilliant innovation across the Arab world. Among those inspiring the Arab revolution were the efforts of Gandhi and the Indian freedom struggle, Martin Luther King Jr. and the U.S. and South African black freedom struggles, Cesar Chavez and the civil rights and farmworker movements, to the East European revolutions of 1989, the Palestinian intifada, and the nonviolent Serbian student movement that toppled the Serbian regime, and a host of lesser known activists and movements that have changed the world (see Sharp, et al., 2005; see Roberts & Ash, 2009; see

Urquhart, 2011; PBS, 2011; King, 2007; see also Jackson, 2007). And in fact, as Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth (2008, 2011) have demonstrated in a study comparing 323 nonviolent and violent resistance campaigns from 1900 to 2006, nonviolent forms of resistance have historically often been much more effective than their violent counterparts (see also Chenoweth & Stephan, 2010). Perhaps the 21st century will be the epoch where nonviolent social change captures the global imagination. If this is to be so, the world will thank the Arab peoples and those who have come before for their spirit of sacrifice and their dedication to democracy, nonviolence and social justice.

Future pieces will explore the reasons for the success of nonviolence in the Arab world and related freedom struggles in greater detail. For now, suffice it to say that one of the great untold stories of the past decade has been the steady growth of a network of activists in the Middle East and around the world committed to revolutionary nonviolence as a mechanism of democratic social change (Stephan, 2009; NYT, 2/14, 17/11; Sharp, 2010; PBS, 2011). One of the dilemmas of anticolonial movements of the past is that the violence used to overthrow the colonial powers often times ended up being used against the people by what Gerard Chaliand (1977, 1989) once referred to as the administrative bourgeoisie that dominated so many of the newly independent states, one that often crushed democratic forms of governance (see also Ahmad, 2006). Given this grim reality, the commitment of many of the young protesters and those joining them to nonviolence – often more successful than violent struggles - may turn out to be key to the making of a more democratic and egalitarian future (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008, 2011; Stephan, 2009).

Significant too is the growing importance for the movements of social media, including Facebook, Twitter, email and satellite television and related forms of electronic communication, forming what some analysts refer to as a sort of "liberation technology" (see PBS, 2011). An indication of the power of the means of communication was shown by the Mubarak regimes

shutting down of the internet, but the genie was already out of the bottle. The revolution would not be stopped. The growing importance of social media has long been recognized, though perhaps never as much as today. Yet it was nearly two decades ago that Giovanni Arrighi, Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein (1992: 236-237) noted that: "...with the means of communication increasingly becoming almost entirely electronic, every movement "local" is equally a movement communications "center," each network nodal point being as able as the next to broadcast (e.g., via electronic bulletin boards) as well as to receive... Increasingly, the modern world-system as a whole becomes the terrain of movements world-scale in extent and trans-state in structure. And national arenas thus increasingly become for them so many linked locales in struggles that are not only in fact worldwide but also more and more conceived by activists to be..."global" (see also Castells, 2009).

As to what will happen in the future and the fate of the struggles in Egypt and throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds for freedom and justice, only time will tell. But at the moment, the filling of the Arab street presages dramatic transformations across both the region and the global system as a whole. At the time of this writing, mass demonstrations, with notable participation among the young, women and broad sectors of each national society, have spread to Algeria, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Jordan, Bahrain, Yemen and Morocco, the latter four all close US allies, with Jordan having closely cooperated with US programs of extraordinary rendition and torture and Bahrain the home to the US Fifth Fleet (CRS, 2010, 2011). (The US also sends foreign aid to the Libyan regime, after overcoming previous hostile relations). Moreover, the contemporary Arab revolts join other important and largely nonviolent democratic rebellions in and across the world-system, most notably the ongoing Bolivarian nonviolent revolutionary wave across Latin America, where social movements and progressive governments are pursuing alternative forms of regionalism and seeking new roads towards social justice, especially for the historically disenfranchised indigenous peoples (see Reifer, forthcoming).

For those advocates and activists for global peace and justice, the uprisings throughout the Arab worlds are a truly inspiring example of the yearning for freedom and the never-ending quest for democracy and social justice that has still yet to be stamped out, despite the earnest efforts of Mubarak, his American allies, and other local authoritarian regimes. For the moment, it is the responsibility of those outside Liberation Square and the rest of the Arab streets to make clear where we stand: on the side of the Egyptian and Arab peoples, who hunger for democracy and social justice. And along with standing with those occupying the Arab streets, we must add our voices and bodies as well, as we seek to make our own polities more democratic and just, as part of global efforts to create a more egalitarian and just world-system.

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ⁱⁱQuoted from Noam Chomsky, “The Revolutionary Pacifism of A.J. Muste: On the Background of the Pacific War,” in his *American Power & the New Mandarins*, New York: Pantheon, 1969, which bears careful rereading in light of the Arab Revolution today, not to mention the demonstrations in Madison, Wisconsin against the attempt to crush unions in that state. The work from which Chomsky is quoting, “Pacifism and Class War,” and many of Muste’s other writings are collected in Nat Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A.J. Muste*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970. On both the power and limits of nonviolent struggle, see Noam Chomsky’s fundamental piece, “Force & Opinion” in *Deterring Democracy*, comparing the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe and its collapse in 1989 when the Soviets announced they would no longer use coercion to uphold the regions dictatorial party states, with the US role in Central America, where nonviolent opposition was largely crushed replete with the killing of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. See also the important work by Barbara Deming, *Revolution & Equilibrium*, Grossman Publishers, 1971, a book which, along with the writings of Gandhi, King and others, and the experience of committed draft resisters serving prison time, contributed greatly to Daniel Ellsberg’s decision to release the *Pentagon Papers*. The story is of Ellsberg’s transformation from Cold Warrior to peace and social justice activist, and the influence of nonviolent thought and action – what Gandhi calls satyagraha, is recounted in Ellsberg’s memoir, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, New York: Penguin, 2003.