

2011

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Majed J. Khader PhD
Marshall University, khader@marshall.edu

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Recommended Citation

Khader, M. "Digital Communication and the Pro-Democracy Movement in the Arab World: Role, Significance and Outcomes." *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2011, pp. 28-47.

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Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)

Volume 5

Number 4

December 2011

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Digital Communication and the Pro-Democracy Movement in the Arab World: Role, Significance and Outcomes

Majed KHADER^①

(Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia)

Abstract: *After decades of living under oppressive dictatorships, the people of the Arab world are rising up against their countries' leadership. For over nine months now, we have been witnessing massive, large scale, and peaceful demonstrations spreading all over the Arab Middle Eastern countries. These mass civic demonstrations have been given many names, including the Arab Spring, Arab uprising, turmoil, tumult, chaos, Arab awakening, Arab revolution, revolt, etc. It is a reform movement on the march that was first started in Tunisia, which moved to Egypt, and then swept across the region to include Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria. Activists in the rest of the Arab world such as Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco and Saudi Arabia, were also inspired by the revolts and calls for reform which had been sweeping the Arab world. Protesters and human rights groups from these countries congregate frequently at popular places and landmarks to protest against their regimes and call for political, economical and social reforms.*

Key Words: *Digital Communication; Arab Revolution; Middle East Upheaval; Middle East Politics; Arab Turmoil*

^① Dr Majed KHADER, Professor of Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia.

Introduction

The Tunisian and Egyptian people have partially succeeded in changing political power, but the goals of their uprising have not been accomplished yet. Longtime Tunisian authoritarian dictator, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who ruled the country with an iron fist for 23 years, fled the country and now resides in exile in Saudi Arabia. In June, Ben Ali and his wife were convicted of several charges of theft and conspiracy against the state and of possession of drugs and weapons. The judge in the case sentenced them to 35 years in prison and gave them \$65 million fine. He and his wife also faced other charges.

The Egyptian dictator, Hosni Mubarak, who ruled Egypt for 30 years came into power after the former Egyptian President, Anwar Sadat, was assassinated in 1981. Similar to Bin Ali, Mubarak ruled Egypt with an iron fist. This tyranny contributed to a growing resentment and ultimately to instability at home. Egyptian demonstrations and protests started a few days after the Tunisian dictator was forced to flee his country. After 18 days of protesting, Mubarak relinquished power and was forced to resign. Mubarak and his two sons, along with a number of his former ministers, are being trialed.

The people's revolution in Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and Syria, which was inspired by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts, are still in the works. Indeed, Libya and Syria are in the midst of a bloody revolution with no end in sight. Hundreds of innocent people, including children, women and the elderly, have been reportedly killed, slaughtered, executed or missing. Regrettably, the Libyan uprising has led to civil war, too.

Digital media, traditional media, social media, the Internet and telecommunication technology have all played a positive role in the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings. Analysts credited these tools for the role they played in spreading reformers and

protesters messages, especially when cell and land line phones were disabled by the authorities. Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook have also podcasted live messages from protesters and supplied graphic images of the crackdowns on protesting. Indeed, the calls for reform sweeping the Arab world and the collapse of the Egyptian and Tunisian dictatorial regimes owe much to these new technologies.

This paper will address in part the role played by such technologies which not only ended up forcing leaderships in Tunisia and Egypt to flee their countries or resign from office, but opened the door for people from other parts of the Arab world to mobilize and rebel.

The following is a list of popular terms used in relation to the topic of this research with brief descriptions.

Arab World. The term Arab world is used to refer to the 22 Middle Eastern countries stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Arabian Gulf and the Arabian Sea in the east, and from the southern and eastern coasts of the Mediterranean Sea in the north to the Indian Ocean and Horn of Africa in the south. The following maps should clarify the definition by showing the location and the borders of the countries included in this research.

Arab Awakening/Uprising. The ongoing act of protesting and rebelling of the Arab people against tyrannical and autocratic regimes.

Social Media: It is a very broad term. All media may be considered social. However, for the purpose of this presentation, social media refers to all digital communication including the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, text message, YouTube, cellphones and satellite.

The official spoken language of Arabs is the Arabic Language. The dominant religion of the people in this area is Islam. Christianity is the second largest religion among Arabs. A limited number of Jewish people are still living in some of these Arabic speaking countries.

Brief History of the Arab World Awakening/ Uprising Attempts

Throughout history, the Arab World has been an attractive region to foreign occupiers. The Greeks, Romans, Persians and Turks are just a few to mention from those who ruled or had partial rule or influence on the people in this region. However the roots of the recent Arab awakening can be traced to the break of the 19th century, when most of what is now called Arabic speaking countries came under various foreign invaders, mainly Europeans forces. Mostyn and Hourani reaffirm this by stating that between 1800 and 1939, most of the Middle East and North Africa came under various types and degrees of European colonial control, with far-reaching political and economical consequences for its populations (p.78). The two key words in Mostyn and Hourani statement that have to do with the roots of the Arab awakening are the political and economic consequences of such occupation on the people of this region. Since then and for the previous 200 years or so, interest and influence of foreign countries in the Arab world never stopped. This interest developed into mandates and occupation of certain countries by European forces like Britain, France and Italy.

This foreign involvement forced Arab nationalists and activists to struggle for freedom of their people and their countries. I cannot agree more with the Khalidi statement when he said, "The Arab world has been a scene of uprising and revolts for its entire modern history." In fact, and according to George Antonius, the Arab movement towards dignity, independence and freedom could be traced back to the middle of the 19th century when the Arab National Movement opened in Syria in 1847 (Antonius, p.13). To illustrate, the following is a brief chronological record of the awakening process in the Arab world.

1. When Napoleon and the French invaded part of Egypt around 1800, the Egyptian people revolted against the French. Also Egypt revolted again against foreign rule in the years up to 1882 (Khalidi).

2. The French invaded Algeria, and the revolution against the French started in 1830.

3. In 1857, the All Arab (Christians, Moslems and Druze) Syrian Scientific Society came into being (Antonius, p.53). This society was formed after the death of two American formed societies called the "Oriental Society" and the "Society of Arts and Sciences" in which membership of these two societies were exclusively Christians and partly foreigners (Antonius, p.53). Forming such a society is one of the early signs of the Arab awakening.

4. The Egyptians also resisted the British invasion of Egypt in 1919, and once again in 1952. The Libyan resistance against Italy began in 1911 and continued for over 20 years. The great Iraq revolution against the British started in 1920. Syria revolted against the French in 1925-26. Morocco revolted against the Spanish and the French in 1925-1926 and Palestinians revolted against the British in 1936-1939 ((Khalidi).

5. After World War II, the majority of the Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa gained their independence. Arab nationalist leaders and dictators came to power and a new phase of struggle and uprising was yet to start, including:

a) A number of military coups and civic movements attempted to overthrow the installed dictator regimes and tyrant rulers who came to power due to independence from British, French or other foreign mandates to the Arab region. Some of these movements were successful, but unfortunately ended up with replacing one dictator with another. Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Libya are among this category. Other attempts failed to achieve their goals. Organizers of these failed attempts were either assassinated or jailed. Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Morocco are in this category.

b) A Syrian anti-government protest in 1982 ended up destroying a very large section of the city of Hama and slaughtering tens of thousands of citizens (Meyers).

c) The 1987 and 2000 Palestinian uprising (Intifada) against Israeli

occupied forces of the Palestinian territories.

d) In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait and the people of Kuwait rebelled against the occupation forces.

e) In 1991, South Iraq and Kurdistan, uprising against Saddam Husein's regime.

Scattered uprising efforts and initiatives all over the Arab world including the main two Palestinian uprisings against Israeli military forces (Intifada) in 1987 and 2000.

What Distinguishes the 2011 Arab World Uprising from Previous Similar Arab Revolt Attempts?

The 2011 Arab awakening is distinguished from previous attempts by the following:

1. Peaceful protesting. Non-violent revolution took place in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and elsewhere throughout the Arab World. Peaceful (Sylmia) was the protestors' logo everywhere despite the harsh crackdown by police, security personnel and military forces in some countries. Along with non-violent action, discipline and responsibilities were the general atmosphere of the movement. Protesters in Cairo, for example, cleaned the streets from any debris, waste, leftover food, empty boxes, etc.

2. Directed towards corrupt Arab leaders, not foreign occupiers. The awakening was directed towards its authoritarian Arab rulers and regimes, not towards foreign forces and occupation like the previous awakenings. In previous awakening initiatives since the early 1800s until the end of the British, French and Italian mandates in the Arab World were aimed at ending foreign rule.

3. An unprecedented revolution. Muhammad Bouazizi is considered the iconic figure of the Tunisian revolution, which ended up triggering angry street fighting all over the Arab world.

4. Transparent focus. The focus of the 2011 awakening has been

on internal problems such as unemployment, fraud, nepotism, democracy and freedom.

5. Carried a general value of dignity and respect for all despite their sex, social or economic backgrounds. Professor Khalidi added that such dignity is to be understood in two senses: the dignity of the individual and the dignity of the collective, the people and the nation (Khalidi).

6. It is contagious. The awakening spread from one country to another so quickly.

7. Similar demands. Protestors' demands were very similar, despite the fact that some focused on constitutional rights and others on ending or limiting the rulers' authority.

8. Youth uprising. The majority of those who participated in the planning, protesting, dissemination of messages, etc. were very young compared to previous uprising activists, in which most of them were military veterans and middle-aged or older.

9. Awakening techniques and tools are also different from the previous awakening initiatives and attempts. Cellphones, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, instant messaging and Satellite are the main tools used to spread the awakening message.

Causes for the Recent Turmoil

In a recent article titled, "The Revolution will be Televised," Andrew Drwiega summarized the causes of the ongoing turmoil in the Arab World by saying, "The dominant political culture in the Middle East over the past six decades has been characterized by authoritarian government, antidemocratic repression, human rights violations, the absence of civil liberties, and the economic exploitation of masses of citizens and disenfranchised foreign workers (p.2). Therefore, the causes of the Arab youth revolt could be outlined to include the following:

1. Dictatorial and oppressive regimes. Rulers or heads of state in several Arab countries such as Syria, Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq operated with absolute personal power without any restriction. Elections very much fraud (Egypt 2010 Elections). True elections were suspended (1991 Algeria). Ordered their armed and security forces to fire and kill protesters (Iraq 1987, 1991). Punished citizens with cutting utilities and disabling services such as communication from residential as well as service organizations such as hospitals (Syria).

2. Dictators' efforts were to prepare their children as their successors. Amending the constitution, official presentations representing the head of state at international events and special envoy assignments are some of the strategies used to prepare their children for leading the country after their death. In his article, "Gamal Mubarak, President of Egypt," presented brief summaries of scenarios and tactics used by some Arab leaders to prepare their children to be their successor in leading their countries. For example, overthrown Iraqi dictator, Saddam Husayn, has invested his two sons, Udayy and Qusayy, with important and powerful functions. Libyan president Qadhafi has been entrusting his son Sayf al-Islam with a range of special assignments. Deceased president of Syria, Hafiz al-Asad, who ruled Syria with an iron fist for three decades succeeded in securing the succession for his son Bashshar before his death. President Salih of Yemen stated in an interview, "I am not grooming my son to succeed me." Mubarak, Egypt's outset president was no different than these dictators. He practiced similar tactics to prepare his son Gamal to succeed him in the ruling of Egypt.

3. Governing regimes are looked at by their citizen traitors, collaborators, or as described in Ben Amis article "puppets of the West."

4. Authoritarian governments. More open government and constitutional monarchy (Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Oman).

5. Long and deep-rooted crooked regimes. In Libya, Kaddafi has been ruling for 41 years making him the longest serving non-monarchy ruler; in Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh has been ruling for 32 years; in Egypt, Hosni Mubarak ruled for 30 years, and in Tunisia, Bin Ali ruled for 23 years).

6. Poverty and lack of employment and job opportunities. Pintak indicated that "a third of the population (Arab World) is between fifteen and twenty-nine years old and unemployment among youth is rampant: 31% in Tunisia, 27% in Egypt, and 43% in Algeria." Rich Arab oil countries are also facing this problem too. Poverty and lack of employment opportunities is even in wealthy countries such as Saudi Arabia where "16% of young adults, many with college degrees from the West, can't find jobs. And then, there is the grinding poverty of the masses." (Pintak, p.23).

7. Corrupt leadership. Egypt and Syria are two good examples. An international network of civic and social organizations called The Global Transparency Initiative (GTI) ranks Egypt in 19th place out of 19 countries in the Middle East and North Africa, and 111th among 180 states around the world using the corruption indicators for the year (Hauidi).

8. Lack of basic citizen and human rights. Based on personal observation, the author totally agrees with Friedman's statement, "All these Arab regimes to one degree or another stripped their people of their basic dignity. They deprived them of freedom and never allowed them to develop anywhere near their full potential (p10). Demonstrators used various slogans to express their feelings. They chanted things like, "dignity, freedom, social justice" (Flamini).

9. Higher prices, tax increases or new taxes, less services and cuts or reductions of government support on essential products consumed by the general public such as the bread. Among address Meyers (2011) testifies to this when he addressed the causes by reporting what contributed to the tax increase.

10. Spoiled children and family members. For example, Mu'tasim Qadafi girlfriend reported that her boyfriend spent \$4400 for a haircut. She also added that he spends an average of \$2 million a month (Alquds, August 29, 2011).

11. Arab-Israeli conflict and "the general Israeli-Palestinian issue (Meyers, 2011). This historic conflict has given considerable impetus for the Arabs to revolt. Palestine is occupied by Israel. The Palestinian people living in Gaza or in the West Bank are suffering from the consequences of such occupation. The Gaza Strip has been under siege for more than three years now. Frequent Israeli attacks and air strikes on Gaza, continuous arrests, road blocks, and other forms of hardships are carried out, imposed or forced on the people in the West Bank. The economic conditions, especially in Gaza, due to the siege, are very detrimental. In addition, both Gaza and the West Bank, are suffering from high unemployment rate, inflation, and other financial problems. On the other hand, Arab regions and dictators like Mubarak have not just been normalizing their relationships with Israel, but strengthening it with economic and other forms of treaties. Other Arab regimes such as Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia and Qatar have been working closely with Israel by facilitating business and tourism transactions and signing various kinds of contracts to encourage such relationships. Normalizing relationships with Israel is unsettled the general public and led to such uprisings.

Digital Communication Instruments: Role, Contribution, Drawback

Those who have been following the turmoil that has been sweeping the Arab world will notice that digital communication technology was a key factor in the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian peoples uprising. These instruments played a central role in documenting and disseminating the peoples' struggle, revolt and

achievement. It is also an important tool used by demonstrators to spread their messages and news to participants and to the rest of the world. Whitehead states, "When Egyptians were asked where they got news and information on events during the uprising, a staggering 94.3% said from social media." The following were among the known digital communication and social media tool used by the rebels and their supporters.

1. Facebook. Some called the Arab Spring the "Facebook Revelation." If it weren't Facebook, it would be something else. (Reuters). We would post a video on Facebook that would be shared by 60,000 people on their walls within a few hours. (Smith, Catharine).

2. Twitter is a very important tool for protesters. It was reported that Twitter gave the protesters a glimpse at how fast and far their message was spreading (Smith, Catharine).

3. Blogs.

4. Cellphones.

5. The Internet.

6. Youtube. "We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world (Howard)

7. Instant Messages.

8. Cables news.

9. Satellites. Al Jazeera has captured the hopes of the crowds gathering on the streets of Cairo (Wang).

10. Hip Hop Music. Songs by professionals and amateur singers against the problems of poverty, unemployment, hunger, injustice and several other themes were sung at street protests. For example, "El General's song was an instant sensation. Its outrage resonated, especially among the young. It broke through the climate of fear in a country where no politician had dared to criticize a president in power for almost a quarter-century. His incendiary rap registered hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube and across other social networks. The amateur video was even picked up by Al Jazeera, the 24-hour

Arabic news channel.” (wright)

Hip-hop is now the battleground for Muslims. While social media has gotten much of the credit for galvanizing the uprisings sweeping the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a new radio documentary is paying respect to another influential medium in the region; one that has articulated the frustrations of the marginalized and incited the young to take action - namely hip-hop music. “I had two friends,” he later explained. “One filmed my songs on a small video camera, and the other edited the videos and put them up on YouTube.” It raged – and boldly blamed them all on Mr. Ben Ali.

Role Played and Known Usage of These Tools

1. Enabled protesters to coordinate plans. A recent article by Shirky testifies to this when he wrote that social media have become coordinating tools for nearly all of the world’s political movements (Shirky, 2011: 3). Used as a mean of communication and organization

2. Enabled rebels, activists and supporters to connect breaking geographic, cultural and other barriers and to learn about each other’s work circumstances.

3. International attention “Twitter trends also help us gauge how visible we are to the international community” (Smith, C).

4. Served as a supporting tool to other communication means of protesting tools

5. Encouragement tool. A young, tech-savvy Egyptian activist told The New York Times that it was precisely the Web blackout that drove him into the streets. “Tell you what, I didn’t miss Twitter, I can confidently say that Tahrir was a street Twitter. Almost everyone sharing in a political discussion, trying to announce something or circulate news, even if they are rumors, simply retweets.” (Sabar, 2011).

6. Helped in banding protesters and citizens of protesting

countries together. They (social networking tools) permit citizens suffering separately from hunger, poverty and powerlessness, to feel less alone. Pressed against one another, sharing food and water and stories of hardship, they feel, for the first time, the nobility of their grievances (Sabir, 2011).

7. Recruited new protesters and helped in giving energy and a boost and encouragement to those who were still protesting. Used to, “fuel a new generation of protest” (Sabir, 2011).

8. Used in rallying and mobilizing crowds and people in mass protest.

9. Aided protesters and supporters to congregate in large groups in a very short amount of time.

10. Provided a platform for protesters to express their feelings and solidarity at the local, regional, national and international levels.

11. Served as the repository sources for data, photos, news, notices, etc.

12. Mediator between protesters and various groups including government officials.

Social Media Tools Drawbacks

The following points were cited as social media drawbacks.

1. Calls for actions were not unified;
2. Hub for dispersing and spreading “e” rumors, false stories, etc;
3. Decentralized the information and news resources;
4. Nothing secret, everything is in the hand which makes it very easy for the governments they oppose to read everything they plan (Saleh);
5. Regimes, dictators, and authorities may steal revolutionary ideas, plans and tactics and use them against the rebels;
6. Government control of media resources. “Regimes of dictatorial leanings tend to control the media and means of communications”

(Charlton, p.12);

7. Government blocking of telecommunication services and tools. Communications in two other protest-ridden Middle Eastern states, Yemen and Syria, follow a similar pattern to Libya in that they are ultimately state-owned and controlled (The Tripoli regime suspended cellphone access to overseas numbers in March (Charlton, p.14);

8. Double-edged sword. Produced as much harm to democratization as good (Shirky, p.12);

9. Contain rebels' message. Government used these tools to obtain rebel messages and arrest activists. "Regimes and their loyalists continue to lash out at reporters and bloggers: the deaths in Bahrainian custody of the founder of the nation's leading independent daily and a blogger there, the detention of journalists and hacking of news websites in Syria (Pintak, p.28);

10. Amplification of the stories;

11. Technical problems;

12. Conflicting narratives surrounding events;

13. Social media is easy manipulated and is more subject to elite control than people seem to realize;

14. May cause chaos and distraction. "When it is used to create a revolution, especially without an endgame, it only causes chaos and disruption" (Akerman);

15. There is also a lot of exaggeration, amplification, half truth stories, and propaganda.

Digital Communication vs. Other Telecommunication and Other News Resource Tools

Social and digital communication tools are very unique. They are distinguished from other telecommunication tools because of the following:

1. Their ability to spread information before the news or events

happens;

2. Their ability to speed up the process of event organization;
3. Their ability to overcome geographic barriers;
4. Reliable, truthful, dependable sources and not controlled by government officials. Pintak wrote when he elaborated on this matter, "Trustworthy more than the printed resources. Internet penetration rates, 'citizen journalists' online are tapping into that bubble of young Arabs, many of whom never pick up a newspaper since they don't trust the content. If mainstream media organizations fail to both break the bonds of government control and make the digital shift, they may cede an entire generation of readers." (Pintak, p.28);
5. Informative, presenting various view points. Zeinab Saleh stated, "I think they're helpful because they spread the word of what's going on and there's different people with different opinions. You read it all and see different sides to everything. You learn," (Saleh);
6. Presents comments from different sides;
7. Communication between and among protesters, protest groups and rebels internally and externally (other countries) easier than might have been the case otherwise;
8. Fast and quick distribution of the news;
9. Presents different views instead of using only one source;
10. Provides a platform for people to express their solidarity, both within the country and with others in the region and beyond;
11. Helped large groups to gather in a short amount of time.

Turmoil Outcomes and Positive Impact So Far

Despite its success in Tunisia and Egypt, the outcome is not clear yet. Protesters still have not harvested that much from the awakening movement. What has been cultivated from this uprising could be categorized in two outcomes: positive and negative. The positive outcomes include the following:

1. Political freedom for the general public. Before the uprising, nobody in Egypt could have publicly said slogans like, “Yaskut, Yaskut Mubarak: Down, Down Mubarak” Yaskut, Yaskut Bin Ali: Down, Down Ben Ali, Tunisia former regime leader,” or leader, or Yaskut, Yaskut Hammad Down, Down Hammad, Bahrain current King.”

2. Region change. Again, the Tunisian and Egyptian people were able to make region change and force the countries’ dictators, Ali and Mubarak, to flee the country or to step down. Freedom Fighters from other countries including Yemen, Bahrain Libya, Syria, and some other Arabic speaking countries are working on changing their dictators.

3. Dignity and trust among people.

4. New leadership.

5. Courage.

6. Opportunity for human rights improvement.

Negative Turmoil Drawbacks

The following were cited as negative outcomes of the Arab Turmoil.

1. Economic drawbacks. Tunisia and Egypt are known as tourist attraction countries. An annual income of \$7 billion for Egypt and \$3 billion for Tunisia (Raphaeli, 2011) A significant portion of this income goes to the pockets of the citizens via employment, businesses and services. Another testimony says that this industry has been affected significantly. Each of the 18 days of Egypt's uprising cost the economy \$1 billion in lost capital as foreign investors withdrew money from the country, according to the Egyptian stock market (Flamini).

2. Power vacuum. Leadership to run the country still not elected yet.

3. Vandalism.

4. Uncounted number of missing and dead.
5. Property damages.
6. Political Challenges.

Conclusion and Outlook

Despite its success in Tunisia and Egypt, the Arab Awakening process still has not harvested its goals. Khalidi wrote, "Nothing has yet been decided in these Arab revolutions. And the most complex tasks are yet to come." (Khalidi).

Nobody knows what tomorrow will hold for the Arab countries that got rid of their leadership. What will happen to the dictators in office? Are the people going to cultivate something positive from this awakening? There are many unanswered and ambiguous questions about the region and its future. There are also many other possibilities and predictions, but no definite answers.

What about digital communication? Are they going to continue playing an active role? I believe they will. They are still powerful despite what has been said about their undermining role during the uprising. I also agree with what has been said, that "for now, the jury is still out in deciding on the importance of social media and cell phone networks in the Middle East upheavals." (Charlton, p.14)"

Again, what is going to be next? Nobody knows, but we have to be cautious and optimistic.

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