

# Civil Resistance and the Arab Spring: Twelve Propositions

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What should we learn about that tumultuous, varied and tragic phenomenon known as the Arab Spring? When, over three years ago, we began work on the book *Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring: Triumphs and Disasters*, we started with a large number of specific questions. Above all we were concerned with what was to be learned about the range of non-violent methods of struggle that became the symbol and main means of struggle of the Arab Spring – namely civil resistance.

First, a quick word about terminology, and then I'll get to the key question. Many terms have been used to describe the extraordinary cascade of movements beginning in a remote town in Tunisia in December 2010: Arab Spring, Arab Awakening, Arab Uprising and so on. One can criticise all these terms on the ground that the movements of that period were not limited to Arab countries, but that misses the point that Arab countries were at the heart of these phenomena. Throughout our work, and without having any quarrel with the other terms used, the editors and contributors to this book have been clear that the term 'Arab Spring' was and remains a good one to describe the unique pattern of events that we sought to analyse. It is widely used and understood, including in the region itself. The word 'spring' reflects the fact that the movements peaked in early 2011 in a crescendo of activity that could not last. Yet I should hasten to add that, despite the harsh fact that it has run into deep trouble in many countries, the story of the Arab Spring is not completely over.

Although, even in the early months, there were numerous incidents in which anti-regime demonstrators used a degree of violence, the Arab Spring was symbolised above all by large crowds using civil resistance. Demonstrations and strikes were especially prominent. The key question we sought to address in the book was: how did it happen that a means of struggle seeking to avoid use of violence was adopted so extensively, and was then followed in so many countries by so much violence, and so many reverses and disasters? These include wars in Libya, Yemen and Syria; external military intervention in Bahrain; a military coup in Egypt; ISIS control in parts of Iraq, Syria, Libya and other states; renewed religious rivalry across the region; and renewed great power rivalry. The list of disasters is great, and has contributed to the further disaster of millions of refugees and migrants fleeing in search of a better life: this population movement can be seen as another, and tragic, form of civil resistance.

There was, and is, a need for a rigorous approach in addressing the key question of how the early triumphs were followed by such a catalogue of disasters. We sought first and foremost to include full and accurate accounts of the Arab Spring movements themselves, how they had developed, and what were the governmental and international reactions to them.

However, there was also a larger matter in our minds. What lessons will the citizens of these countries, and indeed the world generally, learn from these events? There is already a danger that crude and misleading conclusions might gain traction, including for example:

1. Arab countries are unsuited to democracy and cannot make it work.
2. Countries with Muslim populations are unsuited to democracy.
3. Civil resistance was a failure.
4. Civil resistance was the result of foreign influence, pressure, even conspiracy.

## *Twelve propositions*

Any lessons learned from these events need to be more solidly based, and more operationally useful, than the four sweeping and dismissive generalizations outlined above. And of course we should focus on lessons that may be useful, not only in the countries concerned, but also for outside organizations concerned with assisting processes of democratic change.

So, granted the disasters encountered in the Arab Spring, what conclusions follow, both in the region and more generally? I will summarize twelve propositions, which are spelt out with much additional detail in the last chapter of the book.

1. Conditions are important in determining outcomes. The concept of ‘conditions’ encompasses the factors within a society that may either favour, or pose problems for, the achievement of a movement’s goals. In the Arab Spring the goals of almost all the movements included, in some form, the establishment or strengthening of multi-party democracy. The conditions that pose problems for the achievement of that key goal include ethnic and religious divisions, authoritarian traditions of thought, and the weakness (or absence) of political parties and of a functioning administrative system. ‘Conditions’ also encompasses international factors, such as the willingness or otherwise of neighbouring states and major powers to support change. In recent decades there has been much debate about whether the key factor in determining outcomes of civil resistance movements is the skills of the leadership or the conditions that the movement faces. The events of the Arab Spring confirm that both skills and conditions are important; and that in some cases there was inadequate understanding of, and planning for, the particular conditions that were faced. In light of the particular circumstances of their society, movements need to adjust their political aims, their methods of struggle, and their preparations for negotiation. Of course conditions are not static, and being human constructs they can be changed; but it is essential to understand them.
2. Civil resistance, far from being too weak, is powerful, maybe sometimes too powerful. The familiar theory behind civil resistance, that even tyrannical rule depends in some degree on the consent of the governed, and that the various pillars on which autocracy rests can be undermined, is confirmed by some of the Arab Spring cases. Civil resistance does indeed offer the possibility of achieving basic change even in societies that have been under apparently stable authoritarian control. However, on its own civil resistance can only open the door to, and perhaps prepare the way for, the unavoidably complex and hazard-strewn process of making a new constitutional system. The management of this phase, in which the basic conditions of a society have to be tackled, is even more difficult than the earlier phase of deposing the head of the regime; and it requires very different skills.
3. Civil resistance is by no means bound to succeed in the short term. Already in 2009, the repression of the demonstrations in Iran, protesting against a fraudulent election result, had already provided a regional confirmation of this obvious point. The suppression of many of the Arab uprisings that started in 2011, most clearly and tragically in Syria, only confirmed it. However, even when costly and initially unsuccessful, civil resistance may sometimes undermine the claim to legitimacy of an authoritarian system. In summary, both success and failure need to be judged in a long-term as well as a short-term perspective. To depose a regime is hardly a success if the long-term effect is social chaos and/or war. Civil resistance is not a panacea, and presenting it as such stunts serious discussion of what it can and what it cannot achieve in a particular situation.
4. Civil resistance, if it displaces a regime without providing for an effective succession, can lead to social chaos, power vacuums and ungoverned spaces, with disastrous results. It can even form part of the story of how wars begin—the case of Syria being a particularly worrying example. Civil resistance has a complex relationship with other forms of power, and cannot be fully understood in isolation from them. Yet it remains a very distinct form of struggle, and combining it with the use of force is often deeply problematical.
5. Constitutional democracy, despite all its numerous and well-known faults, is the principal means by which political conflicts are played out with minimal violence in most advanced societies. Practitioners of civil resistance are often critical of state structures, and impatient with the compromises and horse-trading involved in party politics. Yet there are links between the practice of civil resistance and a focus on state-based democratic outcomes. One such link is that civil resistance has often been used in campaigns, many of which have been successful, to

reverse the fraudulent stealing of elections. The larger issue, of how civil resistance can be one means of moving towards the overall goal of constitutional democracy within state structures, has been comparatively neglected and needs attention.

6. In the Arab Spring, it was not always analytically enlightening or prescriptively helpful to refer to each and every leader being opposed as a ‘dictator’. In some cases, even in the absence of formal democratic constraints, such leaders are continuously engaged in reacting to a range of regional, confessional, or other pressures within the state, as well as from outside. The implicit assumption of characterizing rulers as dictators is that, if the ruler who is the source of oppression is removed, all will be well. This has plainly not been the case in many countries affected by the Arab Spring. Indeed, the 2003 invasion of Iraq had taught us the same lesson.

7. The movements’ initial success in overthrowing rulers in Tunisia and Egypt, while it was a great achievement, was also misleading for three solid reasons. *First*, because of the power of the ‘deep state’ to continue within the administration and security services despite the decapitation of the regime; *second*, because, in those countries where a regime was overthrown, building a constitutional political order proved to be a longer and harder task; and, *third*, because in some other countries the existing regimes had a greater degree of legitimacy or capacity for survival—so could not be overthrown as easily as those in Tunis and Cairo in the early months of 2011. Because of these three considerations, the question arises: was it wise—especially in deeply divided societies—to call for the removal of the regime? In some cases, including Syria, such calls undoubtedly aroused dark fears and caused severe problems. In other cases, including Jordan and Morocco, Arab Spring movements concentrated on calls for reform, not revolution, and in the particular circumstances they faced were probably right to do so. In the case of Tunisia, the movement began with modest demands, calling for the fall of the regime only after the first two weeks of protests. Similarly, many civil resistance movements in other parts of the world, including those in central and eastern Europe in the 1980s, started with more modest demands regarding workers’ rights, human rights, and freedom of movement: only later, as circumstances made such a transition inevitable, did they aim at more ambitious goals. Yet it has to be admitted that in Egypt and Tunisia, in the first decade of the present century, there had long been significant opposition movements demanding limited reforms— and they had not been notably successful. There is no general rule about whether civil resistance should have revolutionary or reformist demands: all depends on the circumstances, and on the extent of preparation for implementation of whatever demands are being pressed.

8. The decentralized and ad hoc quality of the leadership of the movements in the Arab Spring hindered the performance of three key tasks: preparation for post-revolutionary governance of the country, making necessary compromises with other political forces, and producing a convincing plan for economic development. There were failures on all three fronts. In many Middle Eastern and North African countries it might not be realistic to respond to such failures by urging young activists to form or join a political party: such parties as currently exist are commonly seen as ineffectual bit-players in a political pantomime. Yet, as the story of An-Nahda in Tunisia shows, it can be political parties’ careful preparation for transition that makes ultimate success thinkable.

9. Citizens can become weary of prolonged or repeated civil resistance campaigns, especially if they are seen as damaging the economy of a country. Leadership of a movement requires skill in ending campaigns, or pursuing them in imaginative ways that do not antagonize the public.

10. There is sometimes a tendency in civil resistance movements to regard the crowd as itself a fount of legitimacy. In Egypt in June 2013 the Tahrir demonstrators conveyed a message implying that the elected government (of the Muslim Brotherhood) should step down, or be forcibly replaced, on their say-so. Such a view of the legitimacy of crowds becomes a problem if it assumes superiority over constitutional arrangements, demonstrates over-confidence about the capacity of crowds to remove regimes, or becomes a justification for a coup d’état. Moreover, as

evidenced in Cairo, Damascus, and Manama, ruling regimes can often assemble large crowds as a means of demonstrating that they too have crowd-based legitimacy.

11. International factors of various kinds do sometimes influence outcomes. In many fields, including medicine, business, and politics, transnational influences have for centuries been facts of life. Civil resistance is often assisted by the power of example (including in other countries); by the spread of ideas through books, pamphlets, and media; and by the fact that a few key people have had training in its basics that has been provided outside their own country. If it is to be effective, civil resistance often needs *both* strong local roots *and* some forms of external support. Its application in any given country, and the outcome there, depend first and foremost on the interests, beliefs, and political culture of its citizens. Outside support may also be important, especially if that helps to level the playing field against a powerful government apparatus. Civil resistance campaigns against authoritarian rulers have a proven track record in inducing foreign democratic countries (especially the US) to reorient their policies away from cosy relations with the authoritarian rulers, and in favour of demanding their resignation. In the Arab Spring all of the four regimes that were overturned had been under pressure from other states, including the USA, to quit or at least make major reforms. On the other hand, it appears that there was only modest external pressure in the first case – Tunisia – mainly because events there happened very quickly, before outside powers had a chance to get deeply involved. So the country that achieved most in the Arab Spring did so with little direct foreign involvement. However, more general international influences (as distinct from direct pressure) had long been important in Tunisia, and had contributed to a public awareness that in Europe and elsewhere people could live in dignity, and evils such as corruption could be tackled. If in Europe, why not in Tunisia?

12. Foreign assistance can often be controversial, even to the point of being seen as part of a foreign conspiracy. President Assad of Syria and President Putin of Russia have repeatedly suggested that civil resistance and ‘colour revolutions’ are the product of an international conspiracy. The evidence for this appears to be flimsy. Such accusations fail to take into account the fact that political and social ideas have always crossed borders – never more so than today. However, such accusations of foreign conspiracy are one part of a new authoritarianism, and external support for all kinds of civic movements needs to take this worrying fact into account.

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These twelve propositions based on the experience of the Arab Spring may appear to apply to all the countries in the region. However, they contain many qualifications pointing to the fact that every country is different. To view Arab (or any other) states as mere dominoes, waiting in line to be knocked over, would be a huge mistake. Equally, to consider all the setbacks faced as due to one single cause would be a mistake. The chapters in our book, addressing individually each country involved, are an antidote to such a view.

*2,625 words including all headings etc.*