



THE ABNORMALIZATION SYNDROME: A CHALLENGE TO CIVIL SOCIETY COOPERATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN TODAY

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If a problem cannot be solved, enlarge it.

Dwight D. EISENHOWER.
US President between 1953-1961.

This article, through civic examples from Egypt and Palestine/Israel, looks at a current challenge to civil society in the Middle East-North Africa region, and what the impact of this challenge is on cooperation between civil society organizations of the region and civic actors in Europe and elsewhere. Finally, the article offers to civic leadership possible responses to this challenge: perseverance and a think-outside-the-box option: the Gandhi Move.



In comparison with current challenges to the freshly emerging civil societies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the promotion of development of civil society in the 1990s, after the mostly peaceful revolutions of 1989 and 1990 in Central and Eastern Europe, was an easy matter. Today, mainly young, civic activists and civic leaders in some of the countries of the south and east Mediterranean easily find themselves banned from their activities and funding, and harassed, attacked, arrested, or worse.

1.

The Domino of Revolutions

First, let us see some of the main developments in the MENA region and how European and other western governments have reacted to them.

Hobsbawm called the «short 20th century»¹ to an end by 1991, the year of the dissolution of the Soviet

Union. If accepted that a century can be seen other than a mathematical 100 years, then we can also say that the MENA region had to wait for the beginning of the 21st century until 2011. This beginning had initially been called the Arab Spring, but as it lasted longer than one season and has been put in perspective, new names have been found for it: Arab awakening (not seasonal) and Arab re-awakening (in a long-term historical perspective).

During the decades prior to 2011, the MENA region, apart from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iraq and Lebanon wars, was relatively stable. Mubarak in Egypt, Kaddafi in Lybia, Ben Ali in Tunisia, Assad in Syria, just to mention some of them, had been oppressing opposition, controlling most aspects of politics, economy, culture and the public media of their respective countries. They kept peace, or a «cold peace» with their neighbors, including Israel. European and other western governments, while criticizing with fluctuating vehemence the human rights record of these countries, have appreciated this relative stability. Oil, weapons, military aid, tourism, diplomatic and other exchanges were flowing more or less smoothly.

With the arrival of the Arab Spring, everything turned upside down. As the revolution spread from Tunisia to Egypt and the stakes became high, western governments had to reconsider whether they would stand with the Arab people or with the old dictators. As a matter of principle, democracies

based on respect for human rights could have no doubts about standing with the people, not with dictators.

But it was a difficult choice for western governments from the perspective of *realpolitik*, with high risks, either way. First, if the dictator goes, the so far guaranteed internal and regional stability might also go. Nobody could predict what kind of policies a new 'people power' would bring. Second, you want to bet on the winner of the internal conflict, otherwise you get stuck with a hostile regime, whether it is that of the old dictator or of the new regime established by the revolutionaries. Third, once you make a choice between people and dictator, you have to assess whether you and your allies could make it likely that your choice will win the conflict within reasonable time and with limited support you would have to provide. And, fourth, you will have to face the political and moral judgment of your own electorate about the choice you have made.

After some agonizing weeks, western governments, on a case-by-case basis, made decisions and in most cases took the side of the Arab people. Egypt, in particular because of its pivotal role in maintaining peace with Israel, was a difficult choice. Lybia posed a different dilemma, for reasons of the armed uprising and the military might of the Kaddafi regime. Nobody, especially the US, wanted or could afford another Iraq or Afghanistan-type of quagmire; hence the strange role of the US in the military intervention.

The blood of the Syrian people has been shed for many months, without a Lybia-type of intervention by the international community. Syria also has a considerable army and the Assad regime, like Mubarak's, has been keeping 'cold peace' with Israel, despite its support provided to the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon. In february 2012, at the time of the writing of this article, we are still waiting for a decisive stand to be made, against the background of the Chinese and Russian veto on a Syria-related motion at the United Nations Security Council.

In Tunisia, the revolutionaries prevailed and a few months later free and fair elections were held. In Egypt, the revolutionaries also seemed to have prevailed and the military took charge promising a democratic transition through elections and the drafting of a new constitution. In Lybia, a bloody civil war ended up in victory of the revolution with the help of military intervention led by NATO. Kaddafi was ousted and killed.

Parallel developments concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be discussed in the chapter below. This article deals neither with the regional role of Turkey, nor with the disturbances and massive public protests and their social and political consequences that have emerged in the southern European countries from Greece to Spain during recent months, as a consequence of Europe's financial and economic crisis and the austerity measures that followed from the crisis.

2.

The Asymmetrical Peacefare² of Civil Society

In Tunisia, where the domino of revolutions started, a relatively peaceful revolution led to democratic elections. In some other countries of the region, the influence or even existence of civil society has been challenged.

To see the challenge in practical terms, we will look at two examples of initiatives brought from Egypt and Israel and the Palestinian territories; two crucial places with regional and sometimes worldwide impact.

2.1. Mutually Assured Construction³ in Egypt

The Mutually Assured Construction of Participatory Democracy and Civic Leadership in Egypt (MAC-Egypt)⁴ is an initiative to strengthen the capacity of Egyptian people to safeguard the democratic and participatory achievements of the Tahrir Square revolution. It is also to strengthen through civic leadership the Egyptian society's resilience to provocations of communal violence and conflict, between Muslims and Christians in particular. As half the population of Egypt is under 25, MAC-Egypt will have a special focus on young adults with leadership potential.

Consequently, MAC-Egypt intends to train, connect and bring into a civic leadership network talented young adults from the Muslim and Christian communities of Cairo and Qena. These young adults (18-30 years) are invited to form, after a 4 day long intercultural communication and leadership seminar, local Networks of Trust, that is informal and mixed civic leadership networks, and are invited to work together for the good governance of diversity locally and nationwide in Egypt.

The local Networks of Trust in Cairo and Qena are to connect with, and support, a proposed informal civic leadership network of the 2nd Arab-European Young Leaders Forum⁵, in their respective cities, in other cities and areas of Egypt and in other countries of the Mediterranean.

The main challenge to the MAC-Egypt initiative is that there is a widespread suspicion in the country about foreign sponsored civic activities. This article is not the venue to speculate about the reasons why such a suspicion has gained prominence. The suspicion is not restricted to sponsorship by western, including European, governments. However, recent raids on Cairo offices of other western organizations, such as the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the American National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute, among others, and the arrest of or travel ban on their respective personnel, may bring to halt cooperation or even interaction between Egyptian and European civil society organizations.

In a country where local sponsorship of civic activities is hardly existent, banning foreign sources to contribute to such activities may mean starving the civic sector to financial death.

2.2. The Jerusalem Network of Trust

This initiative was drafted after the statement of the US President at the UN General Assembly in September 2010, calling for a 'framework peace agreement' between the State of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, so that, within one year, the international community could embrace an independent and sovereign Palestinian State as its new member, living in peace with its neighbour, Israel. Many had doubts, and events since then have proved them right, about the feasibility of such a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate.

European, Palestinian and Israeli civic partners drafting the Jerusalem Network of Trust (JNT) initiative in the late months of 2010 believed that whether or not public diplomacy succeeds, the people of Jerusalem, Arabs and Jews alike, have a strong self-interest in cooperating in the civic and business sector. In key terms of the proposal, the logic of the project is to develop an irreversible community of interest between people from the two sides of the division and this community of interest will be a new and positive fact on the ground which public diplomacy cannot ignore. It is meant to be the opposite of those new facts on the ground that negatively influence the peace process, notably continued building of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and occasional violence.

In only a few months' perspective, things turned out to be different from the hopes of the US administration. The Israeli Prime Minister allowed the continuation of building and expanding settlements in the West Bank. Also on the legal basis of former UNGA resolutions, this was unacceptable for the Palestinian side, as well as for the majority of the international community, including the US State Department. Talks broke down again. The Palestinian Authority went ahead with a unilateral declaration of statehood with the expected approval of the UN General Assembly in September 2011. In order to avoid a potentially disastrous US veto in the Security Council, the Palestinian 'bid' was skilfully and at least temporarily shelved under the legal procedures of the UN.

Observing another fiasco of the «Middle East peace process», the project partners felt that the main objective of the JNT initiative, the development of an irreversible community of interest between Israelis and Palestinians in Jerusalem, promoted by new and interconnected young civic leadership capacity, is more necessary and justified than ever. The partners started implementing the JNT initiative.

Developments in the Palestinian territories, and Jerusalem in particular, in December 2011 and ever since have made it dangerous for Palestinians to engage in meetings

with Israelis. The accusation by some fellow Palestinians against those who engage in such activities is that they endorse 'normalization' of the Israeli occupation. This is not entirely new as the debate among Palestinians on 'normalization' has been ongoing since the 1980s. But there has in recent months been an intense unofficial campaign with a lot of pressure on Palestinians not to interact with Israelis, more precisely, with Israeli Jews. At least two events had to be cancelled last December after an intense Facebook campaign against, and threats to the organizers of those events in East Jerusalem⁶.

One potential obstacle to the JNT initiative was an attempt, in late 2011, to adopt a law in Israel banning foreign sponsorship of any civil society activities in Israeli and Israeli-occupied territories that may be considered political. The proposal ran into strong opposition both inside and outside Israel and so far at least, it did not formally reach the lawmakers.

The main challenge to the JNT initiative is that if Palestinians risk their personal safety in meeting and working with Israelis, then one of the few remaining alternative means to advance peace and create conditions for people, and Palestinian people in particular, to live and prosper, would be withheld. Perceiving and opposing contact, communication and cooperation for self-interest between people as «normalization» (being equated with «confirming the occupation»), this article argues, is a misguided and self-damaging line of thought. Decades of conflict, wasted lives of entire generations and repeated deadlocks of the peace process should inspire people to find new and more effective ways to deal with the challenges.

There do not seem to be many other alternatives to the regularly collapsing peace process, than developing an interconnected civic leadership capacity among young adults from both sides who will work together on the basis of their well-understood self-interests. This can bring results in itself and can also help bringing the peace process to meaningful conclusions. That is why the JNT is a transformation initiative.

3.

Back to the Good Old Mahatma

As one can observe through the lens of the examples above, in some countries of the MENA region, different actors in different ways are trying to stop civil society doing what it does best: promote peace and cooperation between people of different backgrounds and opinions. This is the *abnormalization syndrome* as our title says. This syndrome is a group of symptoms, appearing in different places and different ways but with similar results, making efforts by civil society 'abnormal' to help citizens to live a 'normal' life and do, in a non-violent manner, what they feel is good and important for the society in which they live. Here and now.

What can be done about this? One can say: persevere. Wait for the return of better circumstances. Learn from your own mistakes fast. Keep the people together who are committed to the objectives. Keep the spirit alive.

And there is something else. One can say: Think outside the box. The *abnormalization syndrome* is not restricted to one country or even to one region. With different levels of intensity, it may appear in many parts of the world. Middle East civic activists are far from alone with this challenge. «If a problem cannot be solved, enlarge it» —reads the motto of this article—.

It's time for the spirit of Mahatma⁷ Gandhi to return. He was an unlikely and asymmetrical challenger to the British Empire —yet he made his people win independence for their country—. He firmly believed in the equality of all human beings regardless their beliefs, skin colour or origin. He also believed in, and successfully practiced, non-violent ways to bring about monumental change.

Here comes the Gandhi Move. Civic actors in the Middle East and elsewhere, in our age of real-time connectedness and social media, can enlarge Gandhi on a worldwide scale. They can translate his innovations for today's world and add their own ideas in the same spirit. They can multiply Gandhi's message and personal example: they can become one of several new Gandhis who may come from different parts of the world and who face similar challenges. They can share with each other what has been learned, and start cooperating with each other. European civil society also can participate, help and learn.

Civic leadership in the Gandhi way can be put in place in the 21st century. When conducting civic asymmetrical peacefare in our time, one will be connected shortly. This is the Gandhi Move, information-age style.

NOTES

¹ Eric HOBBSAWM. *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*. London, Abacus, 1995.

² Asymmetrical peacefare as a term is used here as opposed to «asymmetrical warfare»; the latter was first defined by Andrew J. R. Mack as significant disparity in power between opposing actors in a conflict (World Politics, 1975), while other definitions also exist. «Asymmetrical peacefare» is understood in this article as a non-violent strategy applied by civil society actors to achieve their objectives and which strategy is sometimes opposed by a stronger material power such as the government, the army, or other armed groups.

³ «Mutually Assured Construction» is an inverted term borrowed from the Cold War's MAD doctrine (Mutually Assured Destruction) and expresses a common sense approach to coexistence and cooperation between people as opposed to MAD-ness.

⁴ The short name of the initiative is no reference to, and the initiative is not being sponsored in any way by, any IT company.

⁵ A joint initiative of the Austrian Government and the Arab League. The first Forum was hosted by the Austrian Government in Vienna in 2010, prior to the «domino of revolutions» in Arab countries. The second Forum was to be held in November 2011 in Cairo, and to be hosted by the Arab League. In light of the uncertainties and security risks around Tahrir Square where the League has its headquarters, the date of the 2nd Forum has been postponed, twice so far. Hoping for more enabling circumstances, the current proposed date for the Forum is April 2012.

⁶ Among others, *The Jerusalem Post and the Palestine Israel Journal* reported on this in December 2011.

⁷ Mahatma means «great soul». Mohandas K. Gandhi got this name from his followers while he was still alive.

