



THE IRON CAGE OF LIBERALISM

*International Politics and
Unarmed Revolutions in the
Middle East and North Africa*

DANIEL P. RITTER

OXFORD

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To my parents, Sonja and George

In memory of my grandparents, Guta, Joel, Trude, and Holger

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Part I

Introduction

1

Toward a Theory of Unarmed Revolution

A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restricted and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence whereby one class overthrows another.

—Mao Zedong, 1927¹

Revolutions are unruly beasts. Not only does their tumultuous nature make them difficult to predict and explain, but they also tend to occur in a dizzying variety of historical and political settings featuring diverse casts of participants. Indeed, even defining “revolution” is a delicate matter.² But until about four decades ago, most commentators could at least agree on one central characteristic shared by all revolutions: they were fundamentally violent.³ For instance, Hannah Arendt asserted that “only where change occurs in the sense of a new beginning, where violence is used to constitute an altogether different form of government...can we speak of revolution,”⁴ while Chalmers Johnson noted that “to make a revolution is to accept violence for the purpose of causing the system to change; more exactly, it is the purposive implementation of a strategy of violence in order to effect a change in social structure.”⁵ Their assessments were not grasped out of thin air. On the contrary, the “Great Revolutions” that ended the old regimes in France, Russia, and China were indeed violent processes that gave analysts little reason to contest prevailing definitions of revolution. The accomplishments of freedom fighters in Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua, and elsewhere in the second half of the twentieth century compounded these impressions and reinforced the idea that revolution without violence was impossible.

¹ Zedong 1927: 29.

² Kimmel 1990: 4.

³ Friedrich 1966: 5; Huntington 1968: 264.

⁴ Arendt 1963: 28.

⁵ Johnson 1966: 57.

Since the late 1970s, however, the face of revolution has changed drastically. In Iran, predominantly nonviolent crowds relied on massive demonstrations and general strikes to overthrow the country's authoritarian king, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. While violence occurred—the regime's security forces were the worst offenders, but revolutionaries also featured among the perpetrators—both sides exercised surprising restraint considering the tremendous political stakes. After more than a year of protests that began in the second half of 1977, the shah finally abandoned his palace on January 16, 1979 to never again return to Iran. That violence erupted on a minor scale a month later and the new Islamic regime turned out to be more repressive than its predecessor does not alter the fact that Iranians overthrew their absolutist leader through an unarmed revolution.⁶

In the decades that have since followed, predominantly nonviolent revolutionaries have toppled dictators and autocratic regimes on almost every continent. But not until recently did unarmed revolution return to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. In the dying days of 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit and vegetable street vendor in the south Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, set himself ablaze in response to a police officer's insults. His self-immolation immediately sparked local protests with limited demands that within weeks transformed into a nation-wide movement calling for president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's resignation. Ben Ali responded to the unrest with selective repression and promises of comprehensive reform, but neither managed to turn the tide rushing against him. On the contrary, as 2010 became 2011, the street crowds continued to grow until a call for a general strike on January 13 helped convince the president to leave the country for good on the following day.⁷

Less than two weeks after Ben Ali's ouster, Egyptian pro-democracy activists mobilized large protests on January 25. The target of their discontent: the country's president for the previous three decades, Hosni Mubarak. Taken aback by the size of the demonstrations, the regime vacillated and only mustered limited repression of the crowds in the days that followed. While violence eventually occurred on both sides of the regime-populace divide, the Egyptian Revolution resulted in relatively few casualties given its magnitude. After seventeen days of sustained protests, which included the spectacular occupation of Cairo's central Tahrir Square, Mubarak vacated his office and left power in the hands of the military as Egypt embarked on an uncertain transition to democracy. Notwithstanding the fact that the revolution has failed to accomplish its grand objectives and many Egyptians remain disillusioned with the direction in which the country has traveled since Mubarak's

⁶ Abrahamian 2009; Arjomand 1988.

⁷ Beinun and Vairel 2011; Noueihed and Warren 2012; Pinfari 2011.

overthrow, the people of Egypt executed an unarmed revolution that deposed a seemingly invincible dictator.⁸

Why is it that the use of violence, once assumed to be a requisite of revolution, no longer appears to be necessary in order for a population to emancipate itself from its authoritarian ruler? Or, put differently, how do we make sense of the fact that nonviolent civil resistance has become an effective weapon against brutal regimes? Leading analysts have noted the recent shift in the nature of revolution, that “*armed* revolutionary struggle would seem to be on the wane...[while] beginning with the Iranian Revolution of 1978–9, moreover, a growing number of *nonviolent* or at least unarmed popular insurgencies have arisen against authoritarian states,”⁹ but few have sought to analyze the new phenomenon. The purpose of this book is to redress this state of affairs through a comparative historical analysis of Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt’s unarmed revolutions. I will argue that in each case, unarmed success can be linked to the respective country’s close relations with Western democracies. Due to implicit, and sometimes explicit, liberal expectations placed on high-profile Western allies, each one of the three regimes eventually found itself constrained by an *iron cage of liberalism* that made overt repression of nonviolent demonstrators politically costly.

Puzzles and Definitions

As Table 1.1 shows, Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt are only a few of the dozens of countries that have since the late 1970s seen nonviolent revolutionary movements attempt to wrest power from authoritarian regimes. While far from always successful, unarmed revolutionaries have remarkably often managed to defeat militarily superior opponents. The relatively large number of unarmed revolutions in the past three and a half decades, along with their impressive success rate, presents this study with its two principal research questions.

This book’s primary theoretical puzzle concerns matters of success and failure. Whereas unarmed revolutionaries in countries like Iran, the Philippines, Chile, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Indonesia, Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Tunisia, and Egypt rid themselves of their oppressors, similarly nonviolent protesters in China, Romania, Burma, Iran (the 2009 “Green Movement”), Libya, and Syria either failed to do so or saw their movements degenerate into violent struggles against the state. Noting these diverging outcomes, the core

⁸ Brownlee 2012; Cook 2012; Ghonim 2012; Stacher 2012.

⁹ Goodwin 2001: 294–95 (emphasis in original). Other scholars that have made similar observations include Foran (2005: 259) and Goldstone (2001: 141, 2003: 53).

Table 1.1. Major nonviolent revolutionary movements, 1978–2011

Country	Peak year(s) of struggle	Outcome
Iran	1977–79	Success
Bolivia	1978–82	Success
El Salvador	1979–81	Failure
Poland	1980–89	Success
The Philippines	1983–86	Success
South Africa	1983–90	Success
Haiti	1985	Success
Sudan	1985	Success
Chile	1985–88	Success
South Korea	1987	Reforms
Burma	1987–88	Failure
Panama	1987–89	Failure
Tibet	1987–89	Failure
Palestine	1987–90	Failure
Baltic States	1987–91	Success
China	1989	Failure
Czechoslovakia	1989	Success
East Germany	1989	Success
Romania	1989	Failure
Bangladesh	1989–90	Reforms
Nepal	1989–90	Reforms
Kenya	1989–92	Failure
Mali	1989–92	Success
Thailand	1991–92	Success
Madagascar	1991–93	Success
Indonesia	1998	Success
Serbia	2000	Success
The Philippines	2001	Success
Georgia	2003	Success
Ukraine	2004	Success
Kyrgyzstan	2005	Success
Lebanon	2005	Success
Burma	2007	Failure
Armenia	2008	Failure
Iran	2009	Failure
Tunisia	2011	Success
Egypt	2011	Success
Libya	2011	Failure
Syria	2011	Failure

Source: Adapted from Goodwin (2001: 295), Nepstad (2011: xv), and Schock (2005: 4). Dates are approximate.

question posed in this study asks *what explains unarmed revolutionary success?* Can a common factor, or set of factors, be identified that accounts for the popular triumphs in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt, despite important differences in the three countries' characteristics? If so, what are those factors, and does their absence in unsuccessful attempts at unarmed revolution explain movement failure? Consequently, and in contrast to most students of revolution, I am not concerned with the causes of revolutions, at least not as they are commonly understood. Instead of explaining why nonviolent revolutionary movements *occur*, I only seek to explain why they *succeed* and go down in history as unarmed revolutions.

A related question concerns the recent "evolution of revolution," that is, the transformation of revolutions from predominantly violent to nonviolent processes. Before the shah's ousting in 1979 unarmed revolutions were largely unimaginable, but since then they have proliferated. While civil resistance has been a feature of contentious politics for centuries, or even millennia,¹⁰ nonviolent protesters' ability to overthrow national governments is a relatively novel development.¹¹ In addition to the question of success versus failure, the book therefore asks *what historical factors explain the shift in the nature of revolutions, from armed to unarmed, that occurred over the last few decades of the twentieth century?*

For the purposes of this book, I modify Jeff Goodwin's broad designation of revolution as "any and all instances in which a state or political regime is overthrown and thereby transformed by a popular movement in an irregular, extraconstitutional, and/or violent fashion"¹² to define unarmed revolution as *an irregular overthrow of a political regime through predominantly nonviolent mass mobilization*. Elsewhere, such and similar episodes have been referred to as "nonviolent revolutions," "peaceful revolutions," "color revolutions," "people power revolutions," "velvet revolutions," "refolutions," "negotiated revolutions," or "electoral revolutions."¹³ Thanks to the attention generated by recent events in Tunisia and Egypt,¹⁴ most readers probably have a fairly good idea of what is meant by "unarmed revolution," but given the term's centrality for what follows, a few clarifying remarks are still in order.

¹⁰ Schock 2013: 277–78.

¹¹ Exceptions do, however, exist. For instance, nonviolent protesters contributed to the overthrows of dictators in Guatemala and El Salvador as early as 1944 (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011: 233, 235), and to the consolidation of Portugal's military-led Carnation Revolution in 1974–75 (Maxwell 2009).

¹² Goodwin 2001: 9.

¹³ Bunce and Wolchik 2011: 27; Garton Ash 2009: 376; Lawson 2005a, 2005b; Nepstad 2011b: xviii.

¹⁴ Alimi and Meyer 2011; Goldstone 2011; Goodwin 2011; Nepstad 2011a; Schneider 2011.

First, the definition requires that a political regime or leader fall in order for the event to qualify as a revolution. Consequently there is no such thing as a failed unarmed revolution since my definition of “revolution” assumes success. Instead, I will refer to unsuccessful attempts as failed non-violent revolutionary movements. Furthermore, while the unarmed overthrow of a repressive regime is no small feat, it remains the most modest of revolutionary outcomes. The study disregards the more substantive social and/or political consequences that may or may not follow in the wake of an unarmed revolution. Since understanding why some regimes fall at the hands of nonviolent revolutionaries is the objective of this book, I intentionally ignore the potentially more far-reaching outcomes of unarmed revolutions. Thus, unarmed revolutions need only reach the status of “political revolution,” that is, “a transformation of the state structure”¹⁵ with the broader social consequences of the regime’s fall being beyond the purview of this study.

Second, my definition of unarmed revolution only requires the revolutionary process to be “predominantly” nonviolent, as it is improbable that an unarmed revolution will occur in absolute absence of violence. A government facing a revolutionary challenge—violent or nonviolent—is likely to seek to gain control of the situation in a variety of ways, including through the use of violence. As the target of such violence, nonviolent protests do on occasion degenerate into riots. However, since the definition I am using only mandates that the revolutionaries are nonviolent, not the state, and even then only predominantly so, government violence and limited opposition violence can occur without disqualifying a revolution from being considered unarmed. What is crucial is that the fall of the regime can reasonably be linked to the pressures emanating from the revolutionaries’ use of nonviolent tactics, such as strikes, boycotts, and demonstrations.¹⁶

Finally, I have favored the term “unarmed revolution” over “nonviolent revolution” precisely because it does not suggest the absence of violence in the revolutionary process. To students of civil resistance, “nonviolent” does not necessarily imply an absence of violence in a given conflict. Nonetheless, to a wider audience the term “nonviolence” is ambiguous, imbued as it is with connotations of Gandhi, King, passive resistance, and pacifism. My opting for “unarmed revolution” is thus intended to emphasize that the revolutions examined succeeded through the use of nonviolent tactics, rather than in the absence of violence and repression altogether.

¹⁵ Foran 2005: 8; Sanderson 2005: 2; Skocpol 1979: 4.

¹⁶ Nepstad 2011b: xviii.

Theorizing Unarmed Revolutions: Between Revolution and Civil Resistance

The study of unarmed revolution falls between two academic subfields, one focused on revolutions and the other concerned with civil resistance. Although this book does not constitute the first attempt to explain unarmed revolutions,¹⁷ previous studies have usually not sought to merge insights from the revolution and civil resistance literatures. One reason for this might be that the two sub-disciplines are in many ways each other's theoretical opposites: Students of revolutions have overwhelmingly emphasized the structural nature of their subject, while civil resistance researchers tend to highlight the roles played by human actors in nonviolent movements. However, rather than neutralizing one another, the two perspectives can be usefully combined, and may in fact allow for the reconciliation of structural and agency-based explanations.

Revolution

The social scientific study of revolution dates back at least to the 1920s.¹⁸ In the near-century that has since passed, scholars have proposed explanations of revolutions based on factors like social systems and social psychology,¹⁹ modernization,²⁰ resource mobilization,²¹ states and social structures,²² and, less frequently, the role of culture,²³ ideology,²⁴ and human agency.²⁵ Jack Goldstone has traced the development of revolution studies by identifying four generations of scholarship.²⁶ Scholars like L. P. Edwards, Crane Brinton, and G. S. Pettie formed what has become known as the “natural history” school of revolution studies that represents the first generation of revolution theory.²⁷ Its members sought to identify the distinct phases that revolutions like the English, American, French, and Russian all had in common.²⁸ Although relatively successful in accomplishing this objective, the natural history school was soon criticized for only engaging in descriptive work that told the reader little about why revolutions occur in the first place.

¹⁷ See for example, Beissinger (2007), della Porta (2014), Mitchell (2012), Nepstad (2011b), Schock (2005), Way (2008), and Zunes (1994).

¹⁸ For excellent reviews of the literature, see for example, Foran (1993b), Goldstone (1982, 2001), Kimmel (1990), Sanderson (2005), and Skocpol (1979).

¹⁹ Blumer 1939; Davies 1962; Gurr 1970; Johnson 1964, 1966; Smelser 1962.

²⁰ Huntington 1968. ²¹ Tilly 1978.

²² Farhi 1990; Goldstone 1991; Goodwin 2001; Goodwin and Skocpol 1989; Skocpol 1979, 1994.

²³ Eisenstadt 1978; Foran 2005, 2008.

²⁴ Colburn 1994; Goldstone 1991; Sewell 1985.

²⁵ Foran 2005; Selbin 1999, 2010.

²⁶ Goldstone 1980, 1982, 2001.

²⁷ Goldstone 2001.

²⁸ Brinton 1938; Edwards 1927; Pettie 1938.

The identification of revolutionary causes has since become the holy grail of revolution research. The second generation of revolution theorists was the first to propose explanations for revolutionary outbreaks. The theories they produced in the 1960s and early 1970s were either social-psychological or structural-functionalist in nature. For instance, Ted Gurr and James Davies argued that revolutions were the result of relative deprivation and the manifestation of collective psychological states stemming from a sudden economic downturn in the wake of an extended period of growth that had raised the population's expectations.²⁹ Inspired by the structural-functionalist theories of Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton, and undoubtedly children of their geopolitical times, Chalmers Johnson and Neil Smelser similarly argued that imbalances in the social system result in the popularization of new, radical ideologies that encourage distraught collectives of individuals to seek the destruction of society.³⁰ While these theorists often provided plausible explanations for the outbreak of revolutions, they were taken to task over their inability to both identify and measure the levels of discontent that they argued would result in revolutionary movements.³¹

The explanatory frameworks proposed by the third generation of revolution scholarship have arguably been the most influential. Beginning in the 1960s with Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship*,³² researchers attempted to identify the structural conditions³³ that explain outbreaks of revolutions. Thus, rather than focusing on the individual-level motivations underlying revolutionary sentiments, researchers now sought to discover the fundamental socio-historical conditions that foregrounded state breakdown. Building on Marxist theory, several accounts generated by third-generation writers emphasized class competition and peasant uprisings as the proximate causes of revolutions.³⁴ While such theories in many ways constituted marked theoretical improvements, it was not until Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* that the subfield took its giant leap forward.

In her work Skocpol stressed the autonomous role played by the state in revolutionary episodes.³⁵ Arguing that revolutions are not "voluntarist," that is, deliberately ushered in by those keen to facilitate fundamental social change, Skocpol instead posited that revolutions are the result of the state's inability to sustain social and political control. In a multi-causal fashion, she proposed that the great social revolutions in France, Russia, and China were

²⁹ Davies 1962; Gurr 1970.

³⁰ Johnson 1964, 1966; Smelser 1962.

³¹ Foran 2005: 9.

³² Moore 1966.

³³ According to Skocpol (1979: 19), "a structural perspective means a focus on relationships... transnational relations as well as relations among differently situated groups within given countries."

³⁴ Paige 1975; Wolf 1969.

³⁵ Skocpol 1979.

the result of three concurrent and interrelated pressures on each state. When economic and political interstate competition with other great powers coincided with a breakdown in elite relations and peasant revolts from below, the French, Russian, and Chinese states proved incapable of maintaining power. Rather than the result of popular whims, therefore, revolutions are the consequences of decades-long processes of national and international structural developments.

Skocpol's heavy focus on social structures came at a predictable price. Intent on showing that previous theoretical frameworks gave too much weight to the role played by revolutionaries, Skocpol opted to ignore their role altogether, at least in any explicit manner. Instead, she argued that "any valid explanation of revolution depends upon the analyst's 'rising above' the viewpoints of participants to find important regularities across given historical instances—including similar institutional and historical patterns in the situations where revolutions have occurred, and similar patterns of conflict in the process by which they have developed."³⁶ While critics have correctly pointed out that her theory is structurally biased, Skocpol herself recognized the limits of her framework, both in the conclusion of her book and later in an article on the Iranian Revolution.³⁷ In the latter, she conceded that Iran's revolution was at least partly voluntarist.

Skocpol's importance for revolution studies can hardly be overstated. In addition to stressing the importance of structural conditions and the role of the state as an autonomous actor, she was also one of the first theorists to consider the international contexts in which revolutions occur. In contrast to existing theories that focused "primarily or exclusively upon *intranational* conflicts,"³⁸ Skocpol asserts that "revolutions cannot be explained without systematic references to *international* structures and world-historical developments,"³⁹ an insight that has important implications for understanding civil resistance as an effective tool for modern-day revolutionaries.

Jack Goldstone impressively built on Skocpol's state-centered theory by proposing a "demographic/structural model" of revolution, arguing that pressures related to population increases caused states to break down in the early modern world. Demographic changes, in particular the explosive population booms that occurred periodically between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, thus help explain the cyclical occurrence of revolutions in that time period.⁴⁰ Jeff Goodwin took the "state-centered perspective" to its logical conclusion.⁴¹ According to him, it is

³⁶ Skocpol 1979: 18. ³⁷ Skocpol 1979, 1982.

³⁸ Skocpol 1979: 14 (emphasis in original).

³⁹ Skocpol 1979: 14 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁰ Goldstone 1991: 24–27.

⁴¹ Goodwin 2001.

the characteristics of the state that most directly determine whether or not revolutionary challengers will emerge, as “revolutionary movements are largely artifacts or products of historically contingent political contexts.”⁴² Questioning the view of “revolutionary movements as the product of rapid social change, intense grievances or poverty, certain class structures or land-tenure systems, economic dependence, imperialist domination, the actions of vanguard parties, etc., or some combination of these factors,”⁴³ Goodwin parsimoniously proposes that patrimonial, repressive states *in themselves* explain the rise of revolutionary movements, since such regimes close all other potential avenues to social and political change.⁴⁴ Another important state-centered contribution was offered by Timothy Wickham-Crowley, whose account of guerrilla movements in Latin America importantly emphasizes *both* the nature of the state *and* the characteristics of the armed movement opposing it.⁴⁵

A burgeoning fourth generation of theorists is currently seeking to augment structural frameworks with attention to “softer” elements, such as culture, ideology, gender, and agency. Misagh Parsa’s work usefully combines a structural focus on economic factors with an emphasis on challenger ideologies in Iran, Nicaragua, and the Philippines.⁴⁶ In a camp almost of his own, Eric Selbin has long been the main proponent of a theoretical perspective that prioritizes the role of the revolutionaries and their narratives.⁴⁷ Perhaps the most promising project to coherently combine structural factors with cultural elements and human agency belongs to John Foran.⁴⁸ His *Taking Power* is an ambitious attempt to identify the causes of Third World revolutions. In contrast to most other theorists, Foran outlines not just one path to revolution, but rather shows how different constellations of factors result in a variety of revolutionary outcomes, such as social revolutions, political revolutions, anti-colonial revolutions, reversed revolutions, and even non-attempted revolutions.

While existing theories of revolution constitute an obvious starting point for this book, this literature is overall inadequately equipped to explain unarmed revolutions due to its primary focus on initial causes. In order to understand how unarmed revolutions succeed in overthrowing authoritarian states, it becomes necessary to amend this dimension with an emphasis on the revolutionary movement itself. Since revolution theory has generally been disinclined to consider this aspect of the process, it can only benefit from insights from a field highly attuned to the roles played by nonviolent actors.

⁴² Goodwin 2001: 25.

⁴³ Goodwin 2001: 30.

⁴⁴ Goodwin 2001: 24–29.

⁴⁵ Wickham-Crowley 1992.

⁴⁶ Parsa 2000.

⁴⁷ Selbin 1999, 2010.

⁴⁸ Foran 2005.

Civil Resistance

Whereas revolution studies enjoy a long history and well-established tradition, the study of civil resistance is a more recent academic enterprise. Like revolution studies, however, the scholarship on nonviolent forms of protest has passed through several phases, each one more inclusive than the one preceding it.⁴⁹ Early research was primarily motivated by India's Gandhi-led independence movement and the American Civil Rights Movement marshaled by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.⁵⁰ However, by the mid-1970s a paradigm shift had begun to occur as the early scholarship's focus on Gandhian, "principled nonviolence" was replaced by a more pragmatic understanding of civil resistance.

The notion of "strategic nonviolence" was popularized by Gene Sharp and his pioneering *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*,⁵¹ which examined non-violent movements and campaigns from a distinctively political perspective. Successful nonviolent struggle, Sharp argued, did not depend on the activists' commitment to nonviolent ideologies. Rather, nonviolent tactics are effective because they may facilitate the withdrawal of the cooperation previously provided by the regime's pillars of support, thereby depriving oppressive leaders of their sources of power. Sharp's theory hinges on the realization that no leader can maintain his rule if individuals and groups upon whom he depends decide to no longer offer their assistance. For instance, if nonviolent protesters can convince security forces to refrain from following orders to repress, the coercive capacities of the leader are immediately rendered useless. Activists' success therefore depends on their capacity to shrewdly and strategically execute a series of nonviolent actions that outsmarts the opponent.⁵²

Sharp's pragmatic approach dominated civil resistance studies for the next three decades, as a number of books and articles were published that sought to identify the strategic keys to success.⁵³ These often took the form of comparative case studies that while informative usually aimed to offer little of theoretical substance beyond repeating Sharp's strategy-based mantra. Others sought to propose more nuanced accounts that placed the nonviolent actors' strategic choices in relation to other factors.⁵⁴ Kurt Schock's *Unarmed Insurrections*⁵⁵ is perhaps the most outstanding example of this development. In contrast to most of the authors that came before him, Schock sought to combine Sharp's strategic emphasis with attention to structural factors.

⁴⁹ Carter 2009; Schock 2013.

⁵⁰ Bondurant 1958; Brown 1972, 1977; Galtung 1965; Gregg 1935; Oppenheimer 1965; Sharp 1960.

⁵¹ Sharp 1973.

⁵² Sharp 1973, 2002, 2005. See also Binnendijk and Marovic (2006).

⁵³ Ackerman and DuVall 2000; Ackerman and Krueger 1994; Helvey 2004.

⁵⁴ Clark 2009; Roberts and Garton Ash 2009; Stephan 2009; Zunes et al. 1999.

⁵⁵ Schock 2005.

Specifically, Schock applied the political process model used by social movement researchers to put activists' strategic choices in the context of political opportunities and threats. Following an analysis of nonviolent movements in six countries (South Africa, the Philippines, Burma, China, Nepal, and Thailand), Schock identified a movement's ability to remain resilient in the face of repression *and* its capacity to exert leverage over the regime it challenged as the keys to nonviolent success. Schock's account is a major contribution because it places civil resistance in the broader theoretical context of social movements.

Sharon Nepstad's analysis of six cases of successful and failed "nonviolent revolutions" (China, East Germany, Panama, Chile, Kenya, and the Philippines) resulted in two central findings. First, Nepstad found that nonviolent revolutionary success depends on a movement's ability to neutralize the regime's use of its security apparatus: When soldiers defect, nonviolent activists win; when the former remain loyal to the regime, the latter lose. The reason troops sometimes refuse to shoot at unarmed protesters, Nepstad argues, is twofold. Since nonviolent tactics do not constitute an immediate threat to the soldiers' lives, a violent response becomes less likely. Also, if the soldiers do not stand to lose much from the regime's fall, then they are less likely to remain loyal to the state.⁵⁶ Second, Nepstad proposes that international pressures on a regime facing a nonviolent revolution tend to undermine its opponents and strengthen the government's hand,⁵⁷ a finding that points to the importance of international factors in nonviolent revolutionary episodes. Perhaps the most important contribution of Nepstad's work is its emphasis on explaining regime responses. To ascertain why nonviolence works, we must understand why repression fails.

Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan have recently provided a much-heralded contribution.⁵⁸ In what is undoubtedly the most ambitious project undertaken by civil resistance researchers, Chenoweth and Stephan set out to compare violent and nonviolent campaigns through a quantitative analysis of 323 movements for regime change, the end of foreign occupation, or secession. The authors couple their statistical analysis with several case studies to show that nonviolent campaigns are on average more likely to accomplish their objectives than their violent counterparts. Indeed, their "most striking finding is that between 1900 and 2006, nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts."⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Nepstad 2011b: 128–31.

⁵⁷ Nepstad 2011b: 133–35.

⁵⁸ Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Stephan and Chenoweth 2008.

⁵⁹ Chenoweth and Stephan 2011: 7.

Chenoweth and Stephan contend that the reason nonviolent campaigns are on average more successful than their violent equivalents derives from their “participation advantage.” “Nonviolent campaigns,” they argue, “facilitate the active participation of many more people than violent campaigns, thereby broadening the base of resistance and raising the costs to opponents of maintaining the status quo.”⁶⁰ Consequently, the authors settle for a “voluntaristic approach to the study of resistance”⁶¹ and conclude, in line with Sharp, that “the ability of the campaign to make strategic adjustments to changing conditions is crucial to its success.”⁶² Dismissing structural arguments, they assert that

There appears to be no general trend indicating that there are types of opponents against whom such strategic maneuvering is impossible. Contrary to theorists who emphasize structural factors in determining whether a conflict will succeed or fail, we find no such patterns. Nonviolent campaigns succeed against democracies and non-democracies, weak and powerful opponents, conciliatory and repressive regimes.⁶³

There is no question that Chenoweth and Stephan’s work has been of great import, not least because it has helped bring civil resistance studies into the mainstream of social science. Still, their rejection of structural factors is premature, and may be a consequence of their research design. By comparing such a wide array of nonviolent campaigns from different world-historical eras, Chenoweth and Stephan are, rather unsurprisingly, unable to draw conclusions that go beyond the strategic superiority of nonviolence as compared to violence. This limitation is rather common in civil resistance studies where there is a tendency to equate all struggles that rely on nonviolent tactics, regardless of their objectives and contexts. Thus, one framework may be used to explain Danish resistance to Nazi German occupation, the American Civil Rights Movement, and the unarmed revolution against Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines.⁶⁴ When campaigns as different as these are compared, one would have to be extremely fortunate to unearth any structural pattern whatsoever.

While in many ways highly sophisticated, Chenoweth and Stephan’s conclusions can therefore ultimately do little more than point precisely to the importance of strategy. In other words, nonviolent resistance works because it is nonviolent, and can succeed in any environment as long as the movement is able to outwit and outlast its opponent. While this is a highly encouraging conclusion to offer aspiring revolutionaries around the world, it might

⁶⁰ Chenoweth and Stephan 2011: 10–11.

⁶¹ Chenoweth and Stephan 2011: 18.

⁶² Chenoweth and Stephan 2011: 221.

⁶³ Chenoweth and Stephan 2011: 221. For an opposing view, see Ulfelder (2005).

⁶⁴ Ackerman and DuVall 2000.

also be a rather irresponsible one. What if structural factors, such as regime type, *do* matter and help determine success or failure? If that is the case, what will happen to strategically shrewd civil resisters that challenge the wrong kind of state?

A Structural-Strategic Compromise?

Both the revolution and civil resistance literatures have much to offer students of unarmed revolution. But despite the wealth of theoretical arguments and empirical information they provide, there is a need for a structural-strategic compromise. I therefore aim to combine the structural focus on states central to revolution theory with the civil resistance literature's emphasis on actors' strategic choices. Rather than positioning revolutionary outcomes as the unavoidable consequence of necessary and sufficient causes, or, alternatively, as the ahistorical, non-contextualized result of strategic brilliance, the argument advanced here assumes that structures matter greatly, but also that it makes a real difference *how* human agents respond to their environments.⁶⁵ As Karl Marx explained in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, "men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."⁶⁶ Thus, theories of revolution, in particular those addressed at its unarmed variety, must find a way to reconcile the relationship between pre-existing structural conditions and emergent human action.⁶⁷ Whether structure or agency is the primary cause of unarmed revolution is less important. What matters is how the two interact and shape one another to create a context in which unarmed revolutionaries manage to overthrow authoritarian states. It is an effort to strike a balance between structure and strategy that undergirds this book's theoretical framework.

The Argument

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of this book's central claims is that neither state nor movement-centered approaches can alone explain why unarmed revolutions occur. In order to understand *how* and *why* nonviolent tactics sometimes become highly potent in struggles against repressive states, it is necessary to situate revolutionary movements employing such methods in their relevant political and historical contexts. The task at hand is thus to identify

⁶⁵ Jasper 2004.

⁶⁶ Tucker 1978: 595.

⁶⁷ Parsa 2000: 6–10.

the circumstances in which authoritarian states become vulnerable to—and inadvertently incentivize—a popular movement's use of nonviolent tactics.

Another look at Table 1.1 suggests a counterintuitive contextual correspondence that contradicts the war and economic conflict thesis introduced by Skocpol and subsequently propagated by others.⁶⁸ At the time of their respective unarmed revolution, most of the afflicted regimes found themselves engaged in friendly, high-profile relationships with a powerful nation or group thereof. Even more to the point, it appears that countries that have experienced unarmed revolution were often ruled by authoritarian regimes closely aligned with Western democracies. Inversely, failed nonviolent revolutionary attempts have largely taken place in countries estranged from the West or aligned with non-democratic powers, such as China or Russia. While the correlation between international relations and unarmed revolutionary success falls short of being perfect, it is still striking enough to warrant the hypothesis that close relations with the democratic West make authoritarian regimes susceptible to unarmed revolutions.

Rather than pointing to external threats, this book's central argument is thus that friendly international relations between the authoritarian regimes in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt and their Western patrons hold the key to understanding the three countries' unarmed revolutions. A number of scholars have attempted to account for how international aspects besides war and economic competition affect revolutionary processes. Concurring with Goldstone's assessment that international contexts "are not sufficiently described in terms of international military or economic competition,"⁶⁹ some theorists have pointed to "permissive world contexts"⁷⁰ or "world-systemic openings"⁷¹ as potentially important. But even then international dimensions usually feature only as secondary explanatory factors. Eric Selbin has consequently criticized his colleagues for "often tossing in 'the international context' or a regime's 'international allies' or the global economic system in some form or another as one more variable to be considered but rarely if ever forefronted."⁷² This study distinguishes itself by making a specific international context its primary explanatory variable.

The book's central objective is thus to identify the mechanism that connects friendly democracy-autocracy relations to unarmed revolutions. To do so I draw on both state-centered approaches to revolution and strategy-based theories of civil resistance to propose that the success of nonviolent revolutionary movements can be traced to a set of contradictions and compatibilities inherent in democracy-autocracy relations. I contend that amicable,

⁶⁸ Calvert 1996; Halliday 1999, 2001; Katz 2001; Snyder 2001; Walt 2001.

⁶⁹ Goldstone 2003: 74. ⁷⁰ DeFronzo 2007: 17–18; Goldfrank 1979: 148.

⁷¹ Foran 2005: 23. ⁷² Selbin 2012: 2.

high-profile relations between a democratic state and an autocratic regime based on mutually beneficial economic and geopolitical considerations threaten to constrain both governments by holding them hostage to the liberal rhetoric on which their relationship must by necessity rest. Within a discursive context officially governed by norms and values such as democracy, human rights, individual freedom, and the rule of law, civil resistance becomes highly potent due to its compatibility with these Western core principles. Conversely, any attempt to overtly suppress or forbid nonviolent protest is a severe contradiction of the rhetoric the democratic state and its authoritarian patron rely on to justify their relationship, thus making repression politically very costly. In short, the liberal discourse that surround democracy-autocracy relationship makes nonviolent protest an undisputable right and its repression an inexcusable violation.

Inspired by Max Weber's notion of the iron cage of rationality, I refer to this constraining mechanism as the *iron cage of liberalism* (ICL).⁷³ Weber famously argued that bureaucratic structures, a result of modern society's incessant drive towards rationalization, eventually betray their original aim. The purpose of bureaucracies is to facilitate interactions by providing clear sets of rules that make for prompt and predictable outcomes, a marked improvement from the arbitrariness that characterized earlier types of social arrangements. Ultimately, however, these rules tend to become so complex that rather than expediting smooth transactions, bureaucracies often end up impeding them. In a sense then, the proliferation of rules has allowed the bureaucratic structure to take on a life of its own, independent of its creators' original intentions. An arrangement intended to streamline social life has thus become an iron cage that traps those within it in its internal logic.⁷⁴

Similarly, the iron cage of liberalism eventually constrains authoritarian regimes and their Western allies by holding them accountable to liberal expectations. What makes the "West" a coherent concept is largely the fact that countries defined as "Western" unconditionally embrace liberal political principles. Authoritarianism, in contrast, is by definition anti-liberal, which means that a close bond with an authoritarian regime poses a fundamental dilemma for any Western government. With liberalism residing at the very heart of Western claims to normative superiority, its leaders *must officially* oppose authoritarian structures, wherever they may be found. To legitimize close relations with a non-democratic state, it is therefore essential that the authoritarian regime *appears* to be democratic, as the successful execution of this charade helps facilitate the consummation of the democracy-autocracy relationship.

⁷³ Ritter 2010, 2012c.

⁷⁴ Weber 1968: 987–89, 1992: 123.

Consequently, authoritarian clients frequently undergo a hypocritical transformation intended to placate their critics in the West, most importantly media outlets and international human rights organizations that have the power to problematize the democracy–autocracy relationship by broadcasting it to wider audiences. By publicly adopting the West’s core values as its own, the authoritarian regime becomes a *façade democracy*,⁷⁵ a type of hybrid regime⁷⁶ that for strategic reasons espouses a liberal political discourse while simultaneously engaging in repressive social control. As will become clear, a democratic façade grants the authoritarian state several important benefits, most importantly international legitimacy that is used to justify the Western aid, trade, and military collaboration that become a vital part of regime survival.⁷⁷ However, over time the initially beneficial commitment to Western core principles may inadvertently assume the shape of a heavy burden through the self-perpetuating dynamic the discursive adoption of liberalism sets in motion.

Since its liberal credentials must be perpetually restated in order for the authoritarian regime to justify the continuation of its economically and politically vital links to the democratic world, over time façade democracies tend to become increasingly entangled by their embrace of Western core principles. Each time a dictator or one of his representatives iterates the regime’s commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, they invite external watchdogs and domestic opponents to hold the government increasingly accountable for its discourse. Since the regime’s ability to secure Western patronage is often a crucial source of elite support, the government has little choice but to do whatever it takes to propagate Western relations, including the upkeep of its democratic charade. Similarly to Weber’s bureaucracy then, democracy–autocracy relations eventually cease to be a strategic choice and instead become a central feature of the regime, which it cannot renounce.

In addition to any negative effects resulting from the state’s accountability to domestic elites, the truly crippling consequences of its hypocrisy emanate from pressures from below. The regime’s efforts to promote a democratic image of itself require it to introduce political liberalization, no matter how farcical it may be. I argue that such measures, regardless of their insincerity, shape the domestic opposition by indicating where the regime’s weaknesses lie. As the empirical analysis will show, opposition groups and leaders are often shrewd enough to recognize that a regime’s acceptance of human rights and democracy means that activism on the basis of these principles will be

⁷⁵ Sadiki 2002b.

⁷⁶ Carothers 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010; Ottaway 2003.

⁷⁷ King 2009.

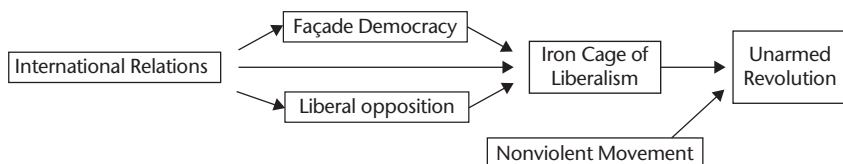


Figure 1.1. From international relations to unarmed revolution.

difficult for the government to obstruct, since doing so would risk demolishing the democratic façade on which it depends for its survival.

As depicted in Figure 1.1, when the authoritarian regime, its democratic ally, and the opposition all champion the same liberal rhetoric, we may consider an iron cage of liberalism in place. In that context of discursive convergence, nonviolent civil resistance against the state becomes an effective movement strategy. Trapped by its often decades-long professing of the virtues of political liberalism, unarmed protest represents a lethal challenge to the regime, especially if the movement plays out before Western audiences via newspapers, television, or the World Wide Web. Since any attempt at unarmed revolution can be defined on the basis of sections 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that guarantee all people “the right to freedom of opinion and expression” and “the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association,”⁷⁸ a façade democratic regime cannot repress nonviolent protesters without shattering the liberal image on which its international legitimacy and domestic elite support by now depends. Trapped as it is in an iron cage of liberalism, the regime may become paralyzed, vacillate, and is often swept away by unarmed revolutionaries demanding the very rights the regime claims to have promoted and protected for decades.

Although the ICL is a structural mechanism inspired by state-centered approaches to revolution, it requires the deliberate, strategic actions of regime opponents to become “activated.” In the absence of nonviolent protest, an ICL can lay dormant for years, perhaps even indefinitely. Hence, while this book’s theoretical framework is structural in nature, it gives human actors a central and important part in the story, a feature it shares with much civil resistance scholarship. Readers familiar with the social movement literature may want to think of the ICL as a specific and durable “political opportunity”⁷⁹ that provides would-be revolutionaries with a strategic opening in their struggle against the state.

It is important to emphasize that the outlined theoretical framework describes an unintended dynamic. Instigated as a way to gain access to

⁷⁸ United Nations 1948.

⁷⁹ McAdam 1982, 1996; Meyer 2004; Rule 1988.

Western riches at the low cost of a phoney commitment to democratic principles, the liberal logic of democracy–autocracy relations eventually takes on a life of its own and becomes an iron cage beyond anyone’s control. Crucially, the framework does not propose that Western leaders deliberately maintain relations with autocratic regimes in order to change them. In other words, the ICL is not an intentional democratization scheme imposed on authoritarian leaders by altruistic leaders in the West keen to see democracy and human rights flourish around the globe. On the contrary, the theory assumes that democratic leaders are familiar with their façade democratic allies’ true, authoritarian character, and in fact often benefit from their patrons’ domestic heavy-handedness. Thus, and as noted above, the democratic façade is not erected to fool the democratic patron, but in part adopted precisely to allow the Western patron to justify the relationship to its domestic constituents. Rather than the targets of sophisticated scams, democratic governments aligned with authoritarian regimes should therefore be considered their clients’ willing accomplices.

Although students of revolution have rarely considered the role of international relations, researchers in related fields have. Social movements scholars have examined transnational movements,⁸⁰ and studies on transitions from authoritarianism to democracy have often noted the role played by external actors, including friendly states.⁸¹ Some democratization experts have argued that engagement with the West results in a “socialization” process, that is, a soft, progressive pattern of regime transformation resulting from Western tutelage. Through exchanges and other programs, Western officials “teach” their counterparts in non-Western countries how to build democratic institutions and thereby socialize aligned governments. From this perspective, the training of bureaucrats is viewed as key to the promotion of a democratic state and a culture free of widespread corruption.⁸² However, juxtaposing this generous interpretation of Western intentions, a more realist strand of thought argues that Western states first and foremost seek to advance their own national interests, even when doing so violates their core values,⁸³ sensing as they do that “political stability and democratization are mutually exclusive.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Keck and Sikkink 1998; della Porta and Diani 2006; Johnston 2011; Smith and Wiest 2012; Tarrow 1998, 2005.

⁸¹ Adesnik and McFaul 2006; Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Bunce and Wolchik 2011: 21; Brysk 1993, 2013; Pridham et al. 1997; Remmer 1995; Schmitz 2004; Smith and Wiest 2012; Whitehead 1996a, 1996b.

⁸² Kelley 2006; Risse and Sikkink 1999; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008; Youngs 2005b.

⁸³ Brown and Hawthorne 2010: 20; Cassarino 2011; Fioramonti 2011; Gillespie and Whitehead 2002: 196–98; Hassan 2011: 130–32; Holden 2010; Jünemann 2002: 88–89; Ottaway and Carothers 2004: 2; Youngs 2005a: 232.

⁸⁴ Schlumberger 2006: 51–52.

Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's theoretical framework is particularly relevant to this study and represents a compromise between the two approaches.⁸⁵ They argue that countries closely aligned to the West economically, militarily, and politically (what they call "high linkage") are subject to direct Western liberalization pressures ("high leverage").⁸⁶ Their contention is thus that non-democratic countries most closely linked to the West are the ones most likely to democratize, since they are concerned with maintaining their profitable connection to the democratic world. Whereas the "socialization" school emphasizes "soft" pressures such as official exchanges, Levitsky and Way propose a "harder" avenue to democratization emanating from explicit Western prodding. Still, in unison with the socialization school, they argue that Western officials *deliberately and actively* implore their autocratic allies to democratize in a sincere manner. While such pressures undoubtedly occur, they are usually directed at aligned countries of limited geostrategic importance. As Levitsky and Way themselves note, Egypt for instance, due to its strategic importance, was rarely subject to direct democratization pressures,⁸⁷ especially when it became clear that anti-Western Islamists were the ones most likely to take advantage of political liberalization efforts.⁸⁸ Yet, as will become clear in this book, one could argue that no country in the Middle East was under more pressure, albeit implicitly, to behave democratically than Egypt.

This book expands on Levitsky and Way's compelling argument by rethinking the relationship between "linkage" and "leverage." Rather than approaching the two factors as distinct, the ICL framework posits that durable, high-profile, and mutually beneficial linkages between a democracy and an autocracy come with *unintended* behavioral expectations formalized in trade agreements and other international instruments, regardless of whether the patron exerts its leverage or not. Simply engaging in close relations with the democratic world makes an autocratic regime susceptible to democratization pressure from Western third parties, most importantly the international media and human rights organizations, which can be just as effective as that coming directly from the democratic patron state. Furthermore, the book complements Levitsky and Way's focus on states and elites by stressing the link between international relations and popular movements from below, and argues that the compatibility between linkages to the West and unarmed protest is central to the story.

⁸⁵ Levitsky and Way 2002, 2005, 2010.

⁸⁶ Levitsky and Way 2010: 50–54.

⁸⁷ Levitsky and Way 2010: 41.

⁸⁸ Alexander 2009: 148; Ottaway 2005: paragraph 1.

Explaining the Emergence of Unarmed Revolution: The World-Historical Context

As noted above, a secondary objective of this book is to explain why unarmed revolutions have proliferated since the late 1970s. As it turns out, the same liberal discourse that explains nonviolent revolutionary success also explains the onset of unarmed revolutions as a global phenomenon. Of particular importance is the notion of human rights. While it is tempting to assume that their “universality” suggests that they have always been considered the epitome of Western enlightenment ideals, human rights only emerged as a hegemonic concept in the 1970s. Although a well-known notion prior to that—the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration in 1948—human rights had hitherto played only a limited role in world politics.⁸⁹ In fact, it was not until the West chose to impose its understanding of human rights on the Eastern bloc during the final stages of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE, later OSCE), concluded in 1975 in Helsinki, that a truly global conception of human rights took root.⁹⁰

By signing the Helsinki Accords (the formal, albeit non-binding, outcome of the conference, also known as the Helsinki Final Act), Western leaders accepted the Communist bloc’s assertion of Europe’s post-war borders.⁹¹ In exchange for this substantial and highly controversial concession, Moscow and its satellites reluctantly recognized—and committed to uphold—the Western view of human rights. Prior to Helsinki, the Communist countries had privileged an interpretation of human rights that emphasized its economic and cultural dimensions.⁹² Following the conference’s conclusion, however, the Western version of human rights, that in addition included political and civil dimensions, became the agreed-upon norm. While Moscow probably considered “Basket Three” a small price to pay, its inclusion changed the trajectory of world history by contributing to the fall of the Eastern bloc. Almost immediately, Eastern European dissidents “began to see the Final Act not as a ratification of the status quo, as the Communist regimes were portraying it, but as a promising and unprecedented opportunity to challenge the repressiveness of those regimes.”⁹³ Grasping the straw they had been handed, Eastern European dissidents “simply demanded that regimes follow their own laws on human rights.... This process, more than any single political, economic, or military event, is what doomed the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe.”⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Hunt 2007.

⁹⁰ Brysk 1993: 266; Gelvin 2012: 29–30; Neier 2012: 3; Risse and Sikkink 1999: 21.

⁹¹ Dale 2005: 86. ⁹² Stokes 1993: 24. ⁹³ Thomas 1999: 209.

⁹⁴ Stokes 1993: 23. See also Adamishin and Schifter (2009), Shepherd (2000: 31), and Snyder (2011).

In hindsight, the West's inclusion of political and civil rights into the Helsinki Accords was an accidental stroke of genius that had enormous consequences for the Cold War's outcome. However, Moscow and its authoritarian allies in Eastern Europe were not the only casualties of Basket Three. In Iran, shrewd opposition groups soon held the shah and Jimmy Carter—"the human rights president"—accountable for their respective articulations of the importance of human rights. Since then activists around the world have challenged Western-aligned authoritarians by pointing to the discrepancy between what the regime says and what it actually does. Consequently, while an appeal to moral standards, human rights in particular, won the West the Cold War, it has also resulted in the fall of many of its most valuable allies.⁹⁵ In short, the Helsinki Final Act marks the beginning of unarmed revolutions by making the iron cage of liberalism possible.

Method and Research Design

Revolutions are best understood as long-term historical processes.⁹⁶ Like most major studies of revolutions, this book therefore employs comparative historical analysis (CHA) as its method.⁹⁷ More precisely, it mimics Skocpol's combined use⁹⁸ of John Stuart Mill's "Method of Agreement" and "Method of Difference."⁹⁹ The Method of Agreement consists of establishing that cases that have in common the outcome of interest (in this case unarmed revolution), also exhibit the proposed explanatory variable (friendly relations with the West). The Method of Difference, on the other hand, requires the researcher to show that the absence of the outcome of interest coincides with the absence of the explanatory factor.¹⁰⁰ Concretely, I first analyze three "positive" cases of unarmed revolution—Iran (1977–79), Tunisia (2011), and Egypt (2011)—in order to establish that each country found itself engaged in a friendly relationship with the West, and that this relationship resulted in the ICL dynamic described above to facilitate unarmed revolutionary success. I then test the book's theoretical framework further through a briefer examination of three "negative" cases—Iran's 2009 "Green Movement" and the 2011 "Arab Spring" uprisings in Libya and Syria—that is, instances in which nonviolent revolutionary movements did not result in unarmed revolution. In these cases, the absence of unarmed revolution is linked to the absence of

⁹⁵ Stork 2011: 83. ⁹⁶ Goldstone 2014: 26–32.

⁹⁷ Foran 1993a, 1994a, 2005; Goldstone 1982, 1991, 2003, 2009; Goodwin 2001; Mahoney and Reuschmeyer 2003: 4; Parsa 2000; Selbin 1999; Skocpol 1979, 1994; Wickham-Crowley 1992; Wolf 1969.

⁹⁸ Skocpol 1979: 36–37.

⁹⁹ Mill 1974.

¹⁰⁰ Skocpol and Somers 1980: 183.

amicable relations with the democratic world, and, by extension, the absence of an iron cage of liberalism.

This book was originally not supposed to be about the Middle East and North Africa. However, the eruption of the “Arab Spring” reshaped the study by offering important methodological advantages, such as reducing geographical and cultural variation between cases. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria were selected for inclusion because they represent the most clear-cut instances of nonviolent success and failure during the “Arab Spring.”¹⁰¹ Notwithstanding important difference between the four countries, the natural experiment of the “Arab Spring” keeps temporal factors, like the global economic crisis, constant, and thus reduces their explanatory power.

The country that diverges from the “Arab Spring,” Iran, was chosen for two principal reasons. First, by virtue of being one of the world’s first unarmed revolutions, an examination of the Iranian Revolution promised to generate important theoretical insights.¹⁰² Second, the country’s 2009 “Green Movement” affords the study a within-case comparison. Despite the fact that thirty years of domestic and international developments separate them, the contexts surrounding the two Iranian revolutionary movements naturally share many key characteristics. Consequently, domestic variables, such as ethnic composition, religion, access to natural resources, and geography, can largely be kept constant and therefore be excluded from the list of potential explanatory variables. For those so inclined, the Iranian case can be read as a self-contained case study.

The book makes use of process tracing, a historicizing technique that facilitates the discovery of causal links between independent and dependent variables by tracking the unfolding of relevant processes over time. Using this approach, I trace the development of friendly international relations between the Iranian, Tunisian, and Egyptian regimes and their patrons over roughly four decades. In each case I show how such relationships liberalized both the state and its opponents until the formation of an iron cage of liberalism made unarmed revolutions possible. In this effort I rely overwhelmingly on secondary sources. Although some primary documents have been used, I am indebted to area specialists, historians, political scientists, sociologists, and others who have written about these countries and the region in the past. While primary sources would have added another layer to the analysis that follows, comparative-historical work can hardly be completed without depending on the historiographies and social scientific contributions of others. It also goes without saying that comparisons of this kind necessarily forsake some

¹⁰¹ Only in Tunisia and Egypt did unarmed revolutionaries overthrow dictators, and only in Libya and Syria did the movements degenerate into full-scale civil wars.

¹⁰² Goodwin 2001: 294–95.

depth and detail about each of the cases examined, leaving the comparativist exposed to charges of superficiality. Still, the sacrifice of depth at the expense of breadth is an unavoidable tradeoff in any comparative endeavor.¹⁰³

Despite its regional focus on the Middle East and North Africa, this is not a book about the Muslim world, or the “Arab Spring” for that matter. Rather, it is a book about unarmed revolutions that for theoretical and methodological reasons draws on six MENA cases for empirical data. Accordingly, the argument presented herein contains no elements that are particular to the Middle East and North Africa. Whether or not its findings can be generalized and thus applied to other cases remains to be seen, and is discussed briefly in the concluding chapter. Those intimately familiar with the region and its political history will probably learn little new in the pages that follow. However, the purpose of comparative research of this kind is not to “present fresh evidence... [but to] make arguments that urge the reader to see old problems in a new light.”¹⁰⁴ As such, this book seeks to look past the trees in order to more fully perceive the forest.

Looking Ahead

The remainder of the book is divided into three parts. Parts II and III analyze the study’s three main cases, Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt. Part II focuses on international relations. The task of Chapter 2 is to establish that at the time of their respective revolutions, Iran Tunisia, and Egypt all found themselves closely linked to major Western powers. To that end, the chapter traces the historical development of each country’s relationship with their democratic patrons, and shows that all three regimes benefited greatly in political, economic, and military terms from being aligned with the West. Chapter 3 describes the process through which the three regimes progressively came to adopt their Western patrons’ liberal rhetoric in order to justify their deepening ties to Europe and North America. While this transformation helped the three autocratic regimes maintain and even strengthen their lucrative connections to the West, it also forced them to behave in a pseudo-democratic manner that would eventually generate political opportunities for dissent.

In Part III, the attention shifts to domestic politics. Chapter 4 shows how the three authoritarian regimes’ close alignment with Western democracies incentivized opposition groups to progressively favor “cultures of opposition”¹⁰⁵ that rhymed with the liberal rhetoric espoused by their governments. The chapter also shows that the same discourse made armed struggle against

¹⁰³ Foran 2005: 27–28.

¹⁰⁴ Skocpol 1979: xi.

¹⁰⁵ Foran 2005: 21.

the state highly inefficient. Chapter 5 continues the examination of the domestic opposition by tracing the protest movements that emerged in each country and eventually culminated in unarmed revolutions. It describes how nonviolent protesters put sufficient pressure on their respective government—and indirectly on the regimes' Western patrons—to make repression highly costly, thereby permitting the movements to become unarmed revolutions.

Part IV is dedicated to further comparisons and conclusions. In Chapter 6, the three negative cases—Iran's 2009 Green Movement as well as the initially nonviolent uprisings in Libya and Syria—are introduced in order to test the findings generated in Parts II and III. Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes the book and offers some conclusions. While the book is organized thematically to accentuate its theoretical contribution, readers who prefer to read about one country at a time can easily do so by tracing each case individually in Chapters 2 through 5.

Part II

International Relations

2

Friendly International Relations

Benefit or Burden?

Our human rights policy is not a decoration. It is not something we've adopted to polish up our image abroad or to put a fresh coat of moral paint on the discredited policies of the past. Our pursuit of human rights is part of a broad effort to use our great power and our tremendous influence in the service of creating a better world, a world in which human beings can live in peace, in freedom, and with their basic needs adequately met. Human rights is the soul of our foreign policy. And I say this with assurance, because human rights is the soul of our sense of nationhood.

—Jimmy Carter, December 1978¹

"Iran, for one, is committed to the ideals enshrined in the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration [of Human Rights]."

—Fereydoun Hoveyda, Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations, May 1977²

This book's central argument, that friendly international relations between Western democracies and autocratic governments help explain unarmed revolutions by imposing constraints on authoritarian regimes, requires such relationships to indeed be characteristic of countries where nonviolent revolutionary movements succeed in overthrowing the state. For an iron cage of liberalism to come into being, an authoritarian regime must feel obliged to adopt the West's political discourse as its own, something that will likely only occur if the benefits of such an espousal outweigh its costs. The task of this chapter is therefore to establish that Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt did in fact find themselves closely aligned with Western democracies at the time of their

¹ Carter 1978.

² Hoveyda 1977.

revolutions, and to show that the riches generated by those relationships were compelling enough to warrant the three regimes' rhetorical embrace of Western political ideals.

As a result of its empirical objective, this chapter, in contrast to those that follow, does not primarily aim to make a theoretical argument. Instead, it comprises accounts of the three regimes' development into full-fledged Western clients, with the purpose of establishing the claim that Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt can be defined as Western allies at the time of their respective revolutions. Already at this point it is worth noting that none of the countries were predestined to become aligned with the West. Quite on the contrary, all three had largely negative experiences of Western intrusions in the decades leading up to their eventual attachment to the democratic world. As will become clear, the final foreign policy orientation of each country was the result of contingent trajectories that progressively steered them westward. This chapter thus documents three national paths to the West, beginning with Iran.

Iran: America's Unconditional Ally

Although Iran was never officially colonized by any imperial power, "its history is a history of colonial interventions and external powers vying for influence."³ Russia and Great Britain were the first two Western nations to recognize the benefits that came with controlling the country.⁴ By the middle of the nineteenth century both powers had imposed themselves on Iran by dividing the country between them.⁵ Britain assumed control in the south in order to safeguard its interests in India and the Persian Gulf, whereas Russia used the north as a buffer for its southern border, while simultaneously gaining access to the Persian Gulf. Though officially rivals, London and Moscow co-exploited Iran for decades, often cooperating to keep the Iranian monarchy sufficiently weak and malleable.⁶ Iran's rulers sought to minimize the influence of either imperial power by balancing the two against one another, but this strategy was rarely successful⁷ since Russia and Britain would when necessary look past their differences and conflicting objectives. For instance, when the Constitutional Revolution (1905–11) threatened to limit foreign influence over Iran,⁸ London and Moscow signed the 1907 Anglo-Russian Entente that settled many of their differences in the region. United by their

³ Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994: 11.

⁴ See Elton (2001) and Ghods (1989).

⁵ Abrahamian 1982: 50–51.

⁶ Keddie 2003; Stempel 1981.

⁷ Stempel 1981: 1.

⁸ Keddie 2003: 69–70.

mutual interests, the two powers then intervened in 1911 to issue a joint ultimatum to the Iranian government that effectively ended the revolution.⁹

Russo-British hegemony in Iran persisted until Reza Khan, a young brigadier general, seized power through a coup d'état in 1921. Khan soon changed his family name to the more Farsi sounding Pahlavi, and crowned himself king (shah) in 1925. Reza Shah's ascension to the throne ended the Qajar dynasty's 130-year reign and set Iran¹⁰ on a new, more independent path to national development. Still, while

no Western power re-shaped the economy to the degree that Britain and Russia had during the Qajar era... Iran remained dependent despite Reza Shah's avowed nationalism, self-reliance, and strong state, due chiefly to three interrelated mechanisms: control of oil by the British, unequal trade with the Soviet Union and Germany, and the vicissitudes of trade as a peripheral supplier of raw materials.¹¹

These factors had enduring consequences for Iran's economic and political development: British control of oil eventually resulted in the oil nationalization movement of the early 1950s, while continued Russian influence contributed to the emergence of a considerable communist movement in the 1940s. However, for Reza Shah personally it was his country's burgeoning relationship with Nazi Germany that had the most far-reaching consequences.

When World War II erupted in 1939, the German military presence in Iran was already substantial. Furthermore, it was no secret that the king privately sympathized with the Nazi government.¹² Fearing that Germany would launch attacks on the Soviet Union from Iranian soil, and themselves seeking to use the country as a supply route to the USSR, the Allies demanded that Reza Shah expel all German forces. Faced with this ultimatum the king stalled, which resulted in Russian and British forces entering Iran on August 25, 1941. Within a month Reza Shah had been forced into exile and abdicated in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah.¹³ Britain and the Soviet Union once again divided Iran into spheres of influence, but this time with the monarchy's explicit approval. In return for the shah's complicity, the two occupying forces formally agreed to protect the country from the negative consequences of the war. In addition, the agreement mandated the withdrawal of all foreign troops within six months of the war's end.¹⁴

⁹ Keddie 2003: 71. For more on the Constitutional Revolution, see Abrahamian (1979), Afary (1996), and Chehabi and Martin (2010).

¹⁰ It was under Reza Shah's rule that the country officially changed its name from Persia to Iran.

¹¹ Foran 1993a: 249.

¹² Keddie 2003: 105.

¹³ From here on simply "the shah."

¹⁴ Keddie 2003: 105.

American Aid and Trade in the Cold War Era

The British troops departed Iran on schedule in March 1946, but their Soviet counterparts lingered. Concerned that Iran would once more find itself subjugated by its giant neighbor, the shah took his case to the recently established United Nations where he received President Truman's full support. American diplomacy soon paid off as Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet Union's Security Council delegate, announced that all Russian troops would be withdrawn within five weeks, and so they were.¹⁵ Unbeknownst to most observers, "this act signaled the beginning of extremely close ties between Iran and the United States, which were to last until the expulsion of the Shah in January 1979."¹⁶

While possibly motivated by principles of justice and a concern over Iran's national sovereignty, Truman's advocacy was more likely fueled by American post-war considerations and the shah's invitation for "the United States to expand its role in Iran."¹⁷ Still, whereas their previous overlords—Russia and Great Britain—had descended on the country as colonizers in disguise, Iranians overwhelmingly welcomed the United States as a liberator and "disinterested protector of Iranian freedom and dignity."¹⁸ The shah hoped that US patronage would shield him from Russian and British advances, but he also calculated that American support would help him control his domestic rivals.¹⁹ The king's political opponents, meanwhile, expected Washington to promote not only Iranian independence, but also democracy.²⁰ Naturally, these diametrically opposed expectations could hardly both be realized.

Fortunately for the king, the altruistic motivations attributed to the US were by and large nonexistent. Although the US imposed on itself a neo-liberal white man's burden of sorts, that is, "to help Iranians in the process of 'modernizing' and 'nation-building,'" ²¹ American interests were, rather unsurprisingly, prioritized. In the 1930s the US had ranked only fourth among Iran's trade partners.²² Already in the early 1940s this situation began to improve as the US doubled its trade with Iran.²³ To promote its interests, and per Tehran's request, the US dispatched financial adviser A. C. Millspaugh to Iran in 1942 with the understanding "that the United States after the war was to play a large role in that region with respect to oil, commerce, and air transport."²⁴ Under Millspaugh's stewardship Americans were soon put in charge of all "key economic departments"²⁵ in Iran, which naturally strengthened Washington's grip on the country.

¹⁵ Stempel 1981: 4; Zonis 1991: 193.

¹⁶ Stempel 1981: 4.

¹⁷ Stempel 1981: 4.

¹⁸ Cottam 1988: 8.

¹⁹ Foran 1993a: 271.

²⁰ Moaddel 1993: 141–42.

²¹ Cottam 1988: 4.

²² Foran 1993a: 248.

²³ Foran 1993a: 271.

²⁴ Keddie 2003: 106.

²⁵ Keddie 2003: 107.

Notwithstanding the importance of close diplomatic and economic ties, Washington and Tehran's close bond was ultimately forged over events connected to the oil nationalization movement of 1951–53.²⁶ The movement, which drastically altered Iran's political trajectory, was led by Mohammad Mossadegh, a nationalist politician appointed prime minister in 1951, and emerged as a reaction to the British exploitation of Iranian oil. By virtue of an old agreement between Iran and Great Britain, the latter's Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) enjoyed a monopoly on Iranian oil production under highly favorable conditions. When London refused to renegotiate the lucrative terms of the agreement, Mossadegh responded with nationalization of the valuable commodity.²⁷ Britain countered by instigating a widely observed international boycott of Iran, an initiative that initially failed to receive American support as Washington sensed an opportunity to capitalize on London's misfortune.²⁸

But the White House soon realized that it was not in its interest to encourage *any* country to nationalize its resources since the US enjoyed privileges similar to those of Britain in other developing nations. Moreover, Mossadegh's popularity had made him a legitimate threat to America's ally on the throne.²⁹ Consequently, the Eisenhower administration alleged that Mossadegh "was ready to open the door to communist influence,"³⁰ thereby justifying American support of the shah and the British boycott. The stand-off between the prime minister and the king was settled in August 1953 when a CIA-devised coup, Operation Ajax, overthrew Mossadegh and allowed the shah to return from his involuntary "vacation" abroad. The decision to directly intervene in Iran's domestic affairs had far-reaching consequences for US–Iranian relations as "the 1951–53 period marked the point of no return, during which the United States eventually committed itself to bolster the shah on his throne and took over from Great Britain the role of hegemonic power in Iran."³¹

Following the coup the grateful shah restructured Iran's oil arrangements. The AIOC, now renamed British Petroleum (BP), saw its former monopoly reduced to a 40 percent share. An equal 40 percent stake befell five American oil companies (Standard Oil of New Jersey, Standard Oil of California, Texaco, Socony-Mobil, and Gulf Oil) in exchange for technical assistance, a significant improvement for the United States compared to the pre-coup situation.³² The new arrangement also marked the beginning of a cynical understanding between Washington and the shah, whereby royal actions benefiting

²⁶ Some scholars have referred to US–Iranian relations as a "special relationship" (Bill 1988a: 233; Foran 1993a: 170–71). Foran (1993a: 343–44) and Sick (1985: 22) have called the relationship "unique," while Afkhami (1985: 145) refers to it as "privileged."

²⁷ Siavoshi 1994.

²⁸ Foran 1993a: 228.

²⁹ Siavoshi 1994: 128–29.

³⁰ Parsa 1989: 44.

³¹ Foran 1993a: 292.

³² Keddie 2003: 165; Stempel 1981: 65.

the United States prompted instant rewards in the shape of economic assistance: Immediately following the new oil deal the Iranian government received \$127 million in aid to be added to the \$68.4 million it obtained within three weeks of the coup.³³ Between 1954 and 1960 the US government provided Iran with over \$1 billion in economic, technical, and military aid, with military assistance accounting for approximately half of that amount. Only Turkey received more among Third World countries.³⁴

But the shah had grander goals for his kingdom than being a US aid recipient. Recognizing that foreign assistance alone would not facilitate his goal of rapidly industrializing the country, the shah in 1958 arranged a summit with more than forty leading American businessmen. During their meeting the king “strongly urged them to make major investments in Iran, maintaining that the only industries that the Iranian state would continue to own were petroleum and steel.”³⁵ To boost his case, the shah offered investors compelling incentives, such as low-interest loans (which were not available to Iranians) and unlimited repatriation rights.³⁶ As a result, American multinationals made significant investments in a variety of Iranian sectors in the 1960s and 1970s, including agriculture, petrochemicals, pharmaceuticals, and banking.³⁷ Although Iranian factories were less productive than their Western counterparts,³⁸ the lower operating costs and generous conditions allowed foreign corporations to profit.³⁹ The Iranian government also benefited from the arrangement as foreign investment helped drive the country’s impressive growth. In fact, Iran’s economic development was so spectacular that the US Agency for International Development (USAID) closed its Tehran office in 1967 after the Johnson administration had declared Iran a developed country.⁴⁰ In a decade and a half, Iran had with American support moved from being a leading recipient of aid to be considered a nation with little need for economic assistance.

Geopolitics and Military Cooperation

Economic interests help explain Washington’s preferential treatment of Iran, but they cannot by themselves account for the close relationship that developed between the two countries. Although American companies benefited from their Iranian engagements and the US government had an interest in grooming Iran into a useful trade partner, US–Iranian relations can only be understood fully within a Cold War context. Financial considerations

³³ Foran 1993a: 344.

³⁴ Amjad 1989: 64; Bill 1988a: 114; Daneshvar 1996: 45–46; Foran 1993a: 344.

³⁵ Bill 1988a: 118–19.

³⁶ Amjad 1989: 88.

³⁷ Foran 1993a: 344.

³⁸ Graham 1980: 121.

³⁹ Amjad 1989: 95.

⁴⁰ Bill 1988a: 177–78.

mattered, but “beyond these purely economic ties lurked perhaps even greater political and strategic bonds. Richard Helms, one-time CIA director and ambassador to Iran, even went as far as referring to Iran as ‘in political terms, the center of the world.’”⁴¹

The Cold War meant that strategies for containing Soviet/Communist expansionism were a permanent fixture on Washington’s foreign policy agenda.⁴² To meet this challenge, US officials developed a perimeter defense strategy built around the idea of providing substantial military aid to friendly countries in the geographic regions considered most susceptible to Soviet and Chinese influence.⁴³ Because of its strategic location and a 1,200-mile border with the Soviet Union, Iran was considered “a prime target for Soviet subversion in peacetime and a likely Soviet military objective in the event of general war.”⁴⁴ In addition to these defensive concerns, Iran’s proximity to the USSR made it an ideal location for espionage and intelligence gathering. Consequently, the United States amended its economic relationship with Iran with a geostrategic dimension designed to prevent the spread of communism, both in Iran and in the region at large. Under this arrangement Tehran received large amounts of military and intelligence assistance, which reinforced the special bond between the Peacock Throne and the White House.⁴⁵

American military support for Iran reached new heights in the late 1960s. Its disastrous war in Vietnam left the United States with “fewer resources to commit worldwide and more need for support from its allies.”⁴⁶ Faced with this reality, President Richard Nixon streamlined the perimeter defense strategy and called for the United States military to become even more indirectly involved in the nation’s defense around the globe. From now on, Washington would commit troops abroad very selectively, and would instead “rely on other nations to defend Western interests by encouraging them to defend themselves.”⁴⁷ But in order to defend themselves effectively, US proxies needed access to the best arms and training available. The “Nixon Doctrine” therefore called upon the US government to sell these goods and services to its allies. Within this framework Iran quickly emerged as one of Washington’s most important allies for two reasons.⁴⁸ First, the shah’s 25-year track record of solid relations with the United States meant that his dependability was beyond doubt. In the words of Henry Kissinger, the shah was “the rarest of leaders, an unconditional ally.”⁴⁹ Second, and perhaps even more importantly, Iran, thanks to its ever-flowing oil, possessed the purchasing power necessary to afford America’s most sophisticated weapons.

⁴¹ Foran 1993a: 344.

⁴² Gasiorowski 1990: 55.

⁴³ Gasiorowski 1990: 146.

⁴⁴ Gasiorowski 1990: 147.

⁴⁵ Gasiorowski 1990: 147–48.

⁴⁶ Stempel 1981: 68.

⁴⁷ Stempel 1981: 72.

⁴⁸ Other important “friends” included Israel, Indonesia, and Brazil.

⁴⁹ Qtd. in Zonis 1991: 218.

Iran's oil output rose from 1.6 million barrels per day in 1965 to 3.5 million barrels in 1970.⁵⁰ Between 1954 and 1977 "Iran's oil revenues leaped almost *a thousand times* from \$22.5 million in 1954 to \$20 billion in 1977."⁵¹ Increased production accounts for some of this improvement, but it followed more directly from the OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) decision to drastically raise oil prices in 1973–74.⁵² When prices quadrupled, the shah suddenly found himself with virtually unlimited financial resources. Uninterested in spending his country's wealth on its people, the king looked for other avenues of investment and found them in the armed forces. The shah had long been obsessed with the creation of a large modern military, and his newfound wealth allowed him to furbish "one of the dozen best equipped armies in the world."⁵³ An agreement signed with the US government in May 1972 had already granted Iran access to any non-nuclear weapons it wanted,⁵⁴ and with the state's coffers full nothing prevented the king from acquiring the best military equipment money could buy.

The arrangement benefited both parties. It satisfied the shah's desire to sport one of the world's finest armed forces while keeping his military commanders content. The US, meanwhile, had found a new way to improve its worsening balance of payments position.⁵⁵ The need for increased exports was acute since the country's foreign trade balance in 1971 "showed a deficit for the first time since 1893."⁵⁶ While the Nixon Doctrine applied to other allies as well, few countries managed to so fully benefit from it as Iran, a fact that only served to further the already close relationship between Tehran and Washington. As Table 2.1 shows, the increase in US arms sales to Iran corresponds with the OPEC price hike in 1973 and Nixon's decision to arm the country to its teeth the year before. Between 1955 and 1978 Iran purchased almost \$21 billion worth of American arms, \$20 billion of which were bought in the 1970s, and \$18 billion after the OPEC price hike and the introduction of the Nixon Doctrine.

Soviet Acquiescence

While both Iran and the United States benefited from their close relationship, one might expect the Soviet Union to be less enthused by the presence of a US-backed military powerhouse on its southern border. However, the Kremlin rarely objected and had its reasons for being complacent. Beginning in the early 1960s, the USSR not only tolerated the shah, but supported and even

⁵⁰ Stempel 1981: 68.

⁵² Foran 1993a: 377.

⁵⁴ Foran 1993a: 345.

⁵⁶ Moaddel 1993: 56.

⁵¹ Foran 1993a: 312 (emphasis in original).

⁵³ Arjomand 1988: 120. See also Amjad (1989: 95–97).

⁵⁵ Amjad 1989: 96–97; Stempel 1981: 68.

Table 2.1. US military sales to Iran, 1969–78 (in thousands of dollars)

Year	Sales agreements	Sales deliveries
1969	235,821	94,881
1970	134,929	127,717
1971	363,844	75,566
1972	472,611	214,807
1973	2,171,355	248,391
1974	4,325,357	648,641
1975	2,447,140	1,006,131
1976	1,794,487	1,927,860
1977	5,713,769	2,433,050
1978	2,586,890	1,792,892
Total	20,246,242	8,569,936

Source: Adapted from Foreign Military Sales and Military Assistance Facts (December 1978), US Department of Defense, Security Assistance Agency.

preferred him to any other plausible Iranian option.⁵⁷ The Soviet Union did condemn the US-orchestrated 1953 coup, but by and large the event had only a marginal impact on its relationship with Iran.⁵⁸ In 1959, Tehran signed a mutual defense agreement with Washington, which made the establishment of American bases inside Iran a possibility.⁵⁹ Not surprisingly, the Soviets opposed this development and chastised both Washington and Tehran for entering into the agreement. However, in 1962, faced with the Cuban Missile Crisis, the shah announced that he would not allow the US to establish military bases in Iran, and that no country would be permitted to place missiles on its soil.⁶⁰

Concurrently with these promises, Iran and the Soviet Union entered into several high-profile trade agreements. In 1966 the Soviets agreed to build a steel mill in Isfahan and provide Iran with other industrial aid in exchange for \$600 million worth of natural gas, and in the years leading up to the revolution the Soviet Union emerged as Iran's largest export market for manufactured goods. Meanwhile, Iran became the Soviet Union's largest customer of non-military goods in the Middle East.⁶¹ The shah also spent \$344 million on Soviet arms between 1966 and 1970,⁶² while Moscow dispatched about 3,000 scientific and technical advisers to Iran. At the time that was the largest contingent of Soviet advisers in any Third World country.⁶³ Finally, the two

⁵⁷ Golan (1990: 185) and Behrooz (1999: 85) have both suggested that Moscow recognized that the odds of a socialist revolution in Iran were slim.

⁵⁸ Herrmann 1990: 69. ⁵⁹ Golan 1990: 178.

⁶⁰ Afkhami 1985: 149–50; Bill 1988a: 150. ⁶¹ Herrmann 1990: 70.

⁶² Ansari 2003: 177; Herrmann 1990: 70. ⁶³ Herrmann 1990: 70.

countries agreed to build a 700-mile pipeline to provide both the USSR and Western Europe with natural gas.⁶⁴

In addition to economic considerations, Moscow tolerated US hegemony in Iran for an even simpler reason: it did not perceive it to be a threat. While Washington allocated international aid based on the anti-communist credentials of candidate regimes, the Soviet Union approached the topic in a more sober fashion.⁶⁵ Since “the perception of Iran as a U.S. surrogate was an American, but not necessarily a Soviet, image,” Moscow did not register American influence in Iran as a matter of grave concern,⁶⁶ and the Kremlin was therefore willing to live with a large American presence on its southern border as long as the shah displayed a sufficient amount of independence. Prudently enough, ideological preferences gave way to geostrategic utility⁶⁷ and economic interest.⁶⁸ John Foran succinctly solves the US–Iranian–Soviet equation by suggesting that “a de facto bargain was struck: the U.S.S.R. accepted the shah’s rule and American hegemony in Iran, while receiving a number of economic agreements of its own and a stable monarchy on its borders.”⁶⁹ As a result of its less intrusive approach, the Soviet Union fared better with the new regime after the revolution than the US did, although both countries’ relationships with Tehran worsened.⁷⁰

A Special Relationship

The economic and strategic relationship between Iran and the United States reached its peak in the mid-1970s, leading Henry Kissinger, the US secretary of state, to proclaim in September 1976 that “on all major international issues, the policies of the United States and the policies of Iran have been parallel and therefore mutually reinforcing.”⁷¹ In 1973 the two nations established a joint economic commission to reinforce the commercial links between them, and in the following year American companies signed joint venture contracts with Iranian entities valued at \$11.9 billion. By 1975, US officials privately anticipated that non-military and non-oil trade over the next six years could amount to \$23–26 billion. At that time, thirty-nine major American arms, telecommunication, and electronics companies conducted operations in Iran, including American Bell, General Electric, Lockheed, Westinghouse,

⁶⁴ Golan 1990: 180.

⁶⁵ Atkin 1990: 100.

⁶⁶ Cottam 1988: 182.

⁶⁷ Golan 1990: 177–78; Herrmann 1990: 63–66.

⁶⁸ As Golan (1990: 180) explains, “by the time of the 1978 revolution Moscow was supporting some 147 projects in Iran, which had become one of the Soviet Union’s most important Third World partners.”

⁶⁹ Foran 1993a: 347.

⁷⁰ Grayson 1982; Halliday 1991: 5. For a broader discussion of Soviet–Iranian relations during the Cold War, see Keddie and Gasiorowski (1990) as well as Malik (1987).

⁷¹ Qtd. in Bill 1988a: 203.

Bell Helicopter International, Grumman Aerospace, McDonnell-Douglas, International Telephone and Telegraph, and Sylvania.⁷² As one scholar notes, “after the OPEC price rise, major United States business interests became more closely tied to, and even dependent on, the Shah’s regime than ever.”⁷³

Notwithstanding the importance of trade, the US–Iranian relationship was first and foremost a military-strategic one as far as Washington was concerned. Following the Vietnam War and the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine, this aspect of the relationship became increasingly important since most alternative regional “policy bridges had been burned years before.”⁷⁴

Richard Nixon’s decision to rely exclusively on the shah for the protection of U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf had been so thoroughly institutionalized in U.S. policy and practice that the United States now lay strategically naked beneath the thin blanket of Iranian security.⁷⁵

With US regional fortunes largely dependent on Iran’s eagerness to protect American interests, the shah had effectively transformed himself from client to ally. In addition, “the vast oil wealth pouring into his treasury liberated him from the usual array of persuasive leverage that a superpower might exercise in its relation with a ‘client’ state.”⁷⁶ Thanks in part to his oil wealth, the relationship he had taken such care to build was now paying off as the US relationship with Iran was for all practical purposes a relationship with the shah personally, one the US desperately needed to maintain. That Washington recognized this transformation from Iranian dependence to US–Iranian interdependence is suggested by a 1976 US Foreign Service report.

After four months of interviews and policy examinations in Washington and in Iran, the report concluded that “The government of Iran exerts the determining influence” in the relationship with United States. Iran, the inspectors noted, contributed far more in financial terms than did the United States, and “He who pays the piper calls the tune.”⁷⁷

Although the shah did indeed wield considerable power in his relationship with Washington, the king never forgot that he owed his throne to American intervention in 1953, and neither did the Iranian people. This meant that although the king was not economically or militarily dependent on the United States, American support constituted his most intimidating source of authority.⁷⁸ That Iranians largely considered the shah an American puppet generated little meaningful opposition as long as they also assumed that Washington’s backing made their king invincible.⁷⁹ American support was thus a double-edged sword insofar as its benefits must be weighed against

⁷² Bill 1988a: 204–09. ⁷³ Keddie 2003: 160. ⁷⁴ Sick 1985: 22.

⁷⁵ Sick 1985: 18. ⁷⁶ Sick 1985: 36. ⁷⁷ Sick 1985: 20.

⁷⁸ Moshiri 1985: 1; Ramazani 1982. ⁷⁹ Kurzman 2004: 142; Zonis 1991: 202.

domestic costs. The king's decision to side with the United States economically and geopolitically, and the domestic policies that followed from that relationship—such as the secularization and rapid industrialization of the country—earned him numerous enemies at home, ranging from Marxist guerrilla groups and Muslim clerics to nationalist politicians and *bazaar* merchants.⁸⁰ The shah reasoned that those alienated were a small price to pay for the benefits associated with US patronage. After all, who needs local merchant support when the world's greatest economic power is in your corner?⁸¹

As a result of unconditional American backing from the Johnson, Nixon, and Ford administrations, the king could to a considerable extent afford to ignore domestic pressures for reform. This seemingly ideal situation for a Third World dictator can, however, have catastrophic consequences.

Because highly autonomous states lack societal constraint, the policies of client states increasingly diverge from the interests and needs of society. Serious unrest and instability may eventually result and even lead to revolution. *A relationship initially designed to promote political stability in the client country may therefore promote instability in the long run.*⁸²

As the following chapters will show, this is what happened in Iran in the late 1970s.

Tunisia: Europe's Star Pupil

Tunisia has for centuries been considered one of the West's most natural allies in the Arab world.⁸³ As early as 1797, the first American consul in Tunisia and the country's authorities negotiated an agreement designed to facilitate commerce between the two countries.⁸⁴ Although Tunisia was ostensibly a part of the Ottoman Empire, the Husainid dynasty (1705–1957) ruled the country in a monarchical fashion.⁸⁵ At the dawn of the nineteenth century the royal court still maintained its nominal independence from Constantinople, but recognized that sovereignty could only be sustained through the centralization and strengthening of both the army and the state bureaucracy.⁸⁶ To afford these costly endeavors, Tunisia's rulers resorted to European loans.⁸⁷ However, the palace's capacity to secure loans far exceeded its ability to repay them, and by 1869 "Tunisia was effectively in European financial receivership."⁸⁸ Despite reforms between 1873 and 1877—a

⁸⁰ Zonis 1991: 202. ⁸¹ Parsa 1989: 189.

⁸² Gasiorowski 1991: xiii (emphasis added). Similarly, Katouzian (2003: 29) has used the shah's autonomy from society to explain the outbreak of the revolution.

⁸³ Halliday 1990: 27. ⁸⁴ Tartter 1986: 262. ⁸⁵ Charrad 2001: 89.

⁸⁶ For details about these efforts, see Noyon (2003: 95). ⁸⁷ Charrad 2001: 95–96.

⁸⁸ Waltz 1995: 53.

last-ditch effort to stave off a European takeover—Tunisia “surrendered” in 1881, signed the Treaty of Bardo, and became a French protectorate.⁸⁹ French domination would last for 75 years until Habib Bourguiba led the country to independence in 1956⁹⁰ after an independence campaign that fluctuated between nonviolent protests and guerrilla warfare.⁹¹

Despite its colonial past, Tunisia remained to a greater extent than other former colonies in the region on friendly terms with the West, largely by maintaining its trade relations with France and the European Community (EC).⁹² This does not mean that relations with the former French overlords were unproblematic. For instance, Tunis angered Paris in 1957 by aiding Algeria’s war of independence against France,⁹³ and in 1961 the two countries clashed over the issue of French rights to Tunisia’s Bizerte naval base.⁹⁴ The most acute test of the two nations’ early relationship occurred in May 1964 when the Tunisian government passed a law that allowed for the nationalization of all foreign-owned land.⁹⁵ This move naturally affected the former colonial power more than other nations, but “historical, geographical, and linguistic circumstances” permitted the dispute to soon be resolved.⁹⁶

Franco-Tunisian reconciliation stemmed not only from historical and cultural bonds between the two countries, with both nations having more to lose than gain from a frosty relationship. As the “leader of a small country with a small army”⁹⁷ in a volatile region, Bourguiba recognized that Tunisia was vulnerable. Nasser’s pan-Arab nationalism threatened to inspire Bourguiba’s opponents, while Algeria’s violent war of independence against France carried the risk of spilling over into Tunisia. Paris shared the latter concern and therefore helped train and arm the Tunisian military. Consequently, “deft diplomacy and strong relations with France and the US [became] central to Tunisia’s foreign policy.”⁹⁸

Western Aid and Trade in the Post-Independence Era

American support was particularly important in the early, anti-French years of independence. When France reduced aid to Tunisia in 1957 in response to Bourguiba’s support for the Algerian independence struggle, Washington gladly replaced Paris as Tunisia’s foremost aid provider. Having been the first

⁸⁹ Charrad 2001: 97; Waltz 1995: 53.

⁹⁰ It is worth noting that Tunisia, unlike many of the Arab nationalist movements in the World War II period, opted to side with the Allies. Part of the reasoning was that the emerging world power, the United States, could then later be “used” to pressure France to grant Tunisia independence (Alexander 2010: 97).

⁹¹ Alexander 2010: 28–31.

⁹² White 2001: 106.

⁹³ Tartter 1986: 260.

⁹⁴ Perkins 1986: 163–64.

⁹⁵ Alexander 2010: 97; Rudebeck 1969: 61; World Bank 1996: 15.

⁹⁶ Perkins 1986: 165.

⁹⁷ Owen 2012: 73.

⁹⁸ Alexander 2010: 8.

foreign government to recognize the country's independence, the US found itself in a favorable position from which to act. Between 1956 and 1961, American aid amounted to \$239.2 million, and from 1960–69 the US provided Tunisia with \$316 million in food assistance alone. Although no formal strings were attached, the United States encouraged Tunisia “to pursue a liberal economic development strategy.”⁹⁹

As in the case of Iran, American support for the Tunisian government is best understood in terms of Cold War considerations. While officially non-aligned, Tunisia undoubtedly sided with the West. For instance, the country was the only one in the Maghreb that never accepted Soviet military aid.¹⁰⁰ Cognizant of its vulnerability, however, Tunisia kept its diplomatic channels open to the Communist bloc, but limited its dealings with Moscow and other Eastern European capitals to technical, cultural, and commercial matters. Soviet naval and merchant ships were welcome to make use of Tunisian ports and from time to time employed its ship repair facilities, but Tunisia's Cold War credentials could hardly be questioned.¹⁰¹ An exception to this rule occurred in the aftermath of the Bizerte naval base crisis when some Western leaders interpreted Tunisia's disagreement with France as indicative of an ideological realignment. Such fears were, however, soon put to rest.¹⁰²

Following a “cooling off period” in the mid-1960s, French and Tunisian officials were once again ready to cooperate by the end of the decade. For both parties economic interests played a central role in the reconciliation process.¹⁰³ The 1960s had not been kind to the Tunisian economy. Bourguiba, advised by his new Minister of Finance and National Economy, Ahmed Ben Salah, had embarked on a socialism-inspired strategy of development.¹⁰⁴ When the collectivization program failed to provide the intended boost, Ben Salah was unceremoniously dismissed in 1969 as Tunisia launched upon a “spectacular reorientation,”¹⁰⁵ replacing protectionism with *infitah* (“economic opening”).¹⁰⁶ Virtually overnight Tunisia opened itself fully to Western business and made economic relations with Europe a top priority. Here, Tunisian and French interests converged. France was not the only Western country to benefit from the *infitah*, but in the 1970s the former colonizer quickly established itself as Tunisia's “primary supplier and its second customer.”¹⁰⁷ Tunisia, meanwhile, obtained not only a trade partner, but also a

⁹⁹ Alexander 2010: 70. ¹⁰⁰ Tartter 1986: 265.

¹⁰¹ Borowiec 1998: 85; Ehrenreich 1986: 307–08; Tartter 1986: 264–65.

¹⁰² Perkins 1986: 164–65. ¹⁰³ Perkins 1986: 165–66.

¹⁰⁴ Alexander 2010: 71–72; Bellin 1991: 49; Cammett 2007: 68–70; Ruf 1984.

¹⁰⁵ White 2001: 2.

¹⁰⁶ King 1998: 112–13. For an extended discussion of Tunisia's *infitah*, see White (2001: 91–104).

¹⁰⁷ Alexander 2010: 92.

generous donor as “per person, French aid to Tunisia climbed to the highest level of assistance from one country to another in the world.”¹⁰⁸

France clearly profited from Tunisia’s new economic approach, but so did the other EC countries when Tunisia in 1969, with French help, attained associate membership in the organization.¹⁰⁹ Already in the 1960s, trade with the EC countries accounted for roughly half of Tunisia’s imports and exports, but the country’s new status simplified trade with Europe considerably.¹¹⁰ For its European partners, trade agreements with countries like Tunisia improved the burgeoning union’s “political and economic standing in the international political economy.”¹¹¹ Due mainly to its shrewd foreign policy, Bourguiba’s Tunisia was at the beginning of the 1970s already well immersed in the Western sphere of influence and ready to benefit financially from it.

Geostrategic Factors

Economic factors were important to Tunisia’s Western partners, but in the political environment of the Cold War strategic considerations loomed even larger. Eager to support a stable government in an unstable part of the world, France lifted its ban on military sales to Tunisia in the early 1970s. Later, as the relationship between the two countries matured, Paris permitted Tunisia to purchase any weapons it wanted, much in the same manner that the United States had made its entire non-nuclear arsenal available to the shah. In addition, France, together with the United States, contributed extensively to the training of Tunisian troops and officers.¹¹² Future president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was just one of many Tunisian military men educated at France’s Saint-Cyr military academy and the artillery school at Châlons-sur-Marne, or at the Senior Intelligence School at Fort Holabird in Maryland and Texas’ Fort Bliss.¹¹³

French and American military support remained modest until a 1980 incident served to radically alter this state of affairs. On January 26, Tunisian guerrilla fighters—trained by the Libyan army—struck in Gafsa, the capital of Tunisia’s phosphate mining region. Operating as the Tunisian Liberation Army, the fighters proclaimed that their raid was simply the first step in freeing Tunisia from neo-colonial rule.¹¹⁴ France, and the US in particular, reacted immediately. Washington had just a year earlier “lost” Iran to an Islamic revolution and was unwilling to see another friendly regime

¹⁰⁸ Alexander 2010: 92.

¹⁰⁹ Perkins 1986: 165.

¹¹⁰ Jones 2004: 67.

¹¹¹ Jones 2004: 66.

¹¹² Alexander 2010: 92. The US government trained Tunisian troops through the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, which was provided to the Tunisian government free of charge (Ehrenreich 1986: 303–07).

¹¹³ Powel and Sadiki 2010: 60; Ware 1988: 593.

¹¹⁴ Alexander 2010: 47.

give way to anti-Western forces. French and American warships made themselves visible off Tunisia's coast in support of the government and to discourage any plans Muammar Gaddafi might have harbored.¹¹⁵ In this context it was not difficult for Bourguiba to convince the American leadership that Tunisia's army needed to be upgraded, and Washington complied. Prior to the Gafsa incident US military aid to Tunisia had averaged a modest \$8 million per year.¹¹⁶ In its wake, this figure rose sharply. Between 1982 and 1984, the US government annually made \$90 million in military loans available to Tunis.¹¹⁷ Libyan aggression had clearly strengthened Tunisia's international standing and importance, as evidenced by then-Prime Minister Jacques Chirac's 1986 declaration that "France and Tunisia are two countries whose ties are such that whatever affects one affects the other immediately," and "if Tunisia was the victim of any kind of aggression, and if it wanted France's help, France would provide it instantly and without reservation."¹¹⁸

By the mid-1980s Tunisia's relationship with France was thus on firm footing, and its ties to the United States were almost as strong. When Bourguiba visited Ronald Reagan in 1985, the American president, keen to reinforce his government's tough stance against Gaddafi,¹¹⁹ expressed wholehearted support for Tunisia. The United States, Reagan proclaimed, "remains firmly committed to the sanctity of Tunisia's territorial integrity and to the principle of noninterference in its internal affairs."¹²⁰ But despite rhetorical backing and the fact that the Reagan administration approved large military sales to Tunisia,¹²¹ relations with the superpower were at times strained. Tunisia's headaches stemmed mainly from the challenge of balancing Western foreign relations against domestic Arab politics. In 1982, following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and due to extensive American prodding, Bourguiba reluctantly agreed to let Tunis host the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).¹²² The president's reservations were vindicated when Israeli forces raided the headquarters in 1985 in retaliation for a terrorist attack on Israeli tourists in Cyprus. The United States' apparent approval of Israel's actions forced Bourguiba to express his "profound regret and great astonishment" over Washington's reaction.¹²³ In the period following the raid, anti-American sentiments flourished in Tunisia, but officials from both countries moved quickly to prevent any lasting damage to the relationship.¹²⁴

¹¹⁵ Perkins 1986: 167.

¹¹⁶ Tartter 1986: 264.

¹¹⁷ Ehrenreich 1986: 304.

¹¹⁸ Chneguir (2004: 191) as quoted and translated by Alexander (2010: 92).

¹¹⁹ Mary Jane Deeb 2007: 440. See also Chapter 6.

¹²⁰ Quoted in Tartter 1986: 24.

¹²¹ Ehrenreich 1986: 304–07.

¹²² Perkins 2004: 171.

¹²³ Tartter 1986: 263.

¹²⁴ Tartter 1986: 262–63.

Ben Ali and the West

On November 6, 1987, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali removed Bourguiba from power in a “constitutional coup.”¹²⁵ The aging president’s harsh treatment of the Islamist opposition had put the country on the verge of civil war, and Ben Ali, at the time prime minister, acted swiftly.¹²⁶ As president, Ben Ali maintained the close relations Bourguiba had fostered with both Europe and the United States, but, like his predecessor, Ben Ali soon became aware of the delicate balance between international relations and domestic politics. When the United States and its allies prepared for war against Iraq in the fall of 1990, Tunisia was put in an uncomfortable position. By virtue of being a Western ally, Ben Ali was expected to support the war effort. Meanwhile, the Tunisian people, while not fond of Saddam Hussein, was highly critical of both the United States and Saudi Arabia, and therefore sympathized with Iraq.¹²⁷ Caught between a rock and a hard place, Ben Ali sided with his people, which caused most foreigners to exit Tunisia before the war even began.

For a development policy based upon encouraging European (and Middle Eastern) trade and investment, the exodus of the foreign community placed a sharp strain on diplomacy and commerce. Nonetheless, the strategy of the government appeared to work; the largest demonstrations gathered fewer than 10,000 people, and foreign nationals slowly returned.¹²⁸

The United States punished Tunisia by cutting economic aid from approximately \$30 million in 1990 to \$8 million in 1991 and finally to \$1 million in 1992. In 1993, however, the flow of aid resumed at its earlier levels.¹²⁹

ECONOMIC RELATIONS

By the mid-1990s Tunisia’s relationships with France and the US were once again sound. Unrest in neighboring Algeria following the country’s aborted 1991 elections made stability a catchphrase in Western capitals.¹³⁰ The European Union’s (EU) heightened emphasis on security in the MENA region helped pave the way for Ben Ali’s 1995 “masterstroke”¹³¹—the signing of a free trade Association Agreement with the EU under its Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Initiative (EMP), also known as the Barcelona Process.

As noted, Tunisia had enjoyed cordial relations with the European Community for decades, and various accords had been signed in 1959, 1965, and 1967.¹³² In 1969 Tunisia signed a five-year Association Agreement with the EC that eliminated certain trade obstacles, and in 1976 the two parties signed an Association Agreement that granted Tunisia “duty-free access to

¹²⁵ See Chapter 3. ¹²⁶ Ware 1988. ¹²⁷ White et al. 2002: 472.

¹²⁸ White et al. 2002: 472. ¹²⁹ Perkins 2004: 192. ¹³⁰ Wood 2002: 94.

¹³¹ Cavatorta 2001: 184. ¹³² Powel and Sadiki 2010: 29.

most European markets and... a share of European development funds."¹³³ The agreement also enabled Bourguiba's regime to set out on an international borrowing spree in the late 1970s.¹³⁴ While various restrictions limited the agreement's positive economic impact on Tunisia, it came with two five-year European aid packages worth \$117 million and \$111 million respectively. This already substantial assistance was supplemented by additional aid from individual EC members.¹³⁵

Despite its successful history of European relations, the 1995 Association Agreement marked "a new phase of development,"¹³⁶ a "turning point in Tunisia's recent history,"¹³⁷ and the culmination of Ben Ali's efforts to have Tunisia take full advantage of the global market. The country had acceded to GATT (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) in 1990 and secured its WTO (World Trade Organization) membership five years later.¹³⁸ Still, the EU Association Agreement, which Tunisia on July 17, 1995, became the first country in the region to sign, held even greater promise. From now on, Tunisia would enjoy restriction-free access to the bloc that already took 75 percent of its exports and provided a similar share of its imports.¹³⁹ But beyond the immediate trade benefits,

Joining a free trade zone with Europe would create significant new opportunities for Tunisia. It would facilitate European tourism, a vital source of foreign exchange earnings. More importantly, it would give Tunisian products access to a market of some 500 million consumers. This would open a vast new frontier for existing firms, but it also would attract new foreign investment. Tunisia already offered tax incentives and subsidies to export-oriented businesses. But EU protectionism made it difficult for Tunisian-made products to enter European economies. Without that access, Tunisia's own market was too small to make it an attractive location for new job-creating and export-earning businesses. The free trade zone would change all of that. It would make Tunisia an attractive jumping off place for companies interested in gaining access to European markets. By coming to Tunisia, companies would benefit from tax incentives; close proximity to European, African, and Middle Eastern markets; lower wages than in Europe; well-developed infrastructure for transportation, electricity, water, and gas; and an educated workforce. This would be a powerful combination of assets for a country seeking to attract high-tech manufacturing and service sector investments.¹⁴⁰

Although partner countries outside of the EU had much to gain from closer ties with the European Union, it would be a mistake to interpret the EMP

¹³³ Murphy 1999: 59.

¹³⁴ Murphy 1999: 59.

¹³⁵ Tartter 1986: 261–62. For further details about the 1969 and 1976 agreements, see White (2001: 56–59, 62–66).

¹³⁶ Hassan 2005: 2.

¹³⁷ Erdle 2010: 117.

¹³⁸ Bchir et al. 2009: 123.

¹³⁹ World Bank 1996: xvii.

¹⁴⁰ Alexander 2010: 82.

as European charity. Concerned with political and economic developments on its southern border, the EU sought to bolster security and stability in the MENA by improving the region's economic outlook. Furthermore, although the Association Agreements provided MENA countries with greater access to European markets through the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area (EMFTA), they also bound the signatories to progressively lower tariffs on European goods, which benefited European exporters.¹⁴¹ The EMP was a potential goldmine for export-oriented companies in the region, but it also promised to significantly increase competition, which meant that not all manufacturers would survive the transition to the global economy. In order to soften the blow for those firms most concerned about their chances on the international market, the EU pledged large sums to the upgrading of the manufacturing sector. In Tunisia this program became known as the *mise à niveau*,¹⁴² but as with virtually all Western aid to Tunisia, the latter's pervasive corruption culture assured that the funds reached only a few select pockets and wallets.

The economic effects of the Association Agreement and the EMFTA tell a straightforward tale. In 1973 Tunisia was home to thirty-one businesses either owned solely by foreigners or co-owned with Tunisian partners. By 2008, almost 3,000 foreign or joint capital firms were registered in the country. In the first five years of the free-trade agreement "the number of joint ventures doubled and more than 500 new companies decided to invest in Tunisia. The 2009 World Economic Forum's Africa Competitiveness Report declared Tunisia the most competitive of the 31 countries in the study."¹⁴³ Foreign direct investment (FDI) also increased sharply. In 1990, FDI in Tunisia amounted to \$70 million. By 2008, that figure had risen to \$2.36 billion.¹⁴⁴ In addition to foreign investment, Tunisia also benefited from extensive EU aid connected to the EMP. Under the first Mediterranean Development Aid Program (MEDA I), Tunisia received €428 million in the 1996–99 period alone.¹⁴⁵

SECURITY RELATIONS

The mutually beneficial economic arrangements between the Tunisian government and its Western counterparts constituted one important dimension of the two parties' relationship. The other crucial dimension revolved around security issues and terrorism. Long before the events of September 11, 2001, Ben Ali had been one of the earliest proponents of waging war against

¹⁴¹ Alexander 2010: 94–95; Erdle 2010: 117; Powel and Sadiki 2010: 29.

¹⁴² For details about the *mise à niveau* program, see Murphy (2006).

¹⁴³ Alexander 2010: 85.

¹⁴⁴ International Monetary Fund 2008.

¹⁴⁵ Bchir et al. 2009: 126–28.

Islamic terrorism. As the head of a country with a long history of fighting Islamists, Ben Ali sought to bring the West's attention to the problem in the early 1990s. Using rhetoric reminiscent of George W. Bush's condemnation of countries harboring terrorists, Ben Ali rebuked both France and the United States for not rooting out Tunisian Islamists living in exile. "In the name of freedom and democracy," he lamented, "you are giving asylum to the enemies of freedom and democracy."¹⁴⁶ France finally heeded Ben Ali's repeated calls in late 1993 as French police began to conduct raids against alleged terrorist groups.¹⁴⁷

American interest in North Africa increased after 9/11.¹⁴⁸ Following the end of the Cold War the US had shifted its emphasis away from geostrategy to the pursuit of economic interests, with a particular focus on the region's energy resources.¹⁴⁹ Now, security concerns again assumed top priority, which resulted in "a boost for relations with Tunisia."¹⁵⁰ The two countries signed bilateral trade and investment agreements in 2002, and in the following year President Bush and Ben Ali met face to face.¹⁵¹ By then, the United States had re-evaluated its approach to the War on Terror and reasoned that success required close collaboration with governments in the region.¹⁵² Tunisia's long history of military partnership with the West made it a natural partner, and no country's armed forces participated in more joint exercises with the United States than Tunisia's.¹⁵³

France reached conclusions similar to those of the United States. In the year preceding 9/11, Paris had become increasingly critical of Ben Ali's human rights performance, but following the World Trade Center attacks France's priorities changed. Three weeks after the event, French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine visited Ben Ali in Tunis, and the two leaders announced that France and Tunisia would together "combat terrorism in all its forms and intensify their consultations to achieve this end."¹⁵⁴ Shortly thereafter Interior Minister Daniel Vaillant traveled to Tunisia to discuss "bilateral efforts against terrorism and other forms of cooperation."¹⁵⁵ On October 31, 2001 Ben Ali met with Italian president Carlo Azeglio Ciampi and took the opportunity to again tout his anti-terrorism credentials. The Tunisian leader "rejected all forms of terrorism and reminded the audience that throughout the past ten years he had not only warned of the danger of terrorism but had also proposed that the international community work together to combat it."¹⁵⁶ Ciampi responded by praising Tunisia as a nation "equally advanced in

¹⁴⁶ Murphy 1999: 199.

¹⁴⁹ Erdle 2010: 398.

¹⁵² Wood 2002: 106.

¹⁵⁴ Qtd. in Wood 2002: 106.

¹⁵⁶ Wood 2002: 106–07.

¹⁴⁷ Murphy 1999: 199–200.

¹⁵⁰ Erdle 2010: 398.

¹⁵³ Zoubir and Zunes 1999: 238.

¹⁵⁵ Qtd. in Wood 2002: 106.

¹⁴⁸ Wood 2002: 106.

¹⁵¹ Erdle 2010: 398.

social pluralism, freedom of individual choices, the condition of women, and the respect for diversity.”¹⁵⁷

The re-polarization of the world that occurred after 9/11, including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, cemented Tunisia’s standing as a Western ally. By the time of the 2011 revolution, Tunis found itself closely linked to France, the European Union, and the United States. The country’s connection to the United States was perhaps the weakest of the three, but the long-standing US–Tunisian relationship still remained sound. While overall US aid fell throughout the 2000s, security-related aid increased. Between 2002 and 2005 Tunisia received \$74.8 million—more than fellow “War on Terror” allies Morocco and Algeria combined.¹⁵⁸ Nonetheless, France and the EU now constituted Tunisia’s most important donors and economic partners. In 2008, trade flows between Tunisia and France totaled €7 billion. At the time, the presence of 1,200 French companies in Tunisia generated 108,000 Tunisian jobs. France also provided annual development aid of €120 million and 1.2 million French tourists, whose holiday indulgences contributed massively to the Tunisian economy. In addition, Tunisia found itself on the receiving end of remittances from millions of French citizens of Tunisian origin.¹⁵⁹

By the turn of the millennium the EU was arguably of even greater importance to Tunisia than France. Between 1977 and 1996, the EU (and the EC before that) provided the country with a total of €742 million in aid. €418 million came from the European Investment Bank while the European Commission provided the other €324 million.¹⁶⁰ Following the signing of the Association Agreement in 1995, two successive MEDA protocols resulted in large European aid packages. The €428 million from the MEDA I program have already been mentioned, and the 2000–06 MEDA II amounted to another €249 million.¹⁶¹ In addition to these already substantial sums, the EU and several of its member countries provided additional aid worth hundreds of millions of euros.¹⁶² All together, “between 1995 and 2008, Tunisia received almost €4 billion from the EU: €1.2 billions [*sic*] in the form of European Community (EC) grants, and €2.8 billions [*sic*] in the form of European Investment Bank (EIB) credits.”¹⁶³ Crucially, almost all of this money was channeled through the state apparatus, including aid earmarked for non-state actors. Between foreign aid and trade, Ben Ali’s government managed to keep its domestic allies happy, which in turn strengthened its hold on power.

¹⁵⁷ Qtd. in Wood 2002: 107.

¹⁵⁸ Powel 2009b: 69.

¹⁵⁹ Erdle 2010: 389.

¹⁶⁰ Powel and Sadiki 2010: 69.

¹⁶¹ Hassan 2005: 34.

¹⁶² Powel and Sadiki 2010: 69; Jones 2004: 70–72.

¹⁶³ Erdle 2010: 388.

Egypt: Guarantor of Regional Peace

Egypt's history, like Iran's and Tunisia's, is one of extensive strategic relationships with foreign powers. While the collaborators have varied over the years, the strategy has remained constant as "foreign alliances have shifted from Britain to the United States, from the United States to the Soviet Union, and from the Soviet Union to the United States."¹⁶⁴ Egypt's pre-independence relationship with the West resembles that of Tunisia. A dynastic monarchy headed by successive Khedives (Ottoman viceroys), ruled Egypt until the establishment of a republican order in 1953. As in Tunisia, Western pressure began to mount by the middle of the nineteenth century when Egypt's rulers, eager to take advantage of trade with Europe, borrowed large sums from European creditors in order to keep up with their competitors. Because British "banks and merchant houses were among the leading financiers of Egyptian-European trade," Britain's influence in Egypt increased dramatically in the 1860s and 1870s, and the country became heavily involved in the construction of the Suez Canal. The opening of the canal in 1869 further increased European interest in Egypt. Britain was particularly keen to secure more efficient access to its African and Asian empire, including its Indian crown jewel.¹⁶⁵ European concerns about the Egyptian government's fiscal management skills eventually furnished the pretense for France and Britain to take control of the country's economy in 1879 by removing the ruling Khedive Ismail from power and replacing him with his son, Tawfiq. While this move served to calm European investors, it angered much of the Egyptian public, which viewed Tawfiq as a foreign puppet.¹⁶⁶

Tawfiq's subservience fueled Egypt's nascent nationalist movement. A group of army officers led by Colonel Ahmed Arabi revolted against the Khedive, demanding "constitutional reform, liberalization of Egyptian political participation, and an end to foreign interference in the affairs of Egypt."¹⁶⁷ The rebellious officers forced Tawfiq to dismiss his entire cabinet and move its replacement, which had been approved by the nationalists, to Alexandria.¹⁶⁸ This development struck fear in many foreigners, including the British consul who alerted London to the fact that "British lives and interests were at risk"¹⁶⁹ if Tawfiq was overthrown. A more representative government, the argument went, might be less prone to honor Egypt's financial obligations to European creditors and to protect British interests. Consequently, British troops descended on Egypt in July 1882. By the end of September they had

¹⁶⁴ Arafat 2009: 1. ¹⁶⁵ Osman 2010: 24.

¹⁶⁶ Marius Deeb 2007: 405; Osman 2010: 24. ¹⁶⁷ Marius Deeb 2007: 406.

¹⁶⁸ Osman 2010: 24. ¹⁶⁹ Rutherford 2008: 33.

crushed Arabi's forces, cemented Tawfiq's rule, and established the British occupation of Egypt.¹⁷⁰

The occupation formally ended in 1914 when a protectorate arrangement replaced it, which did little to stymie nationalist indignation. Popular uprisings became commonplace and culminated in the revolution of 1919. London heard the message of the revolution, and in 1922 officially recognized Egypt's independence, but continued to rule by proxy until the end of World War II.¹⁷¹ The interwar period was arguably Egypt's most democratic era prior to the 2011 revolution. A constitutional, "semi-liberal" order emerged that allowed political parties to vie for limited power within the monarchical system.¹⁷² The brief quasi-democratic experiment came to an abrupt end on July 23, 1952 when a military coup d'état dismissed King Farouk and installed his infant son as Egypt's new monarch. The coup, in many ways the continuation of the nationalist movement, was orchestrated by less than a hundred army officers, most of whom sported junior ranks. Their leader, Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, soon established himself as Egypt's de facto leader. Within twelve months, the Free Officers had abolished both the monarchy and the country's parliamentary system, while in the process disbanding most political parties and voluntary organizations.¹⁷³ Consequently, "the country's liberal political experiment from the 1920s to 1940s (which had been led by Europe-inspired and oriented landowners and capitalists, as well as writers, teachers and lawyers) was terminated, to be replaced by a strongly socialist and populist doctrine (led by a military bureaucratic elite)."¹⁷⁴

Egypt's International Relations Under Nasser

The United States sought to exploit Egypt's political turmoil by attaching itself to the ruling officers and thereby replace British influence with its own. With that end in mind, Washington provided Nasser's regime with both technical and economic assistance while aiding Egypt in its negotiation with London over British troop withdrawal. Yet, disagreement concerning military aid strained the relationship between the two countries. At the time, Egyptian Islamists were conducting raids into Gaza, and Israel responded with counterattacks. Nasser concluded that in order to stabilize the situation his military needed to be upgraded.¹⁷⁵ But Washington was unenthusiastic about the prospect of arming the enemy of a close ally without some guarantees, and therefore proposed that any military aid would be conditional upon the resolution

¹⁷⁰ Marius Deeb 2007: 406; Osman 2010: 24; Rutherford 2008: 33.

¹⁷¹ Osman 2010: 25. ¹⁷² Shehata 2010: 21.

¹⁷³ Monshipouri 2009: 74; Osman 2010: 40; Rutherford 2008: 79–80; Shehata 2010: 21–22.

¹⁷⁴ Osman 2010: 45. ¹⁷⁵ Cantori and Baynard 2002: 363.

of Egypt's conflict with Israel, an ultimatum Nasser and his commanders were unwilling to accept.¹⁷⁶ Any lingering hopes of close US–Egyptian relations vanished when the Americans refused to fund the construction of the Aswan High Dam, a severe blow to the new regime's domestic prestige.¹⁷⁷

With one superpower's bid for influence ended, the stage was cleared for the other. As a result, and despite Nasser's harsh treatment of Egypt's communist movement,¹⁷⁸ Moscow swooped in. In contrast to its nemesis, the USSR was happy to fund the dam project and to furnish the Egyptian military.¹⁷⁹ Soviet arms were on full display during the Egyptian war efforts in 1956, 1967, 1969–70, and 1973,¹⁸⁰ but performed poorly in comparison to Israel's US-made equipment. In particular, Soviet weapons were blamed for the Egyptian army's disastrous showing in the 1967 Six-Day War. To make matters worse, the 1967 conflict showed Nasser that the Soviets were unwilling to risk an open confrontation with the United States over the Middle East.¹⁸¹

The Soviet–Egyptian alliance was always one of convenience. Nasser and Egypt's military rulers never warmed to the Soviets,¹⁸² while Moscow “had no particular reason to encourage a man who had consolidated power through distancing and imprisoning the Soviet Union's most important ‘friends’ within the Egyptian state apparatus.”¹⁸³ Under these already strained conditions, the decisive rift between the two governments occurred in the aftermath of Nasser's death in 1970 when Moscow sought to influence the selection of his successor. Once Anwar Sadat, who was not the Kremlin's preferred candidate for the job, had assumed power, the relationship deteriorated further. Despite sincere efforts on both sides it was beyond repair and eventually severed altogether in 1976.¹⁸⁴ Not until the mid-1980s did Mubarak, with US approval, successfully normalize relations with Moscow.¹⁸⁵

Egypt's socialist experiment under Nasser had less to do with ideological commitments than geopolitical realities. “The shift by the Nasserist regime towards ‘socialism’ was caused by international factors and foreign policy considerations, namely the conflict with Britain, the difficulties with the United States, and the need for the Soviet Union's political support and financial assistance.”¹⁸⁶ This made it relatively easy for Sadat, as it had been for Bourguiba a few years earlier, to distance himself from the country's socialist rhetoric. In a matter of a few years Egypt's new president reversed the country's trajectory and set in on a path toward capitalism under American guidance. A summit between Nixon and Brezhnev in May 1972 prompted Sadat's decision to shift Egypt's international allegiances since the president

¹⁷⁶ Cook 2012: 217.

¹⁷⁹ Cook 2012: 217.

¹⁸¹ Roussillon 1998: 360.

¹⁸³ Roussillon 1998: 360.

¹⁸⁵ Vatikiotis 1991: 438–56.

¹⁷⁷ Cantori and Baynard 2002: 363.

¹⁸⁰ Cantori and Baynard 2002: 364.

¹⁸² Cantori and Baynard 2002: 363.

¹⁸⁴ Cantori and Baynard 2002: 364; Meital 1998: 2.

¹⁸⁶ Dalacoura 2007: 117.

¹⁷⁸ Shehata 2010: 22.

recognized the very real risk of a freezing of the post-1967 positions.¹⁸⁷ Such a scenario would have meant that land lost to Israel was potentially gone forever, and Sadat therefore concluded that Egypt could only avoid a regional context characterized by Israeli superiority by replacing Soviet support with American patronage. What followed was statesmanship of the higher order.

The "Opening Up" and the Realignment

The first step of Sadat's plan entailed the expulsion of 7,800 Soviet advisers and experts in July 1972. This bold act sent a clear message, but its intended receiver was not necessarily Moscow. Rather, Sadat wanted to signal to the United States that Egypt was open to suggestions.¹⁸⁸ The president's motivations were complex. Although reclaiming the Sinai Peninsula that had been lost to Israel in 1967 would bolster his domestic credentials, Sadat was painfully aware that Egypt's problems were much greater than that. The country's relationship with the Soviet Union, itself a consequence of the inability to come to an agreement with the United States in the 1950s, had spelled economic disaster.¹⁸⁹ During nearly two decades of Nasserite socialism, barter-exchange agreements with the USSR and its satellites had been the order of the day and resulted in Egypt sending primary commodities such as rice, cotton, and phosphates north to afford large Soviet arms purchases. When Sadat took over in 1970 this arrangement was simply unsustainable. Egypt needed food imports from the West in order to feed its growing population, which in turn required large sums of convertible currency.¹⁹⁰ To accomplish these goals, a rapprochement with the United States became Sadat's top priority.

Fortunately for Egypt, it found itself in an excellent negotiating position, as its "size, strategic location, and military strength made it an ideal ally for the US effort to expand the American military, diplomatic, and political presence in the area."¹⁹¹ Still, Egypt's strongest bargaining chip was its relationship with Israel. Sadat therefore decided to flex his muscles by ordering the Egyptian army to cross the Suez Canal on October 6, 1973 and launch the Yom Kippur War (also known as the October War). However, Sadat's primary objective was not to militarily reclaim land lost to Israel in 1967. Anticipating that Israel's military would be difficult, if not impossible, to defeat, Sadat hoped that a show of force would induce Washington to pressure Israel at the upcoming peace talks between the two countries so that any peace agreement would have to include provisions for Israel to return the Sinai to Egypt.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ Stacher 2012: 67. ¹⁸⁸ Stacher 2012: 67. ¹⁸⁹ Ben-Dor 1995: 314.

¹⁹⁰ Waterbury 1985: 66–67. ¹⁹¹ Handoussa 1990: 114.

¹⁹² Alexander 2009: 138; Stacher 2012: 67.

The risky strategy began to bear fruit almost immediately. Following the conclusion of the war the US transferred \$85 million to help with the reconstruction of the Canal Zone. This represented the first American assistance package sent Egypt's way since the breaking of relations in 1967. President Nixon requested another \$250 million from Congress in early 1974 for additional development projects, which initiated an extensive American aid commitment to Egypt that is currently in its fifth decade.¹⁹³ Notwithstanding this considerable influx of funds, Sadat's objective was not simply to attain financial aid from Washington. Like the shah and Bourguiba, he also sought to promote international, and especially American, trade. In addition to the country's geopolitical turnabout, Sadat therefore introduced economic liberalization measures. The declaration of *infitah*—"the opening up" of the economy to the West—in 1974 announced to the world that Cairo's transformation was well in progress.¹⁹⁴

Over the next few years Egypt took important steps toward the liberalization of its economy, including measures intended to promote private investments. Passed by parliament in June 1974, Law 43 "constituted the cornerstone of the *infitah*" and made way for foreign investors.¹⁹⁵ The law

established an organism for investment and a list of activities and sectors designated as priorities, and offered considerable guarantees and privileges to foreign investors: repatriation of capital and profits, tax exemptions for five to eight years, and customs exemptions for equipment and raw materials necessary for production. Law 43 also put an end to public-sector monopoly on banking activities, by allowing intervention in Egypt of foreign banks operating in foreign currency.¹⁹⁶

The *infitah* ultimately failed to generate the levels of foreign income Sadat had hoped for,¹⁹⁷ but it did show the West, and Washington in particular, that Egypt's reorientation was sincere.

Sadat's efforts to reach common ground with Israel served to reinforce that assessment. On November 20, 1977, the Egyptian president appeared before the *Knesset*, Israel's parliament, and called for peace between the two countries. After sixteen months of intense deliberations under US president Jimmy Carter's close supervision,¹⁹⁸ Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin signed the peace treaty on March 26, 1979, at Camp David.¹⁹⁹ For Sadat, international reconciliation came at a high domestic and regional cost. Popular discontent over peace with the country's arch enemy resulted in a sharp rise in Islamist opposition to the state,²⁰⁰ and on a regional level Egypt's disregard for Arab sentiments on the Israel–Palestine issue triggered the country's

¹⁹³ Cook 2012: 219. ¹⁹⁴ Handoussa 1990: 114.

¹⁹⁵ Roussillon 1998: 361. See also Vatikiotis (1991: 429). ¹⁹⁶ Roussillon 1998: 361.

¹⁹⁷ Moustafa 2007: 5. ¹⁹⁸ Roussillon 1998: 364.

¹⁹⁹ Alexander 2009: 138; Meital 1998: 4. ²⁰⁰ Vatikiotis 1991: 423.

expulsion from the Arab League. Among its members only Oman and Sudan opted to maintain diplomatic relations with Egypt.²⁰¹

But what Egypt forfeited in Arab and domestic support it gained in American assistance.²⁰² Over the course of the 1970s, US aid to Egypt skyrocketed. In 1975, the initial assistance packages that had been approved on ad hoc bases became annually recurring. In that year the United States sent \$370 million Sadat's way, and three years later the figure had risen to \$943 million. In 1979, as a direct consequence of peace with Israel, the number reached \$1.1 billion plus an additional, staggering \$1.5 billion of military assistance. Besides economic and military aid, US support solidified Egypt's position as a regional power. The regime had wagered that Western benefits would outweigh regional and domestic sanctions, and it appeared to have been vindicated: American assistance averaged approximately \$2.2 billion per year over the last two decades of the twentieth century.²⁰³ Washington motivated these enormous sums on political rather than economic grounds, as a "report by the US General Accounting Office, presented to Congress in 1989, stated that 'if aid to Egypt were considered purely on economic or developmental grounds, Egypt would have received annual obligations of not more than US\$100–200 million.'"²⁰⁴ In short, geopolitical rent allowed Egypt to collect an extra \$2 billion per year in American assistance. Still, the government's good fortune did not apply to Sadat personally: On October 6, 1981, he fell to an Islamist assassin's bullet.

Mubarak and the United States

Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, remained in power for almost thirty years. In 1982 an opportunity to abandon the unpopular peace agreement presented itself when Israel invaded Lebanon. While recalling his ambassador in protest, Mubarak refused to terminate relations with Israel, as "such action would have jeopardized the new relationship with the USA."²⁰⁵ Already at this point, the benefits of peace with Israel were palpable to Egyptian elites. As one long-term commentator asserts, "the issue that was of paramount interest to the military establishment... was not peace with Israel per se but the attendant benefits that came with this conciliation, primarily strategic ties with the United States."²⁰⁶

Military assistance initially took the form of combined grants and loans, but "by 1985, the Reagan administration converted all the military loans to grants," and by 1987 the infamous figure of \$1.3 billion per year in military

²⁰¹ Roussillon 1998: 364–65, 371–73.

²⁰² Baker 1981; Sullivan 1990.

²⁰³ Rutherford 2008: 5.

²⁰⁴ Osman 2010: 126.

²⁰⁵ Alexander 2009: 142.

²⁰⁶ Cook 2007: 23.

assistance had been established.²⁰⁷ In pursuit of closer relations, both Sadat and Mubarak made several visits to the United States in 1980 and 1981 that resulted in Egypt securing highly advanced American weapons, including F15 and F16 fighter jets.²⁰⁸ Military cooperation was not, however, limited to arms trade. In 1981, Operation Bright Star commenced, a biennial US–Egyptian military exercise that quickly became the region’s largest and by 2001 involved 70,000 troops, including 23,000 Americans.²⁰⁹ Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, successive American presidents celebrated Mubarak’s “wisdom,” elevated him into the position of “one of the US’s most important allies in the Middle East,” and “gave Egypt preferred trading and exporting status.”²¹⁰

It is worth pointing out that close US–Egyptian relations soon resulted in impressive profits for American enterprises doing business in and with Egypt, and that

American exports to Egypt have long surpassed the \$2 billion annual total of economic and military aid to Egypt. For example, roughly 40 percent of American sales of agricultural products to Egypt have, since the early 1980s, been made on strictly commercial terms, and US millers consider Egypt their largest foreign customer. Egypt’s exports to the US have met with protectionist barriers, with total exports to the US averaging \$218 million as compared to total imports from the US at \$2,305 million over the 1983 to 1987 period.

On balance, therefore, it would seem fair to say that American aid to Egypt has reaped substantial American dividends in terms of investment and trade, and that both parties are better off in terms of economic transactions, without accounting for the additional benefits from their political and military cooperation.²¹¹

Despite the warm relations between the two countries, complications have occurred. In the late 1980s, Egypt failed to complete a military debt payment installment of \$600 million, causing Congress to pass the 1989 Brooke Amendment that disqualifies any country from receiving American aid if it defaults on payments for American arms. As a result, Egypt became unable to obtain fresh credit and therefore had to pay cash for food imports. Soon, the country’s debt reached \$50 billion, meaning that only the cost of annual service exceeded \$2 billion.²¹² Thus, by the early 1990s the Egyptian economy faced the prospect of total collapse.

The seeds of Egypt’s economic salvation were planted in 1990 when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. President George H. W. Bush and his international coalition desired regional blessing of its military operations against Iraq, and it befell Mubarak to raise Arab support for a Western war on Arab soil. In addition to successfully accomplishing this task, the president authorized

²⁰⁷ Cook 2012: 219.

²¹⁰ Osman 2010: 179.

²⁰⁸ Vatikiotis 1991: 423.

²¹¹ Handoussa 1990: 113.

²⁰⁹ Alexander 2009: 139.

²¹² Roussillon 1998: 375.

the participation of 35,000 Egyptian soldiers and officers in the war effort, the fourth largest contingent from any coalition country.²¹³ That Egyptian troops performed poorly was of secondary importance since their sheer presence gave the Gulf War an air of regional legitimacy and “represented the highpoint in the U.S.–Egyptian strategic relationship.”²¹⁴ The symbolic value of the region’s most influential country participating in a war against a fellow Arab nation could hardly be measured in dollars. Yet this is precisely what Washington did once the war ended after 42 days of military strikes. The US and its Arab allies wrote off \$13.3 billion worth of Egyptian debt, and Washington then convinced a group of creditor countries, informally known as the Paris Club, to forgive half of Egypt’s debt to them, which amounted to another \$10 billion.

In one stroke Egypt’s foreign debt had been slashed in half, which permitted the country to borrow money at lower rates on the international market.²¹⁵ The forgiveness of Egyptian debt had an immediate impact on the country’s economy as inflation rates fell and its hard currency reserves grew.²¹⁶ Furthermore, the Gulf countries, Europe, Japan, South Korea, the United States, the World Bank, and the IMF drastically increased their aid to Mubarak’s regime: Egypt received \$7 billion in emergency assistance during the Gulf War and another \$8 billion after its conclusion. Just as the US had found ways to reward the shah for policy decisions that served American interests, it once again showed its allies what the benefits of cooperation could look like.

Egypt, the United States, and September 11

Almost exactly a decade later, history repeated itself with a different President Bush in the White House. In the wake of 9/11, Washington called upon regional allies and long-time friends like Mubarak to help American intelligence agencies track down al-Qaeda suspects. Familiar with how rewarding such cooperation could be, Mubarak offered his assistance. In pursuit of useful intelligence, Egyptian security officials tortured suspected terrorists that had been kidnapped by American agents throughout the world and brought to Egypt under the infamous practice of extraordinary rendition.²¹⁷ In the first few years of the “War on Terror,” Mubarak thus reinforced his status as invaluable American ally and adviser.²¹⁸ Colin Powell, the American secretary of state, publicly sang Mubarak’s praise by declaring Washington’s

²¹³ Cantori and Baynard 2002: 366–67; Cook 2012: 161; Shehata 2010: 44.

²¹⁴ Cook 2012: 162.

²¹⁵ Belev 2000: 16; Cook 2012: 161; Habeeb 2002: 100; Kassem 1999: 65; Rutherford 2008: 137–38.

²¹⁶ Meital 1998: 6. ²¹⁷ Alexander 2009: 148.

²¹⁸ Brownlee 2002: 12–13; Kassem 2004: 179.

appreciation for the commitment that Egypt has made to working with us as we move forward to deal with the scourge of terrorism. Egypt, as you all know, is really ahead of us on this issue. They have had to deal with acts of terrorism in recent years.... And we have much to learn from them and there is much we can do together.²¹⁹

In addition to its immediate anti-terrorism support, Egypt remained by America's side when the time came to attack Afghanistan²²⁰ and Iraq. Among other contributions to the US war efforts, Mubarak granted the United States ready access to the Suez Canal, despite loud domestic opposition to the invasion of Iraq.²²¹

Until the events of 9/11, Egypt's relationship with the United States was rather uncomplicated. More importantly, it was, and continued to be, highly profitable. While estimates vary, Mubarak's regime received between \$50 and \$70 billion in economic and military assistance during his 30-year rule.²²² In exchange, Egypt assumed the role of guarantor of Israeli peace, regardless of how cold that peace might be, and trusted ally in the War on Terror.²²³ Moreover, Egypt has helped secure the free flow of Middle Eastern oil and has emerged as an important trade partner.²²⁴ It could be argued that Washington got good value for its money, but Egypt benefited even more. Between 1975 and 1991, US aid to Egypt represented 10 percent of the country's GDP,²²⁵ and in the 1980s American assistance was "indispensable" to Egypt's ability to meet its "immediate resource needs."²²⁶ At times, US aid has even "prevented the collapse of the Egyptian economy and allowed the government to invest in infrastructure and basic utilities."²²⁷ Until September 11, 2001, Egypt's relationship with the United States was thus overwhelmingly beneficial. From then on, however, the re-polarization of the world would require the Egyptian government to be not only an economic and military ally. It would also have to become an ideological one.

Conclusion

This chapter traced the development of Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt's close relationships with the West. Far from inevitable, each country's path to Western patronage was the result of excruciating trial and error processes that saw national leaders scramble for viable solutions to their personal and their nation's problems. The three countries' eventual identification with Western

²¹⁹ Powell 2001. ²²⁰ Alexander 2009: 146.

²²¹ Chalcraft 2011: 52; Moustafa 2007: 206; Osman 2010: 180.

²²² Cook 2012: 303; Kotschwar and Schott 2010: 1–2; Rutherford 2008: 5.

²²³ Bianchi 1989: 13–14.

²²⁴ Cook 2012: 303; US Census Bureau 2008.

²²⁵ Zaki 1995: 183.

²²⁶ Weinbaum 1986: 2.

²²⁷ Abdelnasser 2004: 117.

powers was the unintended consequence of efforts aimed at securing national sovereignty and development. In Iran, the young shah sought out US support partly in order to forestall Soviet interference and thereby secure his country's independence. For Tunisia, relations with Europe, and to a lesser extent with the United States, emanated partly from the need to protect the state from external and internal threats. For Sadat, Egypt's realignment was similarly geared toward re-establishing Egypt's military domination in the region and to achieve parity with Israel. For all three regimes, these military concerns were coupled with economic objectives intended to improve the national economies. In the case of Tunisia and Egypt, the transition from a largely planned to an open economy was the result of failed socialist experiments in the 1960s. Similarly to their respective military considerations, the "opening up" of each country's economy to Western capitalism did not stem from ideological convictions, but rather from material necessities. In short, for Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt, Western patronage was not a choice. It was the only viable option.

Yet, the most striking aspect of the three countries' different paths to the West is their converging end points. In time, the shah, Ben Ali, and Mubarak all established a seemingly ideal independence from their societies. Western patronage meant that domestic elites, whether economic or military, could be kept content, and as long as the flow of American and European trade and aid benefited these groups, it mattered little how Iranians, Tunisians, and Egyptians at large felt about their leaders. Western support thus came at what seemed a relatively low domestic cost. The three leaders may have been despised by many of their subjects, but as long as the powerful and the wealthy remained committed to the regimes' maintenance, the dictators had few reasons to worry.

There is, however, a crucial catch in this story that will eventually become important: While domestic elites were beholden to their leaders, it was not the leader's person they actually depended on. Rather, what the leaders represented, and the value they held for domestic elites, was the ability to harvest the fruits of Western allegiance.²²⁸ For the shah, Ben Ali, and Mubarak's few but powerful supporters, the autocrats were the wells from which Western riches poured. This meant that in order to maintain their legitimacy among domestic elites, the regimes found themselves obliged to do whatever necessary to assure that Western support, in particular the financial aspect of it, continued uninterrupted. But as the next chapter shows, securing the material support of the democratic world required certain ideological sacrifices.

²²⁸ Levitsky and Way 2010: 47–48.

3

Façade Democracy

Managing Authoritarianism

The objectives of the common foreign and security policy shall be...to develop and consolidate democracy and the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

—Treaty on European Union, Article J.1, Paragraph 2, 1992¹

Our supreme objective remains that of fully guaranteeing all human rights.

—Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, May 1992²

Friendly relations with the West eventually became matters of survival for the Iranian, Tunisian, and Egyptian states. Wagering that international support—and the domestic elite backing that followed—could substitute for popular legitimacy, each regime eventually placed most of its proverbial eggs in its respective patron's basket. In return for Western aid, trade, and geo-strategic collaboration that could be redistributed to regime backers, Iranian, Tunisian, and Egyptian strongmen maintained regional stability, helped secure Europe's borders, safeguarded the flow of natural resources to the West, and guaranteed peace for Israel. It appeared democracy-autocracy relations were a winning bet for all involved. But while these relationships were based on concrete geostrategic and economic considerations, ideological matters could not be altogether ignored.

Since the West's self-ascribed Cold War superiority stemmed from its liberal foundation emphasizing democracy, individual freedom, and human rights, its leaders could hardly afford to be seen as supporters of authoritarian regimes. Consequently, it became imperative for any dictator keen to

¹ European Union 1992.

² Qtd. in Amnesty International 1994: 4.

maintain Western backing to *appear* democratic.³ As leaders like the shah, Ben Ali, and Mubarak became dependent on American and Western European funds to sustain domestic elite backing, they thus found themselves increasingly compelled to shore up their liberal credentials. Since international and domestic support had become intertwined, the loss of the former would almost guarantee the subsequent disappearance of the latter. To forestall such a development, the three regimes transformed into respectable Western allies in the shape of *façade democracies*.

As discussed in Chapter 1, a façade democracy is a type of hybrid regime that combines democratic discourse with authoritarian practice. The regime's liberal self-portrayal is simply a charade intended to placate audiences in the West. It is important to emphasize that the intended target of this farce is not the patron state, but rather human rights groups and media outlets that have the power to highlight the hypocritical nature of democracy–autocracy relations and to relay it to the general public. Allegations of human rights violations or stolen elections are particularly troublesome for façade democracies since such revelations may potentially force the patron to withdraw its support, which, in turn, could result in regime abandonment by domestic elites.

The construction of a democratic façade thus becomes imperative for governments that rely on Western support for their survival. While initially a relatively low-cost endeavor, a regime's transformation into a façade democracy is virtually irreversible due to its cumulative nature: Every time the regime iterates its commitment to liberal principles, it invites critics to hold it increasingly accountable for its public statements. Over time, an initially empty rhetoric thus threatens to become the discursive trap I call the iron cage of liberalism (ICL). In order to help explain why an ICL emerged in each country, this chapter traces the development of façade democratic states in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt, beginning with Iran.

Hail to the Chief: Iran, the Shah, and the Presidents

After its brief semi-democratic experiment in the wake of the Constitutional Revolution (1906–11), Iran resumed its authoritarian trajectory under Reza Shah. A 1931 law made membership in “collectivist” organizations punishable by up to ten years in prison, and although communist organizations were the principal targets, the government conveniently identified many other groups as “collectivist” as well in order to justify their persecution.⁴ During his sixteen-year reign Reza Shah forced most opposition elements into hiding

³ Rutherford 2008: 18.

⁴ Matin-asgari 2002: 22–23.

and brought the more moderate political climate of the 1910s to a close. But the opposition “returned with a vengeance”⁵ after the Allies forced Reza Shah into exile and replaced him with his young son. The United States’ hegemonic position implicitly entailed American insistence on—and Iranian acceptance of—political reform. The 1940s consequently witnessed an explosive growth of political groups, most important of which was the communist Tudeh (Masses) Party. Already in 1943 the party secured eight seats in parliamentary elections, and at its peak in 1953 it claimed 25,000 members in addition to 300,000 sympathizers.⁶ By then the party’s accomplishments had already frightened the regime enough to brand it an illegal organization, presumably due to an alleged attempt on the shah’s life in 1948.⁷ Despite the ban, the party operated relatively openly until the political environment harshened significantly in the aftermath of the 1953 coup.

The 1940s were a relatively liberal era in Iranian history. To understand why Iran resettled on its authoritarian path one must take a geopolitical approach to post-war Iranian politics. American officials had hoped that liberal forces would surface in a US-aligned Iran, but instead had to witness the Tudeh emerge as the country’s most popular political organization, a highly problematic development from Washington’s Cold War point of view. When Mohammed Mossadegh became prime minister in 1951 and embarked on a nationalization project designed to wrest Iranian oil from foreign hands, the United States slapped the communist label on Mossadegh and depicted him as “a dangerous fanatic... likely to deliver Iran to the Soviets.”⁸ That the prime minister was in fact not a communist, but rather “an anti-imperialist nationalist who intended to keep Iran from being controlled by *any* foreign country or company,”⁹ mattered little since his political connections made him guilty by association. While leader of the National Front, a political umbrella organization that included various nationalist, liberal, and social democratic parties, Mossadegh’s political capital stemmed mainly from his populist rhetoric and resulting mass support for his person. For instance, when the shah twice attempted to dismiss him in the period leading up the coup, Mossadegh successfully called upon the people to protest in the street. The problem was that the organization responsible for mobilizing the masses was the Tudeh, which created a direct link between Mossadegh and communism. As one scholar eloquently puts it, “the apparent rapprochement between the Tudeh Party and the nationalist government, from the point of view of the Cold Warriors, was enough proof for the soundness of their analysis.”¹⁰

⁵ Abrahamian 1985a: 125.

⁶ Bill 1988a: 68.

⁷ Milani 1988: 71.

⁸ Keddie 2003: 125.

⁹ Keddie 2003: 125 (emphasis added).

¹⁰ Siavoshi 1994: 129.

The 1953 coup marked the end of Mossadegh's political career, and, more importantly, Iran's relatively liberal post-war climate. Just as deference to American values and norms had caused the young shah to assume a liberal stance in the 1940s, it was American norms and values—this time in the shape of anti-communism—that shut the political system close in the 1950s. The events of 1953 made the shah realize that the surest path to American patronage entailed shoring up his anti-communist credentials. As a result, the post-coup period was decidedly anti-Tudeh as the organization's leadership was "systematically eliminated."¹¹ Forty party leaders were executed and fourteen others tortured to death.¹² In addition, more than 3,000 Tudeh members were arrested in 1953–57 with 200 receiving life sentences. The party suffered another blow in 1954 with the unfolding of a massive armed forces conspiracy involving 600 Tudeh members. More than 450 of them stood trial, and those considered the masterminds received either death sentences or life-long prison terms.¹³ Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that the Tudeh disintegrated, especially after 1957 when the shah—with the CIA's assistance—created his own intelligence service, the SAVAK,¹⁴ that had anti-communism as one of its main objectives.¹⁵ Literally chased out of Iran, the Tudeh survived almost exclusively as a political formation in exile in the Soviet Union, East Germany, and other Moscow satellites sympathetic to its cause.¹⁶

Kennedy, the Communist Threat, and the White Revolution

Until the early 1960s, Washington rarely rebuked the shah over his authoritarian behavior. However, concerned with the prospect of Chinese-style peasant movements throughout the Third World, the Kennedy administration encouraged friendly regimes to permit some political competition and to improve their citizens' lots in life. The shah was at the time under considerable domestic pressure due to an economic downturn in the late 1950s and two fraudulent parliamentary elections that he had been forced to annul.¹⁷ In this context of discontent, many Iranians welcomed Kennedy's 1960 election victory under the assumption that the new president "was critical of the Shah's autocracy and was an advocate of genuine reform,"¹⁸ and Iranian dissidents sought to exploit the resulting political opportunity. For instance, the dormant National Front re-emerged to stage a mass rally in Tehran that

¹¹ Parsa 1989: 45.

¹² Abrahamian 1982: 280; Foran 1993a: 298.

¹³ Bill 1988a: 100.

¹⁴ SAVAK is the acronym for Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar, which translates to "National intelligence and security organization."

¹⁵ Arjomand 1988: 73.

¹⁶ Behrooz 2000: 249; Foran 1994b: 175.

¹⁷ Foran 1993a: 311.

¹⁸ Milani 1988: 80.

attracted an estimated 80,000 participants. The organization ultimately failed to re-establish itself as a political force,¹⁹ but Kennedy's subtle pressure on the shah did have other, more durable impacts on Iranian history.

Iranian democratization was on Washington's agenda, but the thinking of the time, as suggested by an influential 1961 State Department report, prioritized other factors. The report implored the shah to reduce political repression, but it did not consider authoritarianism per se to be the greatest threat facing America's Iranian ally. Fearful of a scenario in which communist elements would capitalize on rural discontent and overthrow the state through a peasant-based revolution, the report beseeched the shah to implement a land reform program to appease the impoverished farmers and thereby nip any revolutionary sentiments in the bud. It also advised the shah to "reduce military expenditures [and] withdraw from an open pro-Western posture."²⁰ Ever since the 1953 coup, the shah had come to place a great deal of faith in American counsel, and was thus inclined to heed his ally's advice.²¹ Still, the monarch was also eager to reap the political benefits of any reform agenda imposed on him, and therefore articulated land reform as a central element of his grand 1963 "White Revolution."²²

Land reform constituted the core of the White Revolution and sought to redistribute cultivatable land from wealthy landlords to poor peasants. While initially seeming to accomplish this objective, later stages of the reform program reversed the farmers' gains and returned them to their landless status. In the end, the most substantial change achieved by the land reform was "the effective replacement of the all-powerful landlord in the villages by the obtrusive state," which assumed many of the administrative tasks that had previously befallen the landlords, including responsibility for the legal and educational systems.²³ For many of the re-dispossessed peasants their sole option was to migrate to the cities where they and their children some fifteen years later helped dethrone the man who had indirectly forced them off their land.²⁴

But landlords and peasants were not the only ones affected by the redistribution program. The clergy found much of its land, officially owned by mosques and seminaries, "reallocated."²⁵ This perceived governmental overreach was coupled with other provisions of the White Revolution that suggested that the role of Islam would henceforth be severely limited as Iran moved in the direction of secularization, a development most directly demonstrated by the introduction of female suffrage in February 1963.²⁶ Consequently, the shah's reform program—in part a Washington brainchild—had two main

¹⁹ Parsa 1989: 179.

²⁰ Milani 1988: 81.

²¹ Amjad 1989: 30.

²² Amjad 1989: 29–30.

²³ Foran 1993a: 322.

²⁴ Kazemi 1980; Stempel 1981: 81.

²⁵ Arjomand 1988: 83.

²⁶ Foran 1993a: 365–66.

consequences. First, it revived oppositional elements that “began to engage openly in political activities, chanting again the early fifties slogan that the Shah should reign not rule and that the principles of the constitutional monarchy be observed.”²⁷ Second, the White Revolution politicized the clergy and contributed to the rise of an until then relatively unknown cleric, “identified by one American Iran specialist as ‘Abdullah’ Khomeini.”²⁸

The social unrest fueled by the shah’s reform program came to a head in early June 1963. With Iranians preparing to celebrate the anniversary of Imam Hussein’s martyrdom on the tenth of Muharram, the shah grew increasingly concerned with the fact that his opponents were no longer limited to secular politicians. Unlike in the past, their demands now coincided with many of those chanted by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s followers.²⁹ As the previous few days had been marked by riots and widespread violence, the government took pre-emptive action in the early morning of June 5 by arresting Khomeini and some of his close collaborators on charges of planning disturbances. News of the arrests spread rapidly and resulted in demonstrations in Tehran, Qom, Tabriz, Shiraz, Isfahan, Mashhad, and Kashan that continued the following day.³⁰ In stark contrast to the events that would transpire fifteen years later, the shah, confident of American support, “did not hesitate to call out the commandoes and special forces as well as the regular army to crush the demonstrations.”³¹

To understand the shah’s willingness to use decisive force one must consider the political context surrounding the 1963 uprising. Although Kennedy’s push for liberalization in the early 1960s allowed opposition groups to resurface, Kennedy’s interest in Iranian reform stemmed only marginally from an ideological dislike of authoritarianism. Unlike Carter’s push for liberalization in the late 1970s, Kennedy’s insistence on reform was rooted in the desire to pre-empt communist revolutions in Third World countries aligned with the United States, and came without a consistent reform discourse attached to it. More specifically, Kennedy, in sharp contrast to Carter, did not ask the shah—explicitly or otherwise—to move in the direction of greater respect for human rights, despite the fact that the resurrected National Front raised the issue by making government respect for “people’s rights in accordance with the Constitution and the UN Declaration of Human Rights” one of its central objectives.³² Consequently, the brutal repression of demonstrators in June 1963 did not result in any American criticism of the shah. Quite on the contrary! Although then-Vice President

²⁷ Moaddel 1994: 142.

²⁸ Bill 1988a: 148.

²⁹ Amjad 1989: 41; Bill 1988a: 147–48.

³⁰ Bakhsh, 1990: 30; Foran 1993a: 365–66.

³¹ Bill 1988a: 151.

³² Floor 1983: 81.

Lyndon Johnson approved of the shah's highly touted reform program and White Revolution...[h]e approved even more of the shah's brutal treatment of demonstrators throughout Iran in June 1963. To LBJ, the shah was a defender of American interests—a "good guy" manning the barricades for America in the Persian Gulf region.³³

The Shah and the Human Rights Problem

During his first 25 years on the throne, the shah had grown accustomed to dealing with US administrations more than willing to turn a blind eye to his handling of the political opposition, as long as such actions did not threaten American interests. President Kennedy's attempt to steer the shah towards liberalization in the early 1960s represents a rare case in which American policy seemed to consider the rights of the king's opponents. Notwithstanding the fact that such concerns were motivated by Cold War fears, Kennedy's policies resulted in a temporary relaxation of political repression. Still, this brief period represents the exception to the rule of American acceptance of the shah's autocratic system.³⁴ President Nixon's attitude toward human rights in Iran is therefore more typical of US administrations. During a visit to Tehran in 1972, the American president became witness to a student demonstration met with brutal repression. Rather than chastising the shah, Nixon reassured the king that such heavy-handedness would not impact the two countries' relationship, allegedly confiding that "I envy the way you deal with your students... Pay no attention to our liberals' griping."³⁵

Soon, however, the shah would be forced to pay attention, despite Nixon's assurances to the contrary. Due to his close relationship with the United States, the king

was exceptionally sensitive to his image in the international community as a benevolent ruler. A vulnerable aspect of his regime was its ignominious human rights record. The exiled opposition to the Shah in Western Europe and North America in the sixties and the seventies, including the Confederation of Iranian Students, adroitly manipulated this weakness by contacting human rights organizations and providing them with exaggerated and sometimes fallacious information about the so-called political holocaust in Iran, a country alleged to have more than 100,000 political prisoners. The human rights organizations in turn denigrated the shah: In 1972, a United Nations panel found Iran guilty of consistent violations of human rights; and, in 1975, Amnesty International conferred on Iran the notoriety of having the world's most terrifying human rights record.³⁶

³³ Bill 1988a: 156.

³⁴ Daneshvar 1996: 88; Keddie 2003: 144; Milani 1988: 80–83; Moaddel 1993: 142; Parsa 1989: 49; Stempel 1981: 68.

³⁵ Hoveyda 1980: 54.

³⁶ Milani 1988: 180–81.

Amnesty's 1975 report was not the organization's first,³⁷ but it represents an important milestone in the opposition's attempts to leverage the human rights issue against the regime.³⁸ The Amnesty report noted "that Iran had been a signatory to the 1948 UN International Charter of Human Rights and the 1966 International Pact on Political and Civil Rights,"³⁹ which increased the severity of the allegations directed at the shah's regime. That the vastness of Iran's "political holocaust" was most likely heavily exaggerated mattered little since the international community assumed that the atrocious human rights numbers attributed to the shah's regime were accurate.⁴⁰ To counter the negative consequences of the human rights organizations' revelations, "a major and continuous assignment of [the Iranian ambassadors to London, Washington, and the United Nations] was to review Western press coverage of Iran and to do whatever they could to prevent or minimize negative publicity about Iran and its supreme leader."⁴¹ Yet despite grave allegations issued by Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists, the International Red Cross, and other human rights groups, the "efforts of these organizations were by and large inconsequential... devoid of effective leverage within the Iranian regime."⁴² This absence of leverage would soon be remedied by the emergence of two new actors on the Iranian human rights stage: the international media and Jimmy Carter.

The European media's interest in the shah's government increased in the early 1970s as a result of the human rights organizations' reports. Outlets like Germany's *Der Spiegel* and *Frankfurter Rundschau*, France's *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and the United Kingdom's *Times*, *The Economist*, and *The Guardian*, all began to report on alleged torture and political repression in Iran.⁴³ These journalistic efforts culminated in a special report published by the *Sunday Times* of London on January 19, 1975, that confirmed "the systematic use of torture in Iranian prisons," including "the worst allegations, such as the burning of victims on an electrically-heated metal table."⁴⁴

Perhaps stirred into action by its European counterpart, the US media commenced reporting on Iran's human rights situation in the mid-1970s. In previous decades American news outlets had been content to echo the aligned sentiments of the American and Iranian governments without paying closer

³⁷ Matin-asgari 2002: 134.

³⁸ Abrahamian 2009: 166; Milani 1988: 180–81. Chapter 4 addresses the efforts of the exiled opposition.

³⁹ Matin-asgari 2002: 134.

⁴⁰ Abrahamian (1989: 170–71) reports that beginning in 1977, under intense pressure from human rights organizations, the shah released 2,298 political prisoners, including "the last batch" of them in early January 1979. It thus seems unlikely that the shah would have released close to 98,000 additional prisoners in the years before 1977, especially since he only began his liberalization program in that year.

⁴¹ Dorman and Farhang 1987: 24.

⁴² Milani 1988: 181.

⁴³ Matin-asgari 2002: 122.

⁴⁴ Matin-asgari 2002: 151.

attention to conditions on the ground,⁴⁵ but now “the mainstream press for the first time began to raise troubling questions about the shah’s regime, especially concerning his quest for military power, method of rule, and repression of human rights.”⁴⁶ The *New York Times* addressed the shah’s human rights record head-on in September 1974, and the king’s reliance on the secret police was the subject of a report in *Newsweek* that same year.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, *The Washington Post*’s Jack Anderson devoted a May 1976 column to “the shah’s ‘rule by torture and terror,’ ”⁴⁸ and three months later, “*Time* magazine published a special report on torture as government policy, naming Iran and Chile as the most frequently cited examples.”⁴⁹ Also in August, the *New York Times* criticized the close US–Iranian relationship and berated the shah’s method of rule as “militaristic and dictatorial.”⁵⁰ Consequently, “by 1976 references to human rights abuses had become routine in press coverage,”⁵¹ and “a definite publicity breakthrough had occurred, with the international news media viewing Iran as having one of the world’s most repressive governments.”⁵² When even Congress began to debate the shah’s authoritarian tendencies, Iran’s relationship with the US—and the accompanying assumption of appropriate behavior—had surely begun to become a burden for the king.⁵³

The media and the human rights organizations’ reports rattled the shah, “who sought to depict himself as a modern progressive statesman of world stature.”⁵⁴ Still, they did not significantly improve Iran’s political conditions. Quite on the contrary, the shah’s regime became even more repressive and autocratic in the early and mid-1970s, as evidenced by the 1975 merger of the country’s two permitted political parties into one.⁵⁵ Although disappointed by “the treachery of the American Press,” the shah did little to improve his standing in the West, arguably because there appeared to be little reason to change with American officials maintaining their firm support for the king.⁵⁶ This state of affairs changed drastically with the election of Jimmy Carter to the presidency in 1976.

The Human Rights President

Jimmy Carter’s 1976 presidential campaign has been characterized as a reaction to the cynical foreign policies of his predecessors and “balm to the soul of the Americans bitter about the insanity of their bloody adventure in

⁴⁵ For example, the Muharram uprising of 1963, “which had so many parallels with the 1978 revolution, went almost entirely unreported in the United States” (Sick 1985: 11).

⁴⁶ Dorman and Farhang 1987: 131.

⁴⁷ Dorman and Farhang 1987: 108; Halliday 1979: 80. ⁴⁸ Matin-asgari 2002: 154.

⁴⁹ Matin-asgari 2002: 154. ⁵⁰ Matin-asgari 2002: 154.

⁵¹ Dorman and Farhang 1987: 108. ⁵² Matin-asgari 2002: 148.

⁵³ Seliktar 2012: 8. ⁵⁴ Behrooz 1999: 94. ⁵⁵ Foran 1993a: 315.

⁵⁶ Zonis 1991: 235–36. See also Dorman and Farhang (1987: 147).

Vietnam, and the immorality of the Watergate episode.”⁵⁷ Reminiscent of the rationale behind Kennedy’s insistence on land reform,⁵⁸ Carter emphasized the importance of improving human rights throughout the world, arguing that a solid US foreign policy commitment to their spread would “remove the reason for revolutions that often erupt among those who suffer from persecution.”⁵⁹ From now on, Carter vowed, American core values, such as freedom, democracy, and human rights, would guide the United States’ interactions with the rest of the world.⁶⁰

The president-elect returned to the issue of human rights in his 1977 inaugural address, proclaiming that America’s “moral sense dictates a clear preference for those societies which share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights.”⁶¹ But once in office, Carter had to balance his moral convictions against his country’s interests, which unsurprisingly led the White House to conclude that a serious pursuit of human rights reform throughout the world, including in Iran, would have to remain a secondary priority.⁶² Secretary of State Cyrus Vance later admitted that the administration “decided early on that it was in our national interest to support the shah so he could continue to play a constructive role in regional affairs.”⁶³ Even though President Carter’s commitment to human rights thus turned out to be little more than election rhetoric, it had a tremendous impact on Iranian society by generating uncertainty about the country’s relationship with the United States, and, by extension, about domestic politics. The shah and his opponents alike simply did not know what Carter’s election meant. Nonetheless, it appears that while the opposition saw it as a sign of improvement,⁶⁴ the shah was less enthused.

Well aware of Carter’s human rights agenda, the king viewed the Democrat’s victory as a personal catastrophe, reportedly confiding to an aide that “it looks like we are not going to be around much longer.”⁶⁵ But once the immediate disappointment had subsided, the shah embarked on a liberalization project designed to appease the new president.⁶⁶ After all, Carter’s ascension was not an altogether new experience for the shah. Sixteen years earlier he had been shocked by the unexpected victory of another liberal, John F. Kennedy, who had imposed liberalization and even had the audacity to select a prime minister for the king.⁶⁷ Having learned from the Kennedy experience, the shah did not wait for Carter to dictate policy, preferring instead to pre-empt him and thus claim personal credit for liberalization measures he assumed would be forced upon him in any case.

⁵⁷ Milani 1988: 182.

⁵⁸ See Carter (1977a: 170, 1977b).

⁵⁹ Milani 1988: 182.

⁶⁰ Seliktar 2000: xx.

⁶¹ Qtd. in Bill 1988a: 16.

⁶² Strong 2000: 49.

⁶³ Bill 1988a: 227.

⁶⁴ Kurzman 1996; Seliktar 2012: 10.

⁶⁵ Foran 1993a: 394.

⁶⁶ Amjad 1989: 105; Cottam 1988: 160; Foran 1993a: 394.

⁶⁷ Foran 1993a: 311.

The king thus began to reform Iran in early 1977—almost the exact time when Carter entered the Oval Office—and even went so far as to publicly call 1977 “the year of liberalization.”⁶⁸ In April he permitted international human rights organizations to inspect prisons and observe trials against his political opponents, and the use of “torture was significantly reduced.”⁶⁹ In addition, the government eased its control over the press and passed new laws that reduced the practice of trying political prisoners in military tribunals,⁷⁰ and in August the regime announced parliamentary elections to be held the following year.⁷¹ The international human rights organizations that to little avail had spent years criticizing the regime’s treatment of its opponents suddenly found a ruler willing to listen to, and work with, them.⁷²

Although Carter, like American presidents before and since, was enough of a realist to recognize that Iranian human rights gains had to be subordinated to American interests, his administration was nonetheless a “prisoner of its own campaign rhetoric,”⁷³ meaning that Carter had to continue to publicly insist that human rights mattered in US foreign policy. Some commentators have suggested that the president abstained from pressuring allies like the shah over the human rights issue,⁷⁴ but the historical record suggests otherwise. In response “to a question from European journalists on May 2, 1977, [the president] declared that his administration had been putting pressure on Iran both privately and publicly to improve its [human rights] performance.”⁷⁵ Indeed, Carter “may have been one of the first world leaders to broach the subject of human rights with [the shah].”⁷⁶ The president himself also recalls discussing the issue with the shah on November 4, 1977, telling the king that “Iran’s reputation in the world is being damaged” and asking if there was “anything that can be done to alleviate this problem by closer consultation with the dissident groups and by easing off on some of the strict police policies?”⁷⁷ This may not be the type of direct pressure that would satisfy critics, but it certainly suggests that the shah knew where Carter stood on human rights, and according to the president “listened carefully”⁷⁸ when the issue was discussed.

The shah was not the only Iranian to pay careful attention to Carter’s human rights rhetoric. After 25 years of American meddling in Iranian politics, both the government and its opponents had come to believe that the shah remained untouchable as long as he enjoyed the support of Washington.⁷⁹ In an effort to sustain American backing in this new political climate, Iran’s ambassador to the United Nations, Fereydown Hoveyda, wrote an open letter

⁶⁸ Bill 1988a: 219.

⁶⁹ Keddie 2003: 217.

⁷⁰ Bakhash 1990: 9; Keddie 2003: 216–17.

⁷¹ Cottam 1988: 172.

⁷² Bill 1988a: 227.

⁷³ Milani 1988: 183.

⁷⁴ Kurzman 1996: 158–59, 2004: 19–20.

⁷⁵ Grayson 1981: 154.

⁷⁶ Stuckey 2008: 122.

⁷⁷ Carter 1982: 436.

⁷⁸ Carter 1982: 436.

⁷⁹ Milani 1988: 76.

published by the *New York Times* on May 18, 1977. In it he “declared that his country was committed to the human rights ideals of the United Nations and had made more progress toward the realization of human rights than had the United States in a similar time frame.”⁸⁰ While intended to bolster the shah’s standing in the West and afford him greater space to maneuver in, Hoveyda’s public commitment to human rights on the Iranian government’s behalf likely had the opposite effect. By transforming itself into a façade democracy the regime placed debilitating constraints on itself in the case of a nonviolent challenge to its rule.

For Carter, the human rights campaign theme was a shrewd political move that helped him get elected, but once in office that rhetoric now limited the policy options at his disposal.⁸¹ Being the human rights president made it almost impossible to ignore the fact that a close ally was considered by many international organizations and media outlets to be one of the world’s worst human rights offenders. When the shah in 1977 accepted Carter’s human rights discourse, the two regimes were effectively trapped by their now shared political principles. For the king this meant that unless his regime came under armed attack he could not repress protesters without appearing hypocritical. Carter, on the other hand, could not offer the shah the type of wholehearted support that his predecessors had provided as long as the human rights issue plagued the Iranian government. This lack of support, which I return to in Chapter 5, caused both the shah and the Iranian opposition to assume that the tide in US–Iranian relations had turned, and that the American government no longer backed the shah.⁸² That such an assessment of the situation was at best only partially accurate is irrelevant since most Iranians assumed it to be true.⁸³

In Europe’s Image: Tunisia and the Human Rights Dilemma

By the late 1970s human rights had become an important component in international relations, a development that resulted largely from the signing of the 1975 Helsinki Agreement and the election of a human rights president in the United States.⁸⁴ Tunisian leaders were among the first to learn “how to ‘talk the talk’ ... [and] pay ‘lip service’ to the formal aspects of the ‘democracy, good governance, human rights, and rule of law’ discourse.”⁸⁵ The government eventually embraced the human rights narrative so completely that it became central to its legitimacy claims.⁸⁶ In fact, Ben Ali took the strategy

⁸⁰ Grayson 1981: 155.

⁸¹ Milani 1988: 183.

⁸² Arjomand 1988: 130.

⁸³ Kurzman 1996: 155; Milani 1988: 76.

⁸⁴ Brysk 1993.

⁸⁵ Erdle 2010: 418.

⁸⁶ See Waltz (1997: 81).

of “proclaiming democracy in order to mask his totalitarian regime”⁸⁷ far enough for human rights advocate Moncef Marzouki to diagnose the regime as “schizophrenic.”⁸⁸

Still, it was Ben Ali’s predecessor who invented the Tunisian version of the human rights charade. Bourguiba’s advocacy of women’s rights, institutionalized in the 1957 Personal Status Code,⁸⁹ helped Tunisia gain the reputation of something as unusual in the region as a “moderate, stable, and calm” country.⁹⁰ Furthermore, the regime responded to President Carter’s election and “human rights offensive” by permitting the creation of the region’s first independent human rights organization,⁹¹ and by the late 1970s “human rights had assumed [centrality] in the Tunisian political debate.”⁹²

The Origins of Ben Ali’s Human Rights Embrace

Bourguiba’s flirting with Western norms would, however, pale in comparison to his successor’s. At the time of Ben Ali’s constitutional coup on November 7, 1987, the country was “descending into a human rights crisis”⁹³ as the aging and increasingly senile Bourguiba engaged Islamist groups in what approached a full-out war. When the president insisted that a group of arrested Islamist leaders receive the death penalty for their crimes, Ben Ali, at the time prime minister, considered himself out of options and removed Bourguiba from power by citing the president’s health status.⁹⁴ Most Tunisians greeted the coup with relief, although not without concern over how the new president would rule. After all, Ben Ali was a career officer who had spent most of his life inside a repressive state security apparatus responsible for severe human rights violations.⁹⁵

It must therefore have come as a surprise when Ben Ali “declared human rights to be the ideological core of the new government.”⁹⁶ The new president’s

full embrace of human rights concerns upon assuming the presidency must be attributed to the power of the human rights idea combined with political concerns of the moment rather than to a long-standing personal commitment. Ben Ali rose to power by means that were legally open to question and without any clear social base of support. . . . Ben Ali needed the firm backing of political elites, and human rights was a political concept that promised to rally support.⁹⁷

⁸⁷ Qtd. in Perkins 2004: 211.

⁸⁸ Qtd. in Perkins 2004: 211.

⁸⁹ See Charrad (2001).

⁹⁰ White 2001: 41.

⁹¹ Dwyer 1991: 166. See Chapter 4.

⁹² Dalacoura 2007: 167.

⁹³ Amnesty International 1994: 4.

⁹⁴ Alexander 2010: 52; Allani 2009: 263; Murphy 1999: 77; Perkins 2004: 174–75; Ware 1988.

⁹⁵ Gränzer 1999: 128; Waltz 1995: 75.

⁹⁶ Gränzer 1999: 126. See also Perkins (2004: 194).

⁹⁷ Waltz 1995: 175.

In his inaugural speech Ben Ali promised “a break with the violations of the past,” and to introduce political pluralism and respect for the rule of law.⁹⁸ Within a matter of weeks he amended laws pertaining to prison conditions and arrests,⁹⁹ and abolished the State Security Court, which had been the site of some of the most horrendous abuses committed by Bourguiba’s government.¹⁰⁰

In April 1988, a new political parties law institutionalized pluralism—Tunisia’s first serious attempt at multiparty politics since 1981.¹⁰¹ The law only disqualified parties “organized along religious, linguistic, ethnic, and regional lines, and that did not subscribe to ‘human rights’ or ‘national achievements.’ ”¹⁰² As a result, six parties soon gained legal status and received permission to publish periodicals.¹⁰³ The government also enacted a liberal press law, and granted amnesty to more than 2,000 political prisoners.¹⁰⁴ To further emphasize his commitment to Tunisia’s democratic future, Ben Ali changed his party’s name from the Socialist Destourian (Constitutional) Party (PSD) to the Constitutional Democratic Rally (*Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique*, RCD).¹⁰⁵ While some at the time argued that Ben Ali’s liberalization measures were “evidence of a basic change in the nature of the political system,”¹⁰⁶ others have, with the benefit of hindsight, later noted that Ben Ali “based his rise to power on the platform of human rights merely as a veil for strategic interests.”¹⁰⁷

During Bourguiba’s last decade in power a domestic human rights movement had emerged as a potent government critic, largely due to the fact that Bourguiba’s style of rule made him susceptible to charges of human rights violations. In contrast, when Ben Ali assumed the role of Tunisia’s principal human rights promoter, he effectively neutralized the human rights groups by co-opting their narrative. Furthermore, the president offered some of the country’s leading rights advocates positions within the government. Since the bylaws of the country’s most important human rights organization, the Tunisian League for Human Rights, stipulated that its officers could not simultaneously hold government positions, Ben Ali’s headhunting weakened the movement while strengthening his own liberal credentials. Similarly, the president allowed several human rights groups, domestic and international alike, to put down roots in Tunisia. The Arab Institute for Human Rights established its headquarters in Tunisia, and in June 1989 the country hosted the Maghreb Human Rights Union’s founding meeting.¹⁰⁸ In 1990 the

⁹⁸ Amnesty International 1994: 4. See also Alexander (1997: 34). ⁹⁹ Dwyer 1991: 154.

¹⁰⁰ Amnesty International 1994: 4–5. ¹⁰¹ Zartman 1991: 12.

¹⁰² Erdle 2010: 99. See also Murphy (1999: 172–73). ¹⁰³ Murphy 1999: 64.

¹⁰⁴ King 2003: 40; Zartman 1991: 16. ¹⁰⁵ Murphy 1999: 170.

¹⁰⁶ Zartman 1991: 16. ¹⁰⁷ Gränzer 1999: 128.

¹⁰⁸ Alexander 2010: 54; Dwyer 1991: 157; Erdle 2010: 98; Gränzer 1999: 111, 127.

government established the post of “presidential adviser for human rights,” supplementing it a year later with the creation of a governmental human rights group, the High Council for Human Rights and Basic Freedoms (*Comité Supérieur des Droits de l’Homme et des Libertés Fondamentales*, CSDHFLF) that reported directly to the president.¹⁰⁹ Finally, in 1992 the government instituted a Presidential Medal for Human Rights.¹¹⁰

Tunisia, Human Rights, and the West

Initially, Ben Ali’s strategy of monopolizing Tunisia’s human rights narrative was primarily motivated by domestic concerns, but his reforms, “however, were not enacted in ignorance of the international climate.”¹¹¹ The president had received parts of his education in France and the United States, which helped mold him into a modern leader well versed in the West’s rhetoric. Whereas Bourguiba often spoke about democracy without making a full connection to the Western understanding of the term, “Ben Ali, on the other hand, spoke the language of liberal democracy . . . He also talked about the rule of law and individual rights and liberties, including the right to hold and express opinions that differed from the majority or from the government.”¹¹²

But Western norms are not a light burden to carry. Talking the talk was one thing, walking the walk a different one altogether. Thus, in order to maintain his credibility, Ben Ali found himself obliged to allow international human rights organizations and media outlets to document his purportedly exemplary behavior. Unfortunately for the president, their reports tended to present a picture quite different from the one offered by his regime. For instance, Amnesty International upped its focus on Tunisia already in 1989 due to suspected flaws in the country’s judicial and penal institutions,¹¹³ and in 1992 it published a stinging report that documented “mishandled arrests and detention procedures, torture, and death in detention.”¹¹⁴ Put plainly, Ben Ali’s embrace of all things human rights came at a predictable price. He had become

caught in the contradictions of his regime. In presidential speeches, human rights figured prominently as part of the heritage of November 7, but he could not effectively use the rhetoric of human rights to bolster the legitimacy of his government and simultaneously appear to sanction egregious abuses. *The human rights rhetoric had a power of its own and imposed limits on acceptable policy.*¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ Dalacoura 2007: 175; Murphy 1999: 204–05.

¹¹⁰ Erdle 2010: 110.

¹¹¹ Waltz 1997: 86.

¹¹² Alexander 2010: 53.

¹¹³ Murphy 1999: 204.

¹¹⁴ Waltz 1995: 182.

¹¹⁵ Waltz 1995: 182–83 (emphasis added).

Over the next few years, human rights groups continued to level serious accusations against the regime.¹¹⁶ Ben Ali naturally contested the charges, often blaming individuals working for the regime as personally responsible for the alleged violations, or simply claiming that some encroachments, while regrettable, were necessary as the government faced an Islamist uprising intent on its destruction. The government strategy was therefore not to deny that human rights violations had occurred, but instead to argue that they “were anomalies that would not happen once the ‘parentheses’ of the Islamist crackdown had been ‘closed.’”¹¹⁷

Despite the negative publicity, Ben Ali concluded that the importance of owning the human rights narrative warranted certain concessions. Consequently, the president invited representatives from both Amnesty and the International Federation of Human Rights to discuss pertinent issues, and allowed foreign observers to witness military trials against Islamists.¹¹⁸ As long as North American and European leaders agreed that “because Islamic fundamentalism questions the basis of Western style secularism it is to be considered a greater evil than repression,”¹¹⁹ the human rights organizations’ critiques remained toothless. Thus, rather than letting them discourage him, the president doubled down on his strategy and made the transnational organizations his partners in Tunisia’s human rights crusade, proclaiming in May 1992 that “human rights are our choice and our policy.”¹²⁰ Seven months later, during a ceremony marking the fifth anniversary of his coming to power, Ben Ali asserted that “through our legislation, initiatives and daily practice, the Tunisian people are assured of their rights.”¹²¹ He also pointed to the chaos in neighboring Algeria as a reminder to the West of what Tunisia without his steady hand might look like.¹²² In short, as long as undemocratic Islamists constituted the only victims of the president’s inconsistent approach to human rights, his international allies applauded Tunisia’s progress and its stated commitment to Western values.¹²³ In 1993 the United Nations elected Tunisia to head its Human Rights Commission and France awarded Ben Ali a prestigious human rights prize.¹²⁴

By the mid-1990s the extent of the regime’s investment in human rights was such that it could not be abandoned. Eager to promote Tunisia internationally as a country with an exemplary human rights record, the regime actively pushed this image by distributing English-language documentation of its accomplishments to foreign embassies.¹²⁵ In 1994, the government

¹¹⁶ Amnesty International 1994; Murphy 1999: 207, 2001: 6; Noyon 2003: 106.

¹¹⁷ Noyon 2003: 106.

¹¹⁸ Waltz 1995: 183.

¹¹⁹ Gränzer 1999: 130.

¹²⁰ Amnesty International 1994: 1.

¹²¹ Amnesty International 1994: 19.

¹²² Entelis 1997: 47.

¹²³ Entelis 1997: 49; Powel and Sadiki 2010: 103.

¹²⁴ Waltz 1997: 86.

¹²⁵ Waltz 1995: 201. For a stunning example of regime propaganda, see Chaabane (1997).

issued a leaflet detailing 117 specific actions it had taken since 1987 that had improved the country's human rights situation, as the regime continued to present "itself as the protector of human rights and [took] every opportunity to emphasise its commitment to democracy and the president's pioneering role in it."¹²⁶

But the government's appropriation of the human rights narrative increased the risk of major discrepancies between its words and deeds. Tunisia therefore found itself in an odd position: While many countries like to flaunt their commitment to human rights and perhaps an even greater number of states are responsible for severe human rights violations, Tunisia fit both descriptions. As Amnesty International concluded,

There are few countries where human rights have a higher profile than Tunisia. Praise of human rights appears in nearly every speech by nearly every public figure. Human rights are cited daily in press articles, and several major conferences a year relate to human rights. Tunis is the seat of the *Institut arabe des droits de l'homme*, Arab Institute for Human Rights, it hosts an Amnesty International Section and in November 1992 it was the venue for the African Regional Meeting of the World Conference on Human Rights. At the United Nations (UN), Tunisian officials sit on most of the UN committees dealing with human rights. Tunisia has ratified nearly all UN human rights instruments and regularly submits, on time, its reports to the appropriate committees.... As a result of its high international human rights profile, its constant emphasis in speeches on the importance of these rights and its appointment of human rights officials and commissions, the Tunisian Government should have, and is probably widely perceived as having, an excellent human rights record. Sadly, the reality is very different.¹²⁷

The Point of No Return: Tunisia and the European Union

To Amnesty's chagrin, Ben Ali's charade initially resulted in wholehearted support from Western capitals. France in particular came to provide Tunisia's new leader with nearly "unconditional material and political backing."¹²⁸ Still, the honeymoon could not last forever. In the early 1990s, François Mitterrand began to incorporate the notion of political conditionality into foreign policy by declaring that "France will tie its financial assistance to efforts made to progress towards more freedom"¹²⁹ in recipient countries. In 1993, the member states of the European Community (EC) revised the Lomé Convention (the EC document responsible for regulating trade and aid) to make aid allocation conditional upon human rights considerations.¹³⁰ While not yet a critical development as far as Ben Ali was concerned, Tunisia's

¹²⁶ Dalacoura 2007: 175.

¹²⁸ Sadiki 2002a: 75.

¹³⁰ Waltz 1995: 30.

¹²⁷ Amnesty International 1994: 1.

¹²⁹ Daguzan 2002: 135. See also Waltz (1995: 30).

dependence on European commerce and assistance meant that the country could ill afford to be caught in violation of basic human rights norms.¹³¹

The relevance of Europe's human rights frame increased when the European Union (EU) announced the creation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP, also known as the "Barcelona Process"), which aimed to promote trade and improve security in the Euro-Mediterranean region. In order to qualify for partnership, non-EU countries had to sign Association Agreements (AA) that then governed their revised relationships with Europe.¹³² The contents of the AAs vary from country to country, but always include "a number of political principles whose acceptance and obedience are said to constitute a *conditio sine qua non* for the validity of the accord."¹³³ In Tunisia's case, the AA signed in 1995 specifically states that "relations between the Parties, as well as all the provisions of the agreement itself, shall be based on the respect for human rights and the democratic principles which guide their domestic and international policies and constitute an essential element of the Agreement."¹³⁴

In order to pre-empt European voices critical of Tunisian inclusion in the Barcelona Process, the government intensified its liberalization program in 1994.¹³⁵ In parallel to its discussions with the EU, the regime changed Tunisia's election rules to guarantee opposition parties at least 19 of the 163 parliament seats, regardless of the election outcome. This meant that for the first time since independence the opposition would be represented in the legislature.¹³⁶ That 19 seats, which unsurprisingly was all the opposition mustered in the 1994 elections, was insufficient to accomplish much in terms of policy is beside the point. What is of consequence here is that Ben Ali's need to appear democratic abroad caused him to change the political rules at home.

The signing of the 1995 Association Agreement was beneficial to both Tunisia and the EU, but it also meant that both parties were now committed to a close relationship within the framework of Western values. Importantly, the Barcelona Process signifies a drastic change in the European Union's approach to its external affairs, representing as it did "the first European foreign policy initiative to place the promotion of democracy at the heart of EU-Mediterranean relations."¹³⁷ This is not to say that either Tunisian or European officials saw democracy promotion as a particularly important element of the Agreement, but Tunisia's EMP membership did nonetheless bind both sides to the liberal rhetoric upon which the partnership was based. The consequences of this arrangement would soon become apparent.¹³⁸

¹³¹ Powel and Sadiki 2010: 69. ¹³² Del Sarto and Schumacher 2011: 932–33.

¹³³ Erdle 2010: 118. ¹³⁴ European Union and the Republic of Tunisia 1995.

¹³⁵ King 1998: 121. ¹³⁶ King 1998: 121. ¹³⁷ Powel and Sadiki 2010: 31.

¹³⁸ Erdle 2010: 118; Powel 2009a: 195; Borowiec 1998: 86–87.

On May 22, 1996, the European Parliament (EP) took the unprecedented step of denouncing Tunisia on the basis of its human rights record. The EP cited the government's treatment of opposition figures, prison conditions, and the curtailing of the press as reasons for concern. The Parliament also pointed to high-profile cases of government harassment of prominent human rights activists.¹³⁹ A coinciding and highly critical US State Department report on Tunisia's human rights performance,¹⁴⁰ along with the continued stream of negative assessments by human rights organizations, amplified the impact of European criticism. Furthermore, by now it had become "commonplace in both the United States and Europe for major newspapers to run summary accounts of reports issued by international human rights watchdog groups,"¹⁴¹ which increased the pressure on repressive governments. Importantly, the EP sought to hold Tunisia accountable by calling "on the [European] Commission to insist that the Tunisian government respect the commitments made in the Association Agreement regarding human and political rights."¹⁴²

For France, Tunisia's closest European ally, these criticisms were particularly uncomfortable and could hardly be disregarded. Just a year prior to the EP's condemnation, soon-to-be French president Jacques Chirac asserted that France

must say loud and clear that democracy, freedom and human rights are not luxuries reserved for western [*sic*] societies, but values to be lived by all peoples and concretely realized. The requirement of democracy and the respect for human rights have to figure among the main criteria of our international action.¹⁴³

As a consequence of the new international climate, Ben Ali's scheduled visit to Paris was delayed by 20 months, and when it finally took place in October 1997 it was an awkward ordeal for all involved since the French press and international human rights groups insisted that French officials confront Ben Ali.¹⁴⁴ Although the government "felt it could not ignore the human-rights issue, it would broach the issue in a discreet manner. As one French official remarked, 'Discretion is the most effective way to deal with this type of question.'"¹⁴⁵

Despite France and the European Commission's reluctance to publicly pressure a trusted friend and ally, Ben Ali felt forced in the second half of the 1990s to defend his human rights credentials and move in the direction of further reform. In a 1998 interview the president reiterated his commitment to the human rights issue:

Let us be clear about the fact that there are no political prisoners in Tunisia. All those in prison in Tunisia are there for common law crimes. . . . Those who respect

¹³⁹ Murphy 1999: 208; Pinfari 2011: 33–35.

¹⁴⁰ Garon 2003: 153.

¹⁴¹ Waltz 1995: 24.

¹⁴² Murphy 1999: 208.

¹⁴³ Qtd. in Daguzan 2002: 135–36.

¹⁴⁴ Garon 2003: 153; Wood 2002: 100.

¹⁴⁵ Wood 2002: 100.

the law in Tunisia are not disturbed, as we live under the rule of law. We are, quite obviously, particularly committed to safe-guarding and promoting human rights.¹⁴⁶

Caught in a vicious cycle, each time Ben Ali expressed his adoration for human rights he invited his opponents to hold him increasingly accountable for the country's paltry record. Chirac's insistence that French foreign policy would remain conditional on "democratization, human rights, and political freedoms,"¹⁴⁷ hardly made Ben Ali's balancing act any less complicated, as the French media continued to point out the discrepancy between the French president's rhetoric and Tunisia's political reality. For instance, in their book *Notre Ami Ben Ali* (2002), French writers Nicolas Beau and Jean-Pierre Tuquoi noted that "France tolerates at two hours by plane, a seemingly benign dictatorship"¹⁴⁸ despite Paris' categorical commitment to human rights.¹⁴⁹ In addition, highly publicized incidents of human rights violations, such as that involving journalist Taoufik Ben Brik in 2000, forced French, European, and American officials to publicly criticize the regime.¹⁵⁰

For France, Ben Ali's regime had simply "become too harsh, too visible for the same degree of unconditional support to be given"¹⁵¹ as had been the case until the mid-1990s. In May 2001, Hubert Védrine, France's minister of foreign affairs, expressed his dismay with Tunisia's political deterioration before parliament, and in June Development Minister Charles Josselin "met Ben Ali and spoke directly about the question of human rights in Tunisia."¹⁵² The French government portrayed Josselin's visit as a concrete change in its stance on Tunisia, and commentators expressed their hope that "now that France has begun to speak loudly and officially on the question of democracy and human rights in Tunisia, policy is only likely to develop further in this direction."¹⁵³ That Ben Ali allowed two candidates to contest him in the 1999 presidential elections and three challengers to compete in 2004 attests his desire to respond to Western prodding and indicated that the nudging had an impact.¹⁵⁴ Unfortunately, however, Western pressure on the Tunisian leader was too unevenly applied for reforms to assume real meaning, especially after the events of 9/11. For example, the EU had little to say about Ben Ali's 2004 presidential election victory in

¹⁴⁶ Qtd. in Wood 2002: 101.

¹⁴⁷ Wood 2002: 92.

¹⁴⁸ Qtd. in Wood 2002: 102.

¹⁴⁹ That France and other European regimes were aware of Tunisia's human rights problem is beyond doubt. See for instance the European Commission's report on Tunisia issued in connection to the latter's entry into the European Neighbourhood Policy (European Commission 2004).

¹⁵⁰ For details about the Ben Brik affair, see Alexander (2010: 92), Erdle (2010: 121–22), Sadiki (2002a: 75–76), and Wood (2002: 103).

¹⁵¹ Daguzan 2002: 139.

¹⁵² Daguzan 2002: 139.

¹⁵³ Daguzan 2002: 139. See also Zartman (1997: 219).

¹⁵⁴ Alexander 2010: 63; Entelis 2004: 6.

which the incumbent received 96 percent of the vote, while in the very same week lamenting the fraudulent Ukrainian elections that led to the “Orange Revolution.”¹⁵⁵

Tunisia, the West, and 9/11

Before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the US had been relatively uncritical of Ben Ali.¹⁵⁶ However, when in February 2004 he became the first Arab leader to visit Washington after George W. Bush had announced his “Freedom Agenda,”¹⁵⁷ the American president urged him “to open the political system and allow for a free and vibrant press.”¹⁵⁸ Around the same time, the EU launched a democracy promotion program of its own.

Developed in 2002–2003 as an alternative to EU enlargement, the European neighbourhood policy (ENP) envisaged the creation of a “ring of friends” east and south of the EU. More importantly, the new policy set out to address the issue of political reform beyond the EU’s borders from a different and ideally more effective tri-dimensional angle. The cornerstone of this approach was meant to be the combination of “positive conditionality,” that is economic or political rewards in exchange of reform, differentiation, and benchmarking. Whereas the Barcelona Declaration stipulated that the “strengthening of democracy and the respect for human rights” were central for the overall objective of turning the Mediterranean “into an area of dialogue, exchange and cooperation guaranteeing peace, stability and prosperity,” the ENP is more explicit as it speaks of a “commitment to shared values,” including human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and the respect for human rights.¹⁵⁹

ENP partnerships are formalized in Action Plans (AP) agreed to by the EU and the specific neighbor. Tunisia’s AP called for more trade links, but also for enhanced “political dialogue and cooperation in areas such as democracy and human rights, foreign and security policy, cooperation in the fight against terrorism, whilst promoting respect for human rights.”¹⁶⁰ Though European leaders continued to prioritize regional stability over democratization,¹⁶¹ the ENP reinforced both Tunisia’s and the EU’s official commitment to Western core values. Furthermore, the European Commission took advantage of the Union’s negotiations with Tunisia by asserting that “the EU’s first ‘priority action’ in Tunisia should be ‘the pursuit and consolidation of reforms which guarantee democracy and the rule of law.’”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁵ Youngs 2005: 3. ¹⁵⁶ Alexander 2010: 100.

¹⁵⁷ See the discussion about Egypt in this chapter. ¹⁵⁸ Azarva 2007: 5.

¹⁵⁹ Del Sarto and Schumacher 2011: 933. See also Amirah-Fernández (2006).

¹⁶⁰ European Union and the Republic of Tunisia 2004.

¹⁶¹ Hollis 2012: 94.

¹⁶² Powel and Sadiki 2010: 31.

In the four years following the signing of the AP, the Tunisian government released in excess of 2,500 political prisoners.¹⁶³ Whether this move was motivated by EU pressure is difficult to ascertain, but it is worth noting that in 2007 the EU and Tunisia created a “Subcommittee on Human Rights and Democracy” tasked with assessing Tunisia’s compliance with the political commitments undertaken in its AP.¹⁶⁴ That the committee refused to issue anything but diplomatic rebukes,¹⁶⁵ and the fact that the EU opted to never penalize Tunis may be secondary.¹⁶⁶ What mattered was that Tunisia got itself increasingly entangled in the West’s liberal rhetoric by legally binding itself to promote democracy and protect human rights. Since Tunisia’s links to the West, by Ben Ali’s purposeful design, were more intimate than many other authoritarian regimes’, “human rights concerns expressed by friendly states were not easily ignored.”¹⁶⁷ At the same time, those friendly states had little incentive to pressure Ben Ali, a valuable ally in the struggle against Islamist violence and a guarantee for national stability.

In the words of one commentator, as long as “repression occurs discreetly, by less visible and direct methods, foreign institutions are largely deprived of any means of action.”¹⁶⁸ One might add that Western states are in such cases happily absolved of their responsibility to object, which means that the authoritarian status quo is easily maintained. Moreover, “change could not be achieved without pressure from ‘above’ and ‘below.’ Mere ‘external’ accusations by international human rights organizations (‘above’) without ‘internal’ non-governmental activities (‘below’) were bound to fail.”¹⁶⁹ Nonetheless, its liberal discourse had already begun to trap the Tunisian government and its international allies in an iron cage of liberalism by transforming it into a façade democracy. What was needed now was pressure from below. As we will see in the next chapter, Ben Ali’s human rights agenda proved a useful starting point for civil society organizations to challenge the regime.

With Freedom on the Agenda: Egypt and the Democracy Discourse

Like Tunisia, Egypt has a “long history of expressing support for democracy but failing to deliver.”¹⁷⁰ Mubarak was indeed Egypt’s most vocal president-advocate of democracy, but he was hardly its first. In the mid-1970s, Sadat began to experiment with a multiparty system,¹⁷¹ although early elections were predictably

¹⁶³ Erdle 2010: 128; Human Rights Watch 2009b.

¹⁶⁴ EU–Tunisia Association Council 2007.

¹⁶⁵ Del Sarto and Schumacher 2011: 946–47.

¹⁶⁶ Powel and Sadiki 2010: 69.

¹⁶⁷ Waltz 1995: 201.

¹⁶⁸ Hibou 2011: 102.

¹⁶⁹ Gränzer 1999: 129 (emphasis added).

¹⁷⁰ Rutherford 2008: 233.

¹⁷¹ Kassem 1999: 6.

"heavily manipulated."¹⁷² While political liberalization was in part undertaken to identify domestic coalition partners, it was mainly embarked upon for external reasons.¹⁷³ As one scholar notes, "Sadat's shift to a multiparty system was never intended to be a complete and comprehensive democratic transition. Rather, it was to be a tightly controlled process of political liberalization *that would give the appearance* of free party competition with few concrete concessions from the regime."¹⁷⁴

Portraying Egypt to its new Western friends as a democratic country was important for economic reasons rather than political ones. With Egypt in desperate need of foreign investment, Sadat sought to promote "political forms that would help its appeals to Western sources of support."¹⁷⁵ Since Egypt had nationalized all foreign-owned assets as recently as 1956, foreign investors were understandably reluctant to plant their money in such uncertain soil, and the absence of political competition only reinforced investors' perceptions of Egypt as a country where the state was free from legal constraints.¹⁷⁶

Multiparty politics helped correct the view of the country as lawless, but elections alone would not satisfy foreigners' demands for legal guarantees for their investments. In 1974 the government returned some of the property that had been nationalized almost two decades earlier to its previous owners.¹⁷⁷ Still, only limited foreign investment took place, which caused the government to take drastic action. After years "of failed attempts to attract investment without implementing concrete institutional safeguards on property rights, the regime created an institutionally autonomous Supreme Constitutional Court [SCC] with powers of judicial review. The new court was designed to assuage investor concerns and guarantee institutional constraints on executive actions."¹⁷⁸ The 1979 inauguration of the SCC was truly extraordinary in Egypt's authoritarian context. The government, which up to this point had been uninhibited by checks and balances, was so keen to promote foreign investment that it willingly gave up some of its autonomy. As will become clear below, the decision to establish the SCC would come back to haunt the state more than once.¹⁷⁹

Mubarak and the Democracy Rhetoric

After Sadat's assassination in 1981, Mubarak found himself in a position similar to the one Ben Ali faced in November 1987. Replacing a controversial president in the aftermath of an Islamist act of domestic terrorism required finesse.

¹⁷² Shehata 2010: 20.

¹⁷³ Kassem 1999: 6; Kienle 2007: 248; Moustafa 2007: 87–90; Owen 1994: 183–84.

¹⁷⁴ Moustafa 2007: 90.

¹⁷⁵ Zartman 1990: 233.

¹⁷⁶ Shehata 2010: 23.

¹⁷⁷ Roussillon 1998: 361.

¹⁷⁸ Moustafa 2007: 5.

¹⁷⁹ Boyle 1996: 89; Moustafa 2007: 7–8.

To that end, Mubarak, like Ben Ali, assumed the role of reformer-healer of the nation. The new president released political activists from jail and publicly expressed his commitment to democracy.¹⁸⁰ He also hinted that he would build upon Sadat's multiparty system to extend participation further.¹⁸¹ In April 1982, six months after assuming power, Mubarak asserted that "I totally oppose the centralization of power and I have no wish to monopolize the decision-making because the country belongs to all of us and we all share a responsibility for it."¹⁸²

Roger Owen has argued that Mubarak decided to expand on Sadat's pseudo-democratic experiment because "his personal identification with democracy would give his regime a legitimacy different from that of his two predecessors"¹⁸³—at home and abroad. Still, the president was careful to point out that Egyptian democracy would by necessity look different from the variety found in the West. In what would become a familiar line of reasoning, Mubarak explained that liberalism could only be injected into Egypt's political fabric in small doses and over an extended period of time.¹⁸⁴ Although many Egyptians recognized Mubarak's embrace of democracy as the empty rhetoric it was,¹⁸⁵ they were not necessarily the president's main audience. As the leader of a country alienated from its Arab neighbors because of the same Israel policy that had rendered Egypt dependent on US support, Mubarak's principal target was Washington. Fortunately for the president, the White House considered Egypt important enough to maintain a great deal of understanding of the difficulties facing a secular Middle Eastern reformer challenged by a potent Islamist movement.

Throughout the 1980s the state tolerated, and at times even encouraged, the Muslim Brotherhood's political ambitions in order to counter the advances of other regime opponents.¹⁸⁶ This arrangement came to a halt when more radical Islamist factions recommenced their attacks on the state. Ironically, and counter to the intentions of these groups, their confrontation with the state strengthened Mubarak's hand—internationally and domestically—as the president could justify his repressive measures against the backdrop of Islamist terrorism and in defense of democracy.¹⁸⁷ Still, Mubarak's license to repress was not inexhaustible. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the foreign aid world had become unipolar. This meant that dictators wishing to receive international assistance were forced "to show at least rhetorical support for the principles of democracy and accountability."¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁰ Cook 2007: 77; Kassem 1999: 51. ¹⁸¹ Osman 2010: 166.

¹⁸² Qtd. in Kassem 2004: 54.

¹⁸³ Owen 1994: 189.

¹⁸⁴ Owen 1994: 189.

¹⁸⁵ Kassem 1999: 97.

¹⁸⁶ Cook 2007: 77; Shehata 2010: 54.

¹⁸⁷ Abaza 2006: vi. See also Cook (2007: 92).

¹⁸⁸ Rutherford 2008: 18.

Mubarak's preferred way to abide by the West's normative framework was through regular—and regularly fraudulent—elections. Most opposition parties, however, were not fooled and often opted to boycott elections rather than participate in “the creation of a false democratic façade.”¹⁸⁹ For instance, the Wafd, one of several parties that shunned the 1990 parliamentary elections, published a highly critical article in its newspaper, charging that “all the regime wants from democracy is its form. It wants all the parties to participate in a performance so that the world will think we are proceeding in the democracy march.”¹⁹⁰

As Mubarak continued to broadcast his commitment to democracy, the SCC began to recognize its own power as the court's liberal-minded judges realized that the regime's vocal support for democracy and human rights could be used against it. From the early 1990s, the SCC initiated a practice of holding the regime responsible for its international commitments. The court argued that since the government had ratified international agreements on human and political rights, these were now an implicit part of the Egyptian constitution. This meant that whenever the government violated basic human rights, it, for all practical purposes, also violated the constitution, which the SCC was mandated to protect.¹⁹¹ As a result, Egypt's international human rights obligations served to reduce the government's domestic ability to control its opponents. “Ironically,” Tamir Moustafa writes, “the Egyptian government signed and ratified these conventions as window dressing, with no expectation that they would be used by an institution like the SCC to strike down repressive legislation.”¹⁹²

The SCC was not alone in pressuring the state to liberalize. International human rights groups contributed to the court's efforts by keeping a steady eye on the regime. Due to its close relationship with the West, “Egypt has a tradition of granting access to international human rights research missions”¹⁹³ and could hardly deny such organizations access to the country without jeopardizing its democratic credentials. Despite these nuisances, Mubarak had good reasons to maintain his liberal image since

the notions of “democracy” and “democratization” are indispensable to any attempt at legitimating a regime either internally or externally. Egyptians would not willingly accept a discourse that insisted on the alleged merits of authoritarian rule, even though they are more than familiar with the gap between democratic rhetoric and actual policy... At the same time, such a discourse would alienate governments in Europe and North America, as well as the international financial institutions, international organizations and non-governmental organizations

¹⁸⁹ Moustafa 2007: 100.

¹⁹⁰ Qtd. in Moustafa 2007: 100.

¹⁹¹ Boyle 1996: 89; Moustafa 2007: 7–8, 167–68.

¹⁹² Moustafa 2007: 167–68.

¹⁹³ Hicks 2006: 67. See for example Human Rights Watch (1992).

whose aid and support are more or less conditional on the respect of human rights and democratic procedures.¹⁹⁴

Since Mubarak's Western allies—the United States in particular—“purported to promote human rights and liberal values generally,”¹⁹⁵ the presence of a violent Islamist threat turned out to be a blessing in disguise for the government. “Caught in the dilemma, as they saw it, between democracy and weakening a ‘moderate’ Arab regime, Western states repeatedly failed to criticize the Egyptian government’s authoritarian behavior,”¹⁹⁶ thus limiting the impact of the human rights organizations’ criticisms. That the US State Department compiled annual—often critical—reports on Egypt’s human rights situation¹⁹⁷ mattered only marginally since “political reform was understood by both sides as being subordinate to the strategic concerns that lay at the heart of the U.S.–Egyptian relationship.”¹⁹⁸

Benefiting from the absence of external pressures, Mubarak went after his opponents, and “by the end of the decade the regime had defeated the oppositional Islamists involved in armed resistance and terrorism; in the process it had also managed to contain the Muslim Brothers, who sought to bring about change without resorting to violence.”¹⁹⁹ The demise of the violent Islamist threat, however, did not represent a full-fledged victory for Mubarak since its disappearance also removed the regime’s most compelling argument against political reform. Without convincing scapegoats, Mubarak suddenly found himself under more pressure to liberalize than perhaps any other Arab leader when in the wake of 9/11 the United States radically revised its approach to Middle Eastern politics.

September 11 and the Freedom Agenda

Similarly to Tunisia, Egypt had come under increased European scrutiny over its human rights record in the mid-1990s due to the country’s inclusion in the Barcelona Process.²⁰⁰ Nonetheless, it was only after the events of 9/11 that Cairo had to take foreign prodding seriously. President Bush’s initial response to the terrorist attacks was to meet violence with violence. Soon, however, new lines of reasoning surfaced in the American capital as political strategists began to wonder if perhaps Washington’s longstanding support for authoritarian Middle Eastern allies at the expense of democratic institutions had helped create the Islamist problem. Put differently, was it just a matter of coincidence that the majority of the 9/11 hijackers stemmed from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, two of America’s staunchest allies in the region?²⁰¹

¹⁹⁴ Kienle 2000: 176.

¹⁹⁷ Esposito 1999: 56.

²⁰⁰ Pace 2011: 52–53.

¹⁹⁵ Dalacoura 2003: 4.

¹⁹⁸ Rutherford 2008: 6.

²⁰¹ Cook 2012: 244–45; Dalacoura 2005: 963–64.

¹⁹⁶ Dalacoura 2003: 47.

¹⁹⁹ Kienle 2004: 74.

The 2002 State of the Union Address marked the beginning of President Bush's efforts push to promote democratization in the Middle East. Before the traditional joint session of congress, the president vowed that

America will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law; limits on the power of the state; respect for women; private property; free speech; equal justice; and religious tolerance. America will take the side of brave men and women who advocate these values around the world, including the Islamic world.²⁰²

The White House's burgeoning approach to combat terrorism assumed clearer forms over the next few years. In December 2002, Richard Haass, the National Security Council's Senior Director for Near East and South Asian Affairs, publicly emphasized the importance of democracy promotion in US Middle East foreign policy, and in February 2003, Bush raised similar points in a speech given at the American Enterprise Institute.²⁰³ Washington's definitive commitment to Middle Eastern democracy promotion occurred on November 6, 2003, in a talk marking the 20th anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy.

Reflecting on his country's history of propping up authoritarian leaders in the region, Bush concluded that

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo.²⁰⁴

The president went on to explain that in pursuit of these objectives, his government had “adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East” that would bring democracy to the region.²⁰⁵ The “Freedom Agenda,” as it became known, obviously required the cooperation of regional allies and the president therefore called upon Cairo to lead the charge: “The great and proud nation of Egypt,” Bush proclaimed, “has shown the way toward peace in the Middle East, and now should show the way toward democracy in the Middle East.”²⁰⁶

The Bush administration continued to loudly and clearly transmit its new message to the Egyptian president. When Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Cairo on June 20, 2005, she echoed her boss, declaring that “for 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of

²⁰² Bush 2002. See also Craner (2006).

²⁰³ Blaydes 2011: 203.

²⁰⁴ Bush 2003.

²⁰⁵ Bush 2003.

²⁰⁶ Bush 2003.

democracy in this region here in the Middle East—and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people.”²⁰⁷ At the time of Rice’s visit, the Egyptian government was experiencing a miniature PR crisis. Earlier in the year the government had detained Ayman Nour, the leader of the oppositional Ghad Party, and only released him from his arrest after considerable domestic and international outcry.²⁰⁸ Around the same time, street protests became increasingly common as activists took advantage of the regime’s efforts to placate Washington as well as the American secretary of state’s visit.²⁰⁹ Rice seemingly reflected on these developments in her speech, stating that “we are all concerned for the future of Egypt’s reforms when peaceful supporters of democracy—men and women—are not free from violence. The day must come when the rule of law replaces emergency decrees—and when the independent judiciary replaces arbitrary justice.”²¹⁰

In line with its new approach to the Middle East, Washington established a number of regional democracy promotion programs, including the Middle East Partnership Initiative and the Broader Middle East and North Africa Partnership Initiative (co-developed with the other G8 countries).²¹¹ The White House’s new discourse was an unmistakable signal to Mubarak of what his American allies expected from him,²¹² which forced the president “to position himself as a reformer.”²¹³

Mubarak’s Reform Response

Already in 2003, “the Bush administration’s rhetorical support for political change forced Mubarak to act.”²¹⁴ The government abolished the criticized state security courts and created the National Council for Human Rights (NCHR), a “semigovernmental institution”²¹⁵ charged with the task of monitoring Egypt’s human rights performance.²¹⁶ Similar to Ben Ali’s creation of the CSDHFL in Tunisia a decade earlier, the NCHR was devised to co-opt Egypt’s human rights movement by recruiting some of its leading advocates and thus put it under state supervision.²¹⁷ Despite official claims to the contrary, the NCHR had “no power to compel the government to change its policies and [served] only as window dressing.”²¹⁸ While some considered its creation a “positive step,”²¹⁹ others deemed it a “superficial attempt to polish the NDP’s [National Democratic Party] image for the United States.”²²⁰

²⁰⁷ Rice 2005.

²⁰⁸ Arafat 2009: 108, 111.

²⁰⁹ El-Mahdi 2009: 91.

²¹⁰ Rice 2005.

²¹¹ See Dunne and Hamzawy (2008: 39–40).

²¹² Wittes 2006: paragraphs 4 and 5.

²¹³ Cook 2007: 147.

²¹⁴ Cook 2012: 264.

²¹⁵ Dunne and Hamzawy 2008: 30.

²¹⁶ Durac 2009: 79.

²¹⁷ Cook 2007: 7; Stacher 2005: paragraph 13.

²¹⁸ Cook 2007: 7.

²¹⁹ Dunne and Hamzawy 2008: 28–29.

²²⁰ Arafat 2009: 98–99.

To the surprise of many, the NCHR's first report (released in 2005) "acknowledged claims of torture in the country's police stations and called for an end to the emergency laws."²²¹ Even though the NCHR was far from an independent watchdog, the government, due to international pressures, had seemingly repeated its SCC mistake by again creating an institution that formally bound the regime to its rhetoric. The ruling NDP also underwent a facelift. In 2003, the party released a policy document on "The Rights of Citizenship and Democracy,"²²² and at the following year's party convention Mubarak emphasized the importance of "'strengthening' and 'deepening'" Egypt's democratic institutions.²²³

In late 2004, the government suddenly approved the formation of two new political parties in one month after declining the previous 63 such applications.²²⁴ In February 2005, Mubarak declared that Article 76 of the constitution would be amended to replace the presidential referendum held every six years with multi-candidate presidential elections²²⁵ that would "strengthen the democratic movement and let the Egyptian people freely choose their leader."²²⁶ Notwithstanding his triumphant rhetoric, the president had delayed reforms for as long as possible, hoping that Bush would not be re-elected in 2004, but it "eventually became clear that Bush's demands would have to be met."²²⁷ The reforms were well received by the West and accepted as evidence that Egypt was moving in the right direction.²²⁸ In addition to being open, the 2005 presidential elections were also "reasonably free."²²⁹

Still, the odds were hopelessly stacked against the challengers, who were largely unknown to the Egyptian public. Despite being allocated "surprisingly large"²³⁰ amounts of time on state TV, the opposition candidates simply could not compete with Mubarak. In the end, the incumbent emerged victorious with a comfortable 88 percent of the votes. While some irregularities occurred, it is unlikely that they fundamentally affected the outcome of the election.²³¹ But Mubarak's democratic victory before the world's eyes came at a high price, namely the end of the regime's monopoly on presidential politics. In its bid to appease Washington, the government had permitted unprecedented civil society and judicial oversight of the elections. Furthermore, and perhaps even more importantly, "the taboo of criticizing the regime had been broken."²³² As one activist put it, the electoral process disrupted the existing

²²¹ Stacher 2005: paragraph 1. ²²² Arafat 2009: 97. ²²³ Qtd. in Cook 2012: 264.

²²⁴ Albrecht 2007: 64.

²²⁵ Durac 2009: 79; Moustafa 2007: 210–11; Rutherford 2008: 167–68; Shahin 2010: 104–05.

²²⁶ Arafat 2009: 97. ²²⁷ Blaydes 2011: 204. ²²⁸ Blaydes 2011: 205.

²²⁹ Rutherford 2008: 257. ²³⁰ Tadros 2005: paragraph 12.

²³¹ Aly 2012: 14; Azarva 2007: 2. ²³² Azarva 2007: 2.

“culture of fear” by transforming Mubarak from “half-god, half-president” to “just a man.”²³³

The parliamentary elections held a few months later similarly amounted to a pyrrhic victory for the regime. The ruling NDP obtained 69 percent of parliament’s 454 seats, but many of its delegates had run as independents as a result of the party’s decision to promote other candidates. After the elections the independents joined (or rejoined) the NDP to help secure the party’s two-thirds majority. The fact that the NDP’s “approved” candidates only won in one-third of the races they contested amplifies the impression that when given the chance to vote for something different, the Egyptian people did so overwhelmingly.²³⁴ Unfortunately, Egypt’s system of political patronage has tended to generate self-interested politicians whose allegiances are for sale and help maintain the country’s political status quo.²³⁵ Nonetheless, true independents also performed splendidly. “Independent” Muslim Brotherhood candidates, forbidden from running on a joint party platform, captured 88 seats, or 20 percent of parliament. In fact, Brotherhood candidates won every seat they contested,²³⁶ despite government attempts at interference, including “vote buying, voter intimidation, and shortages of judges to oversee ballot box counting,” as well as government refusal to allow independent monitors to oversee the vote counting.²³⁷

In spite of these shortcomings, the 2005 elections were quite possibly the freest Egypt had ever experienced, largely due to the government’s desire to portray itself as a real democracy.²³⁸ Given the rhetoric flowing out of Washington, and echoing in London, Paris, Berlin, and Brussels,²³⁹ this should hardly be surprising. Mubarak, like other regional strongmen, took Bush’s Freedom Agenda seriously.²⁴⁰ During a large international conference in Sana’a, Yemen established the Arab Democratic Dialogue Forum in January 2004, and two months later, writers, activists, and intellectuals gathered in Alexandria for a conference on “Arab Reform.” In May of that year, Arab foreign ministers assembled in Cairo to draft “A Course for Development, Modernization and Reform in the Arab World,”²⁴¹ and later that month the Arab League issued the Tunis Declaration, which implored its signatories to “[consolidate] the democratic practice” and to protect “the humanitarian principles and the noble values of human rights in their comprehensive and interdependent dimensions.”²⁴² Finally, in June, thinkers and politicians

²³³ Qtd. in Wise 2006. ²³⁴ Shahin 2010: 114.

²³⁵ Arafat 2009: 16–17; Rutherford 2008: 238; Kassem 1999: 10.

²³⁶ Cook 2012: 188–89; Sharp 2006a: 1. ²³⁷ Sharp 2006a: 5.

²³⁸ Arafat 2009: 118; Moustafa 2007: 210–11; Rutherford 2008: 156; Shahin 2010: 104–05.

²³⁹ For European pressure on Egypt, see Dalacoura (2003: 49) and Durac (2009: 81–82).

²⁴⁰ Arafat 2009: 93; Dalacoura 2005: 967–68. ²⁴¹ Blandford 2004.

²⁴² League of Arab States 2004. See also Dalacoura (2005: 968).

from various Arab countries agreed on the Doha Declaration for Democracy and Reform.²⁴³

That many regimes felt compelled by President Bush's rhetoric to implement reforms is hardly in doubt, but "Egypt is perhaps the best illustration of these ambiguous forces and influences."²⁴⁴ We may never know exactly how much pressure the Bush administration put on Mubarak, but that might not matter. Drawing on international relations theory, Lisa Blaydes argues that the Egyptian president's public statements on the merits of democracy, imbued as they were with high "audience costs,"²⁴⁵ meant that Mubarak faced significant backlash if he failed to come through on his promises. Problematically for the Egyptian president, the period 2003–2006, and 2005 in particular, represents "the rhetorical peak"²⁴⁶ of President Bush's Freedom Agenda when Washington "took several steps to increase its ability to use assistance programs as leverage for democratization."²⁴⁷ As he could not afford to alienate his most important ally and aid donor, Mubarak simply had to play along in the international democracy game, which, as we have seen, had significant domestic consequences.

In 2006, Washington began to tone down its democratization rhetoric when Hamas' election victory in Palestine compounded the shock of the Muslim Brotherhood's political gains the year before. Democracy, contrary to US expectations, had led not to the emergence of liberal forces, but rather to the strengthening of Islamist, anti-Western parties,²⁴⁸ a development that "brought the 'Freedom Agenda' to an effective, if not rhetorical, end around the region."²⁴⁹ In response, the Egyptian government passed a second series of reforms that rescinded some of the laws passed in 2005. Still, the damage, from the regime's point of view, had already been done. While no longer compelled to engage in an aggressive reform program, neither could Mubarak disentangle himself from the liberal rhetoric he had so vigorously embraced in the preceding three years. The president recommenced repression of political dissidents, but he now enjoyed less freedom to do so and discretion became increasingly important.

Crucially, Bush's rhetoric had not only bound his Egyptian ally to comply with the democratization narrative; it also boomeranged back at the White House as Washington's relationship with Cairo came under increased scrutiny.²⁵⁰ Congress began to demand that aid be tied to human rights conditions, and although the administration did what it could to stave off legislative attempts to cut assistance to Egypt, the genie had irreversibly escaped the

²⁴³ Dalacoura 2005: 967. See also Hawthorne (2005).

²⁴⁴ Dalacoura 2005: 969.

²⁴⁵ Blaydes 2011. On audience costs, see Fearon (1994), Schultz (1998, 1999), and Tomz (2007).

²⁴⁶ Blaydes 2011: 204. ²⁴⁷ Dunne and Hamzawy 2008: 39.

²⁴⁸ Alexander 2009: 148; Ottaway 2005: paragraph 1; Sharp 2006b.

²⁴⁹ Cook 2012: 190. See also Owen (2012: 71–72).

²⁵⁰ Keck and Sikkink 1998.

bottle.²⁵¹ And although critics rightly charged that the administration had abandoned its Middle Eastern democratization objective, “the foreign policy bureaucracy continued to encourage democratic change in the Middle East” in more subtle ways.²⁵² The democratization wheels had once and for all been set in motion, making it difficult for Mubarak and Bush to avoid the freedom narrative.

Over the years, Washington has repeatedly shown that the promotion of democracy and human rights is an easily retractable priority subjugated to more immediate concerns of regional stability and security, a steady flow of oil, and peace for Israel.²⁵³ As a result, Arab populations are often, for good reason, suspicious of the United States’ sincerity about democratization,²⁵⁴ and consider America’s commitment to liberal ideals hypocritical at best.²⁵⁵ Still, “however superficial, naive, selective, or perhaps downright cynical... [the US] emphasis on democracy promotion may be, it cannot be dismissed as sheer rhetoric, and even then such rhetorical choices would have to be accounted for.”²⁵⁶ By the time Washington abandoned, or at least lowered the intensity of its democratization agenda, important structural changes had already occurred. Semi-independent judiciaries, governmental human rights agencies, and competitive, albeit manipulated, elections, what Steven Cook calls “pseudodemocratic institutions,”²⁵⁷ had all been established. While such institutions can constitute

an important component of regime stability, they do pose a certain risk to non-democratic leaders. Although analysts have never taken the seemingly democratic laws, rules, and regulations of authoritarian regimes very seriously, dedicated counter-elites have. Opposition groups in authoritarian settings have consistently sought to leverage pseudodemocratic institutions to their advantage... [by giving] content and meaning to institutions that the military and its civilian allies preferred remain hollow.²⁵⁸

In the three decades preceding President Bush’s unveiling of the Freedom Agenda, Egyptian leaders had enjoyed all the benefits that came with being a façade democratic ally of the United States. Before 2003, to qualify as a democrat an Egyptian president simply had to sound like a democratic leader. As a result, praising Western values was a low-cost endeavor that promoted foreign assistance while causing few domestic disruptions. However, once the White House began to demand that Mubarak put his rhetoric into practice, the Egyptian opposition found itself afforded a new set of opportunities. The West’s value system, which until now had served mainly to strengthen

²⁵¹ Berger 2012: 610; Wittes 2006: paragraph 7. ²⁵² Cook 2012: 270.

²⁵³ Bellin 2005: 32–33; Ottaway 2005: paragraph 5; Rutherford 2008: 4–5.

²⁵⁴ Ottaway 2005: paragraph 1. ²⁵⁵ Rutherford 2008: 257. ²⁵⁶ Kienle 2007: 231.

²⁵⁷ Cook 2007: 135. ²⁵⁸ Cook 2007: 135.

the regime, suddenly transformed into its Achilles' heel. For every repressed anti-government demonstration and protest that took place, the regime had to muster ever greater efforts to maintain its porous democratic façade, a fact scarcely lost on its adversaries.

Conclusion

This chapter traced the development of façade democratic regimes in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt in order to show how their ties to the democratic world inadvertently pushed them in a liberal direction. Although each state followed its own distinct path to façade democracy, their procedural divergences are less important than the converging outcomes. In each case, the regime became increasingly obliged to live up to the liberal image it had created for itself. Eventually, all three governments' instrumental adoption of Western norms like human rights and democracy began to trap them in a self-perpetuating cycle: Every time they proclaimed their respect for such principles, they implicitly invited human rights groups and media outlets to scrutinize the relationship between their discourse and actual performance.

The three regimes initially got themselves entangled in liberalism for different reasons. The shah embraced human rights and political liberalization as a direct consequence of his pre-existing relationship with Washington and Jimmy Carter's assumption of the presidency. Similarly, Egypt's espousal of liberalism was motivated by the need to accomplish an international realignment in order to promote trade with the West. In Tunisia, Ben Ali initially appropriated the appearance of democratizer to achieve domestic legitimacy, but, perhaps more than any other leader analyzed in this chapter, soon recognized the international benefits of erecting a democratic façade. In the end, however, the outcome in each case was nearly identical: as the benefits of appearing democratic amassed, it became nearly inconceivable for any of the three governments to venture down a different path. Due to the fact that Western patronage was the source of domestic elite support, any measure that would jeopardize the country's international standing would consequently reduce the regime's value to its domestic backers. As a result, once the three regimes had commenced their respective transformations to façade democracy, they could hardly retrace their steps. In a sense, a deal with the devil had been struck, and come what may, Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt's leaders would be forced to maintain their liberal appearance.

As long as domestic opposition groups remained either violent or passive, the regimes had traditionally had little to fear since their Western supporters had no interest in a change of the status quo. This equilibrium was, however, upset when Western leaders—first Jimmy Carter in the case of Iran, and

25 years later George W. Bush and his European counterparts in the Tunisian and Egyptian cases—suddenly increased the pressure, either implicitly or explicitly, on their allies to liberalize. Having spent years, or even decades, praising the merits of liberalism, the three autocrats now had little choice but to remain true to their previously empty commitments. Still, even then the relatively robust Western pressure on the regimes to democratize had only limited effects. Western heads of states desired reforms that would de-radicalize extreme elements by making politics a viable path to incremental change, but neither American nor European leaders intended for their friendly strongmen to be removed from power. Accordingly, Western pressure was either half-hearted, or, alternatively, quickly withdrawn when it became clear that democratization would produce not democrats, but rather illiberal opposition elements seeking to take advantage of democratic institutions.

What liberalization expectations did accomplish, however, was a change in the domestic conditions for contentious politics. As the next chapter will show, the three regimes' hypocritical embrace of Western liberalism meant that opposition groups willing to espouse democracy and human rights now found themselves empowered. Furthermore, the introduction of façade democracy meant that the prospect for an iron cage of liberalism to emerge improved dramatically.

Part III

Domestic Politics

4

Survival of the Fittest

Challenging Façade Democracies

Democracy is the best guarantee of our future.

—Hosni Mubarak, April 1982¹

The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world. America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one.

—George W. Bush, January 2005²

Friendly relations with the West helped transform the autocratic regimes in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt into façade democracies, a development that eventually placed significant pressure on the three governments when changing Western priorities forced them to honor their insincere liberal commitments. Pressure on the three regimes, however, did not stem solely from external demands. Rather, domestic opposition groups compounded their adversaries' difficulties by centering their dissidence on calls for democratization and respect for human rights. That opposition groups embraced the very same rhetorical positions that the regime had been obliged to espouse due to its relationships with Western democracies was, I argue, far from a coincidence. On the contrary, the rise and relative prominence of such groups can be partially explained by their countries' close friendships with the West.

To propose that political challengers—including revolutionaries—are shaped by their environments is hardly a novel contribution. For instance, Jeff Goodwin has argued that it is the characteristics of the state that dictate whether or not a revolutionary movement will emerge, since such movements are “unintentionally facilitated and even encouraged by that subset of violent and exclusionary authoritarian states that are also organizationally

¹ Qtd. in Kassem 2004: 54.

² Bush 2005a.

incoherent and militarily weak.”³ Goodwin’s claim is that a state that does not provide opposition groups with political avenues to challenge it makes itself the target of revolutionary movements by removing all other paths to change. This chapter builds on Goodwin’s insight that opposition movements are shaped by the state, but it disagrees with the idea that repressive states give their opponents “no other way out.” I contend that certain types of repressive states, that is, façade democracies, make violent opposition highly inefficient, while instead providing some space for liberal opposition groups to operate in. This means that in order to understand how opposition movements evolve in authoritarian contexts it is not enough to only consider the regime’s domestic characteristics. Rather, the state’s international standing must be considered as well.

In order to show how international factors may shape domestic politics, this chapter traces the development of opposition to the state in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt in light of the three regimes’ external commitments. It argues that while violently inclined opponents ultimately represented minuscule threats to the shah, Ben Ali, and Mubarak, the three leaders found liberal-minded opposition groups that emphasized democratization and human rights a much more difficult nut to crack. Somewhat protected by the convergence between theirs and the state’s rhetoric, these groups enjoyed more freedom to operate and stood a better chance of gaining legitimacy both at home and abroad. In the end, it was these groups that discovered how the regime could be challenged: not through an armed uprising, but by discursively demanding that the state honor its liberal commitments. As in previous chapters, Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt are analyzed individually, beginning with Iran.

Iran: Students as Teachers of Revolution

Iran enjoys a long history of anti-systemic social movements,⁴ and external factors have often been a major component in episodes of mass mobilization against the state. In 1891, the country’s Shi’i clergy, the *ulama*, joined forces with bazaar merchants to oppose the monarchy’s decision to grant a British entrepreneur, Major Gerald Talbot, monopolistic rights to Iran’s tobacco industry. As far as the merchants were concerned, the concession was symptomatic of the regime’s inclination to promote foreign capitalist interests at the expense of domestic businessmen.⁵ The clergy, meanwhile, considered the concession a sign of the country’s moral decline and feared that Westernization would undermine its and Islam’s role in society.⁶ These two

³ Goodwin 2001: 26.

⁴ Keddie 1983a.

⁵ Bakhash 1991: 1485.

⁶ Amjad 1989: 37.

related concerns—economic competition from foreigners and the demise of Iran's Shi'i heritage—helped forge an alliance between the merchants and the clergy, a partnership that would be rekindled in the late 1970s.⁷

In response to the concession, the clergy under Ayatollah Shirazi's (at the time the country's highest ranking religious figure) leadership mobilized massive demonstrations and strikes throughout Iran, accompanied by a consumer boycott of tobacco. These actions emanated from a *fatwa* allegedly issued by Shirazi himself. The brief ordinance read "In the name of God, the Merciful and the Forgiving. As of now, the consumption of tobacco in any form is tantamount to war against the Imam of the Age,"⁸ and was widely observed.⁹ Massive popular participation in the "Tobacco Movement" eventually forced both the royal house and Talbot to acknowledge the near impossible task of executing the concession, and in early 1892 the parties canceled the agreement in its entirety.¹⁰

The salience of external factors in Iranian politics again became visible during the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11 that pursued "the destruction of internal dictatorship and the establishment of a truly sovereign country" free of Western interference.¹¹ The movement, backed as it was by merchants who hoped that a constitution would limit foreign intrusions on the Iranian market, soon gathered momentum and convinced the king to approve Iran's first constitution on December 31, 1906.¹² The movement's emphasis on a constitution was itself a result of Western influence, as foreign-educated Iranian intellectuals concluded that the presence of constitutions was a common feature among the world's most advanced nations. Their analysis was seemingly validated when Japan, the only Asian country with a constitution, defeated Russia, the only European power without one, in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05. Subsequently, "treatises explaining constitutions and their virtues began to circulate, and news of Japanese victories was happily and rapidly spread" throughout Iran.¹³

Britain and Russia, the most influential external powers in Iran at the time, viewed these developments with concern, dreading that a more democratic Iran would be less prone to accept foreign domination. Hence, eight months to the day after the constitution had been approved, London and Moscow signed the Anglo-Russian Entente that settled their differences in several countries, including Iran,¹⁴ and made common cause with the monarchy in its struggle against the constitutionalists. Following a few years of low intensity civil war, the recently established parliament (the *Majles*) was shut down by the government in 1911 following a British-backed Russian ultimatum.¹⁵

⁷ Miklos 1983; Skocpol 1982.

⁸ Moaddel 1994: 15.

⁹ Keddie 2003: 61.

¹⁰ Fischer 2003: 185; Keddie 1983b: 584; Moaddel 1994: 15.

¹¹ Siavoshi 1994: 110.

¹² Abrahamian 1979; Afary 1996.

¹³ Keddie 1983b: 586.

¹⁴ Keddie 2003: 69–70.

¹⁵ Afary 1994: 39; Keddie 2003: 71.

While the Constitutional Revolution ultimately failed to accomplish most of its stated objectives, it served an important function in Iran's political development by normalizing the notion of political opposition. The constitution itself remained largely symbolic, but the concrete creation of the *Majles* legitimized political activity. Although parliament remained a tool of the government, politics had been institutionalized.

Political Opposition to Mohammad Reza Shah

Upon crowning himself king in 1925, Reza Shah swiftly undid the modest democratic progress achieved by the Constitutional Revolution.¹⁶ But when the Allies in 1941 forced the king to abdicate in favor of his young son, political liberalization followed.¹⁷ The 1940s therefore came to constitute the rebirth of democratic aspirations in Iran. Two organizations were particularly active in this period, namely the National Front and the communist Tudeh Party. The Tudeh (masses) Party emerged in 1941 when a group of Marxists who had been imprisoned by Reza Shah were released from jail. In the context of the Allies' occupation, the Tudeh received Soviet support, which made the organization somewhat immune to government repression¹⁸ and allowed it to establish itself as a "Communist Party with an effective machinery for mass mobilization."¹⁹ The party's success culminated with the 1946 appointment of three of its members to the country's cabinet.²⁰ However, after the United States established its hegemony in Iran, Marxism quickly went out of fashion, and by 1949 the regime had chased the Tudeh into clandestinity.²¹

In that same year, a number of small nationalist-liberal parties united under the banner of the National Front.²² The Front's charismatic leader, Mohammad Mossadegh, ascended to the prime ministership in 1951 and soon used his newfound power to challenge the shah and his Western allies.²³ Outraged by British exploitation of his country's natural resources, the prime minister nationalized Iran's oil industry in what was in equal parts a domestic and a nationalist struggle. The "oil nationalization movement" amounted to an important eye-opener for proponents of Third World liberalization in Washington: left to its own devices, political competition in developing countries seemed susceptible to the emergence of anti-Western sentiments. Unwilling to let Iran's nationalization scheme set an example for other resource-rich Third World countries, the US branded Mossadegh a

¹⁶ Matin-asgari 2002: 22–23.

¹⁷ Abrahamian 1985a: 125. See Chapter 3.

¹⁸ Milani 1988: 71.

¹⁹ Arjomand 1988: 71–72.

²⁰ Parsa 1989: 40.

²¹ Herrmann 1990: 67.

²² Moaddel 1994: 53; Stempel 1981: 39. For a detailed treatise on the National Front, see Siavoshi (1990).

²³ Siavoshi 1994.

communist, and, with British help, removed the prime minister from power in August 1953, in the CIA-devised "Operation Ajax" that allowed the shah to reconsolidate power.²⁴ Just as American influence had led to an opening of the political system in the early 1940s, it now mandated the return to autocracy in the 1950s. As the political climate hardened, opposition activities became increasingly rare.²⁵

Calls for liberalization were again heard in the late 1950s and, more loudly, in the early 1960s. As in the 1940s, the impetus for reform came from the United States. As noted in the previous chapter, the Kennedy administration sought to pre-empt communist peasant uprisings throughout the world by imploring its allies to reduce political repression and enact land reform. Convinced of Washington's wisdom, the shah heeded the White House's advice, but his White Revolution alienated groups previously loyal to the regime. Most important of these were the clerical leaders who had supported the shah in his showdown with Mossadegh,²⁶ but now found their land and privileges under threat. In addition, some of the political elements of the reform program, including female suffrage, resuscitated clerical fears of pending secularization.

As a result, the shah soon faced a broad movement against his rule in which both secular and religious activists participated. While his revived political opponents pressed for more liberalization, his new religious enemies simultaneously pressed for less. By the summer of 1963 the unrest had reached dimensions unsettling enough for the shah to order his military to end it. In the early morning of June 5, Khomeini and several of his close collaborators, deemed to be the leaders of the uprisings, were arrested. Brutal repression of demonstrations throughout the country followed, which brought the movement to an end.²⁷

Opposition Radicalization and Guerrilla Warfare

The brutal repression of June 1963 had an enormous impact on Iranian politics. From the early 1940s, secular constitutionalists who believed that the shah could be reasoned with and that nonviolent methods of resistance constituted the most promising avenue to social change had represented the loudest voices for reform. The events of June 1963 drastically altered the opposition's attitude, both toward the shah and political activism more generally.²⁸ As Abrahamian explains,

²⁴ Foran 1993a: 296; Parsa 1989: 45; Siavoshi 1994: 128.

²⁵ Abrahamian 1982: 280; Bill 1988a: 100; Moaddel 1994: 53–54.

²⁶ Parsa 1989: 193.

²⁷ Foran 1993a: 365–66; Bakhash 1990: 30.

²⁸ Matin-asgari 2002: 67.

the Shah's determination to use massive force, the army's willingness to shoot down thousands of unarmed demonstrators, and SAVAK's eagerness to root out the underground networks of the Tudeh party and the National Front, all combined to compel the opposition, especially its younger members, to question the traditional methods of resistance—election boycotts, general strikes, and street demonstrations.²⁹

The government's deadly response to the popular uprising caused some of the leading young members of the Liberation Movement, one of the newer parties of the National Front coalition, to abruptly break with its leadership and form a discussion group with the objective of discovering new ways of challenging the shah's regime.³⁰ The product of their efforts was the creation of the Mojahedin guerrilla movement.³¹ Thus, as the leaders of the traditional opposition groups received long prison terms that debilitated their organizations, new opposition constellations came into existence. Unlike their predecessors, the new opposition groups had little affinity with nonviolent methods of struggle.³² In fact, one of the main complaints of those who broke with the existing opposition concerned its unwillingness to confront the state with physical force. Inspired as they were by events in places like Algeria and Cuba, the younger dissidents assumed that the same tactics that had been used elsewhere could also be applied in Iran.³³ In short, Iranian guerrilla activity emerged as a consequence of the shah's brutal efforts to prevent opposition to his rule. With nonviolent methods deemed futile, violence appeared to be the last resort.³⁴

Although committed to their creed of "armed struggle, more armed struggle, and yet more armed struggle,"³⁵ the guerrillas were never able to mount a significant challenge against the regime. Exact numbers are impossible to provide due to the fact that the guerrillas operated in small and autonomous cells in order to avoid detection by the security forces.³⁶ Commentators agree, however, that the movement was small, with estimates ranging from "a few hundred"³⁷ to "at least 400 to 600 individuals"³⁸ participating in guerrilla activities between 1966 and the time of the revolution. But despite their limited numbers the guerrillas managed to exasperate the government.³⁹ They carried out political assassinations,⁴⁰ attacks on military and police stations

²⁹ Abrahamian 1985b: 151–52.

³⁰ Abrahamian 1985b: 161. For further details about the Liberation Movement, see Chehabi (1990).

³¹ Abrahamian 1989: 85; Daneshvar 1996: 90.

³² Abrahamian 1982: 482; Daneshvar 1996: 90; Foran 1993a: 373.

³³ Abrahamian 1989: 84, 99; Amjad 1989: 105.

³⁴ As noted above, Goodwin (2001) has analyzed this dynamic at great length.

³⁵ Abrahamian 1989: 98. ³⁶ Stempel 1981: 53. ³⁷ Foran 1993a: 337.

³⁸ Stempel 1981: 52. ³⁹ Abrahamian 1989: 141, 152.

⁴⁰ Some of these assassinations targeted American citizens, including military officers, living in Iran (Stempel 1981: 76).

(such as the 1971 raid on a gendarmerie outpost near the village of Siakhal),⁴¹ as well as more general acts of sabotage.⁴² In 1972 a group of guerrillas attempted to disrupt the celebrations marking the 2,500th anniversary of the Iranian monarchy in the town of Persepolis by placing explosives at the power plant providing electricity for the festivities.⁴³ Despite some limited success, by the mid-1970s the movement had suffered such extensive losses⁴⁴ that its leaders decided to suspend most of its activities,⁴⁵ and by late 1976 the guerrilla leaders were forced to abandon their violent struggle, due to “the lack of mass struggles triggered by their acts.”⁴⁶ Although some of the guerrilla groups survived, their importance, which from their inception had already been limited, decreased further, and the part they played in the revolution was marginal.⁴⁷

Besides domestic reasons for failure, such as the limited appeal of Marxist ideologies in a Shi’i Muslim society and the seemingly limited “‘revolutionary potential’ of the Iranian countryside,”⁴⁸ international factors must be added to the equation. In contrast to many other guerrilla movements against US-supported dictators around the world at the time, the Iranian freedom fighters failed to secure meaningful Soviet support.⁴⁹ This seems surprising given that the guerrillas explicitly sought to put an end to a US-sponsored regime that, on top of ideological concerns, resided in a resource-rich country sharing a long border with the Soviet Union. Moreover, one of the two main guerrilla groups, the Feda’iyan, was explicitly pro-Soviet and sought to establish a social order mirroring those of Eastern Europe.⁵⁰ Notwithstanding these facts, Moscow was “against guerrilla action in Iran, due to a lack of objective revolutionary circumstances,” and made it clear that if Iranians “wanted to pursue the idea, it would have to be with backing other than theirs.”⁵¹

If the absence of support from potential allies was not enough of a handicap, the guerrillas faced a state committed to their destruction. One scholar has suggested that out of all the factors that eventually contributed to the failure of the guerrillas, none was more elementary than “brutal repression by the regime.”⁵² The one factor that could have mitigated the shah’s harsh

⁴¹ Abrahamian 1982: 487–88; Keddle 2003: 220.

⁴² The guerrillas “tended to set off their bombs late at night and after telephone warnings in order to limit civilian casualties,” suggesting that they were more interested in making political propaganda points than perpetrating terrorist activities (Abrahamian 1989: 140).

⁴³ Abrahamian 1989: 128.

⁴⁴ Bill 1988a: 190–91; Parsons 1984: 45.

⁴⁵ Abrahamian 1982: 494–95; Milani 1988: 138.

⁴⁶ Keddle 2003: 220. See also Milani (1988: 137–38).

⁴⁷ Parsa 1989: 184; Stempel 1981: 85–86.

⁴⁸ Abrahamian 1989: 126.

⁴⁹ Stempel notes that “some Soviet money and weapons probably worked their way to the Mujahidin and Fedayeen through Libya, but it was insignificant compared to that from other sources” (1981: 102).

⁵⁰ Amuzegar 1991: 273.

⁵¹ Behrooz 1999: 85.

⁵² Amjad 1989: 107.

treatment of his opponents would have been US disapproval, but the guerrillas' struggle against the regime

coincided with a period in Iran's relationship with the United States when the shah had reason to believe that a crackdown on opposition elements would be welcome in Washington and that his methods would be regarded with a considerable measure of tolerance.⁵³

The fact that all Iranian guerrilla groups became associated with Marxist ideas made it even easier for the shah to justify their extermination.⁵⁴ That the Mojahedin initially "never once used the terms socialist, communist, [or] Marxist... to describe itself,"⁵⁵ appears to have mattered little as long as the they subscribed to classical guerrilla tactics and rhetoric, thus becoming guilty of communism by association. On the rare occasions when American newspapers did report on the guerrillas' struggle against the regime, they referred to them as "Marxist and Islamic-Marxist terrorists,"⁵⁶ which naturally meant that the shah risked few repercussions from the Johnson, Nixon, and Ford administrations on the basis of his brutal treatment of their common enemies.

Student Resistance to the Shah

Following the destruction of the political opposition in 1963, "open and peaceful opposition was to become impossible except among exiles and students abroad."⁵⁷ In sharp contrast to the guerrilla movement that perished partly as a consequence of Iran's alliance with the West, the country's students exploited their government's friendly relationship with North America and Europe by heading abroad for their education. Well out of the shah's reach they set in motion a protest culture that would eventually end in revolution.

Although the practice of sending students abroad accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s, Iran enjoyed a relatively long tradition of such programs, dating back to the 1920s. The need for skilled labor had led Reza Shah to send small numbers of students to Europe to receive training. However, when Iranian students in Germany embarrassed Reza Shah by engaging in demonstrations and propaganda, the king revised the practice and instead established the University of Tehran in 1934.⁵⁸ By keeping students at home, international

⁵³ Sick 1985: 23.

⁵⁴ Originally, the Feda'iyān had been the only significant Marxist guerrilla organization in Iran while the Mojahedin acknowledged a Marxism-inspired Islamic ideology. However, by 1975 the Mojahedin leadership altered its ideology and accepted Marxism. This led to a split within the organization with one faction remaining Islamist and the other becoming Marxist (Abrahamian 1989: 148–49).

⁵⁵ Abrahamian 1989: 2.

⁵⁶ Dorman and Farhang 1987: 143.

⁵⁷ Matin-asgari 2002: 67.

⁵⁸ Matin-asgari 2002: 21–23.

scandals were avoided. But while Reza Shah largely managed to control Iran's student population, his son was less successful in doing so, especially in the country's semi-liberal post-war context. Still, after the 1953 coup the shah tightened his control of the Iranian polity, which made mass protests increasingly rare. The king's new attitude toward dissent could have spelled the end of student activism, and to some extent it did. Harsh social control made domestic university students for a time a largely inconsequential opposition group, but the tradition of student dissent survived abroad.

With rapid industrialization on top of the shah's agenda, Iran found itself in desperate need of skilled workers. With the country's educational system unable to meet the rising demand, "the only solution for Iran was to export its student population for training abroad."⁵⁹ Fortunately for Iran, both European and American colleges were more than willing to admit Iranian students. Many small American colleges struggled economically and therefore gladly welcomed foreign students, but the enormous influx of Iranian students was also a result of their country's excellent relationship with the United States.⁶⁰ As a result, the Iranian student population in the United States grew from 6,000 in the early 1960s to roughly 60,000 in 1978. Iranians also made up sizeable student populations in Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Italy, Switzerland, Turkey, Austria, and Belgium. At the eve of the revolution Iran had more students studying abroad than any other nation, and its citizens constituted the largest foreign student population in the United States.⁶¹ In the period between 1963 and 1976, when organized dissent to the shah's regime inside Iran was severely curtailed, the opposition's "most conspicuous manifestations were among Iranian students abroad."⁶²

The expatriate Iranian students must have found the United States and Europe of the 1960s a stimulating place. Faced with a protest culture radically different from what they had experienced at home, the students quickly learned from their Western counterparts. But rather than joining their hosts' ranks, Iranian students opted to highlight the repressive political conditions of their homeland by making human rights central to their discourse.⁶³ The earliest recorded student protest in the United States took place in 1959,⁶⁴ and when the shah validated allegedly fraudulent parliamentary elections in the following year the students once again took to the streets.⁶⁵ In January 1962, the Confederation of Iranian Students/National Union (CISNU), a coalition of three organizations representing students in Iran (Organization of Tehran University Students—OTUS), the United States (Iranian Students'

⁵⁹ Beeman 1983: 208. ⁶⁰ Beeman 1983: 208.

⁶¹ Bill 1988a: 211; Matin-asgari 2002: 57, 131; Milani 1988: 113–14; Sick 1985: 28.

⁶² Menashri 1990: 18.

⁶³ Matin-asgari 2002: 43.

⁶⁴ Bill 1988a: 113.

⁶⁵ Matin-asgari 2002: 47–49.

Association in the United States—ISAUS), and Europe (Iranian Students in Europe—CIS) came into existence in Paris⁶⁶ and was almost immediately called into action.

On January 21, just days after the conclusion of CISNU's founding congress, the shah authorized a military attack on unarmed students demonstrating at Tehran University. The soldiers applied such brutal force that the chancellor of the university resigned in protest of the regime's actions.⁶⁷ CISNU issued the following statement in response:

The Confederation of Iranian Students, representing 13,000 students in Europe and 6,000 students in United States, hereby informs government authorities of its demands, letting them know that unless we receive a response by Friday, 26 January, *we shall employ every means available abroad to show the Free World the true face of those in charge in Iran.*⁶⁸

As far as the shah was concerned, the last part of the statement might have appeared an empty threat. However, over the next decade and a half the students undermined the Iranian government by doing exactly what they had promised to do. Emphasizing Iran's abysmal human rights situation, the abroad-based students helped bring about a context that would prove favorable to Khomeini and his collaborators in the late 1970s.

The students' strategy was simple. By taking every opportunity to protest against the shah and his regime they sought to attract the attention of the international media, human rights organizations, and even foreign politicians. In January 1962, in response to the massacre at Tehran University, approximately 500 students protested against Prime Minister Ali Amini as he visited London, and a few months later those scenes repeated themselves in Bonn.⁶⁹ When the shah made an official visit to the United States in April that year he was met by ISAUS demonstrators and forced to leave the New York airport via a back exit. The demonstrations then continued outside the Waldorf Astoria where the shah was staying. In connection with these activities the students published an open letter to President Kennedy in which they denounced the shah as a ruthless tyrant with the citizenry's blood on his hands.⁷⁰ When the shah then traveled to Washington to meet with the president the protesters were on hand to greet him there as well.⁷¹ In May 1967, the shah visited Cologne unaware of the fact that local Iranian students had already distributed over 100,000 leaflets all over Germany. As a result the shah faced protesters in Aachen, Bonn, Düsseldorf, and Munich.⁷² In August of the same year, ISAUS members wearing masks in order to avoid

⁶⁶ Matin-asgari 2002: 51.

⁶⁷ Bill 1988a: 146–47.

⁶⁸ Qtd. in Matin-asgari 2002: 57 (emphasis added).

⁶⁹ Matin-asgari 2002: 57.

⁷⁰ Matin-asgari 2002: 58.

⁷¹ Matin-asgari 2002: 58.

⁷² Matin-asgari 2002: 97.

identification clashed with the police when the shah once again visited the United States.⁷³

The king sought to counter CISNU's activities by having some of its US-based leaders arrested. In the face of such retaliation CISNU determined that its best response was neither to curb its activities nor negotiate with the regime. Rather it stepped up its verbal attacks on the government. By continuing its strategy of emphasizing the human rights angle while involving the international community in its struggle, the students protected themselves from further repression and simultaneously increased the pressure on the shah.⁷⁴ This approach became particularly powerful when the international media and human rights organizations adopted the students' cause and "persuaded a number of prominent Western writers, academics, and artists to lend their support to the activities of dissident Iranians abroad."⁷⁵ Despite the important roles eventually played by international media outlets and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in problematizing the shah's human rights record, "years of adverse publicity by the CISNU was the most direct and important cause of this situation."⁷⁶

Reshaping the Opposition

The contrasting accomplishments of the country's polar opposition opposites—the domestic, violent guerrillas, and the international, nonviolent students—were not lost on attentive observers. Among them was Khomeini, who had long plotted the overthrow of the shah but only emerged as the face of the radical opposition in connection to the 1963 uprising. In that capacity, the ayatollah met with both guerilla and student representatives at his exile residence in Najaf, Iraq. Some of Khomeini's collaborators had supported the guerrillas financially, not because they had much faith in their chances of success, but because they "considered any form of struggle against SAVAK a blessing."⁷⁷ Khomeini, however, refused to lend the guerrillas his support, and instead reprimanded them during meetings with them in 1972 and 1974, arguing prophetically "that the regime would fall not when the masses took up arms but when the whole clerical stratum joined the opposition."⁷⁸

Unimpressed by the guerrillas, Khomeini instead found inspiration in the abroad-based students' accomplishments. In 1966, Hasan Masali, one of CISNU's leaders, met with Khomeini in Najaf and presented him with a report on the organization's activities. In return, Khomeini sent the students a message in which he lent them his support and encouragement:

⁷³ Matin-asgari 2002: 98.

⁷⁴ Matin-asgari 2002: 124.

⁷⁵ Dorman and Farhang 1987: 144.

⁷⁶ Matin-asgari 2002: 148.

⁷⁷ Bakhash 1990: 44.

⁷⁸ Abrahamian 1989: 150.

Students must continue their struggle in unison, without ever forgetting the oppressed Iranian people and its destiny. The country's future is trusted to the youths who must not neglect its safeguarding. We, the clergy, are your companions on this path and shall cooperate with you according to Islamic precepts.⁷⁹

By the time of the revolution, Khomeini, like many secular opposition leaders, had drawn important conclusions from the students' successful attempts to destroy the shah's international image. When in 1977 Iranian intellectuals sought to exploit the shah's poor human rights reputation by keeping the world abreast through letters to foreign newspapers, NGOs, and politicians—in effect copying the strategy employed by the students during the previous decade and a half—Khomeini implored his followers to do the same:

You too should write letters. A hundred gentlemen of the clergy should sign them . . . Inform the world. You can't reach the world from inside Iran; send [your letters] outside the country for them to be published, or send them here somehow, and we will get them published. Write critiques, write about the troubles, and give it to them [government officials], like the few people who we've seen stir and speak out at length and sign their names. No one's done anything to them.⁸⁰

International student activism—in part a result of Iran's friendly relations with the West—seemingly taught Khomeini the same lesson he had learned from the guerrillas' failures: the shah's weakness was not military, rather it was rhetorical and ideological as the king's close relationship with the West rendered him hostage to his patrons' political principles.

Tunisia: An Extraordinary League of Advocates

Bourguiba's widespread popularity as liberator of the nation meant that few political forces arose to challenge him in the early years of his rule. Not even the country's status as "one of the most consistent Westernizers in the Arab world"⁸¹ generated much discontent, as long as the collective high generated by the achievement of independence lingered. But the failed socialist economic adventure of the 1960s made the government vulnerable to charges of misguided development and gave rise to disgruntlement. To complicate matters further, the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 created fertile ground for new ideologies to flourish and grow, including Islamist ones.⁸² Although the government's efforts to Westernize Tunisia and thus marginalize religion were

⁷⁹ Qtd. in Matin-asgari 2002: 85.

⁸⁰ Qtd. in Kurzman 2004: 22 (all brackets in original).

⁸¹ Noyon 2003: 96.

⁸² Noyon 2003: 99–100.

the Islamists' main concern,⁸³ their politicization in the 1970s was also a reaction to the political left's growing influence.⁸⁴

Early Opposition to the State: Labor and Islamism

The Tunisian General Union of Labour (*Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens*, UGTT) enjoys a long and glorious history of political engagement. As early as 1924, when Tunisia was still a French colony, it organized the country's first general strike,⁸⁵ and emerged as "the vanguard of the opposition to French rule"⁸⁶ when the nationalist movement faltered in the mid-1940s. Having positioned itself as a strong ally of Bourguiba and an influential player in Tunisian politics, the UGTT remained a reliable tool of the regime during the first two decades of independence, growing in size from an estimated 200,000 members in 1956 to 500,000 in 1974.⁸⁷ By the mid-1970s, the initial benefits of the *infitah* began to dissipate. Unsurprisingly, Tunisian workers paid the highest price for the government's privatization schemes, which they construed "as favoring foreign capital to the detriment of the national interest."⁸⁸ The resulting tensions culminated in a general strike on January 26, 1978, that soon degenerated into riots that claimed at least fifty lives. In addition to these fatalities, "Black Thursday" resulted in hundreds of injuries and arrests.⁸⁹

The unrest of the mid-1970s, and the union's role in it, put both the government and the burgeoning Islamist movement on notice. Fortunately for the regime, the Islamists and the UGTT were natural-born enemies. The former's approval of the Iranian revolutionaries made them highly suspect to the left, while the increasingly politicized Islamists had little sympathy for an ideology they perceived to be even more secular than that of Tunisia's leadership. The government skillfully maneuvered the two groupings against one another. For example, to control organized labor the regime encouraged the Islamists to activate their networks in universities and factories, thereby limiting the influence of the left. Similarly, the government pacified the unions by pointing to events in Iran, arguing that only it stood in the way of a similar theocratic development in Tunisia.⁹⁰

Due to the regime's implicit approval of their activities, the Islamists soon became its most potent opponents. But parallel to the Islamists' rise, the late

⁸³ Dalacoura 2007: 166. ⁸⁴ Magnuson 1991: 176; Perkins 2004: 165–66.

⁸⁵ Garon 2003: 23; Ziadeh 1962: 124–25. ⁸⁶ Perkins 2004: 96.

⁸⁷ Vandewalle 1988: 606. ⁸⁸ White 2001: 118.

⁸⁹ Murphy 1999: 60; White et al. 2002: 468. As always in situations like these, the numbers are contested. For example, White (2001: 118) suggests that 200 people died.

⁹⁰ Dalacoura 2007: 167; Erdle 2010: 233; Hermassi 1995: 107. Interestingly, Ben Ali appropriated the tactic following his 1987 coup (Alexander 1996: 185).

1970s also witnessed the birth of the country's human rights movement. While the Islamists' ideology resonated deeply with many Tunisians in a way the decidedly Western human rights discourse did not, the latter offered its proponents a clearer point of attack on the government.⁹¹ Although Tunisia's close relationship with France and other Western nations allowed "unprecedented numbers"⁹² of young Tunisians to receive their secondary and university education abroad, which "politicized them in ways that made them more inclined to protest,"⁹³ students did not drive the human rights movement as they had done in Iran. Instead, their "principal contribution to both the domestic and the international human rights movements was to make abuses more visible."⁹⁴ In contrast to Iran, Tunisian human rights activism was primarily organized from within the country.⁹⁵

The Origins of Tunisia's Human Rights Movement

Notwithstanding its domestic focus, Tunisia's human rights movement did not surface in isolation of global events. That the *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme* (LTDH, Tunisian League for Human Rights), the Arab world's first independent human rights organization, came into being in 1977 was far from a coincidence.⁹⁶ The 1975 Helsinki Accords and the election of Jimmy Carter shortly thereafter served to increase the salience of human rights around the world. Attuned to the international stage, both the Tunisian government and its Western-educated opponents sensed the opportunity (or threat) that the human rights discourse seemed to offer. While many Tunisians were skeptical of human rights, which they perceived to be "a bourgeois notion and dangerously American,"⁹⁷ a group of liberal-minded intellectuals began to meet regularly with the objective of promoting individual freedoms. In time, this group developed into the LTDH.⁹⁸

Tunisian law required government approval of all voluntary associations, and in 1976 alone fifteen different applications had been submitted to the government requesting permission to form a human rights organization. All of them were rejected.⁹⁹ But the regime's relationship with the democratic world made it difficult to deny the human rights groups' claim to legitimacy, especially since applications frequently referenced Tunisia's international human rights commitments. The government was thus "caught in an awkward position:"¹⁰⁰ It could not claim to respect human rights and at the same time prevent the creation of an independent human rights organization, that

⁹¹ Waltz 1995: 162.

⁹⁴ Waltz 1995: 195.

⁹⁷ Waltz 1995: 134.

¹⁰⁰ Waltz 1995: 135.

⁹² Alexander 2010: 46.

⁹⁵ Gränzer 1999: 118–20.

⁹⁸ Waltz 1995: 134.

⁹³ Alexander 2010: 46.

⁹⁶ Perkins 2004: 165.

⁹⁹ Dwyer 1991: 165–66.

is, a concrete manifestation of the regime's declared position. The government countered the human rights groups' moves for official status by claiming that another group, made up exclusively of members of the ruling party, also wished to form a human rights organization, and that two groups was more than the country needed.¹⁰¹

However, these stalling tactics could not be maintained forever. When the regime arrested thirty dissidents in March 1977 for distributing leaflets and circulating a magazine, members of the still unapproved LTDH used this obvious violation of civil rights to pressure the government. The League published a formal statement signed by 168 notables, which demanded amnesty for political prisoners, the granting of official status for the LTDH, and a national conference on civil liberties. To promote the conference one of the organization's leaders, Hassib Ben Ammar, traveled to Europe and the United States to raise awareness of Tunisia's human rights plight. To avoid international embarrassment the government finally approved the LTDH's creation on May 7, 1977.¹⁰² While primarily the result of domestic activism and ingenuity, the international context played an important part in the organization's birth since "the Tunisian government wanted to put a human rights association into operation at that time to respond to US President Carter's 'human rights offensive.'"¹⁰³

The LTDH's declared mandate was to monitor and protect human rights in Tunisia, eschewing more confrontational objectives in order to prevent charges of political aspirations. Rather than engaging the regime in discussions about the nature of human rights, the LTDH simply sought to hold the regime responsible for its international commitments.¹⁰⁴ To further protect itself from government persecution, the League affiliated with the International Human Rights Federation (*Fédération internationale des droits de l'homme*, FIDH), and established ties with the International Commission of Jurists.¹⁰⁵ The fact that Bourguiba never contested the validity of human rights in principle simplified the League's work. Yet, aware of the regime's fickleness, it resisted the urge to actively pursue human rights claims against the government.

The LTDH and the regime eventually established a peaceful co-existence after the government realized that the organization could be of use in its efforts to control the Islamists, and thus exploited the League's bashfulness during trials against the former. With the League preferring not to challenge the government over the sensitive Islamist issue, Bourguiba could point to the absence of complaints from the human rights organization as proof that his campaign against the Islamists was not only justified, but also followed

¹⁰¹ Waltz 1995: 136.

¹⁰² Waltz 1995: 135–36.

¹⁰³ Dwyer 1991: 166.

¹⁰⁴ Waltz 1997: 84.

¹⁰⁵ Dwyer 1991: 167.

human rights protocol.¹⁰⁶ Largely left alone by the government, the LTDH grew rapidly. By 1982 it boasted of more than a thousand members, a number that tripled over the next three years. By 1989 the League had more than 4,000 members divided among nearly 40 local sections.¹⁰⁷

Until the spring of 1987, when Tunisia appeared on the verge of eruption, the League maintained a tense but stable relationship with the government. The LTDH was free to observe trials, make inquiries in response to complaints, conduct studies, and inspect prisons. In addition, the League made numerous public statements about press freedoms, opposed unconstitutional legislations, and fought against capital punishment.¹⁰⁸ At most times it maintained a respectful tone in its dealings with the state to pre-empt government charges of treason or sedition.¹⁰⁹ As a result, the League cemented its credibility not only in Tunisia, but also abroad, with many foreign news outlets, French ones in particular, relying on it for information about the country's human rights situation.¹¹⁰ Careful not to overstep implied boundaries, every measured response by the LTDH served to heighten its international reputation and make government repression of the group increasingly costly.¹¹¹

Despite these precautions the LTDH was not immune to government subjugation. Tunisia's worsening political situation in the late 1980s compelled the League to speak out against the persecution of Islamists, which ended its relatively sheltered existence. In the spring of 1987 the regime created a human rights organization of its own, the Association for the Defence of Human Rights and Public Liberties (*L'Association pour la defense des droits de l'homme et des libertés Publiques*, ADDHLP). In one stroke, the LTDH's societal function had been co-opted, which forced the organization back into the shadows.¹¹²

Islamist Opposition to Ben Ali

Ben Ali's coup marked the beginning of a new era of Tunisian reconciliation. Lacking Bourguiba's unquestioned legitimacy, the new president sought to build a broad political coalition by presenting himself as a reformer open to power sharing.¹¹³ Ben Ali replaced the "presidency-for life" provision with a 15-year limit, and introduced an age limit of 70 for the office. He also established a multiparty system, which, while discriminating against religious political organizations, was credible enough to lead the country's banned Islamist party, the Movement of the Islamic Tendency (*Mouvement*

¹⁰⁶ Waltz 1989: 219, 1995: 162–63. ¹⁰⁷ Dwyer 1991: 166–67.

¹⁰⁸ Dwyer 1991: 143–44. ¹⁰⁹ Waltz 1995: 137. ¹¹⁰ Waltz 1997: 83.

¹¹¹ Gränzer 1999: 125–26. ¹¹² Waltz 1989: 223, 1995: 138–39.

¹¹³ Krämer 1994: 217.

de la Tendence Islamique, MTI) to shed its explicitly religious orientation and re-establish itself as the Ennahda (Renaissance) Party.¹¹⁴

Ennahda's relationship with the state was tense but civilized in the first two years of Ben Ali's rule. Assessing the president's rhetoric as sincere, the party revised its position on sensitive issues that had previously placed it in stark opposition to the government, and came to embrace a more liberal position on women's rights and a commitment to individual freedoms.¹¹⁵ Emboldened, Ennahda applied for legal status in 1988 with an eye on contesting the parliamentary elections scheduled for April of the following year. The government, however, had no intention of letting its only viable challenger threaten the country's newfound stability and predictably denied the petition. Ennahda candidates participated in the election as independents and received 13 percent of the vote. But since Tunisia's electoral rules operated according to a winner-takes-all format, Ennahda, like all other opposition parties, ended up with zero seats in parliament while the ruling, and recently renamed, Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), collected all 141 mandates.¹¹⁶

Ennahda reacted with indignation. It had spent the better part of 18 months abiding by the government's rules only to learn that the regime's talk of power sharing meant little in reality. "Until now," declared its leader Rachid Ghannouchi, "we sought only a shop and we did not get it. Now it's the whole souk (marketplace) we want."¹¹⁷ Ironically, Ghannouchi himself became a victim of the government's insincerity. Having failed to see through the regime's façade and thus allowed his party's defeat, Ghannouchi's comrades voted to replace him just a month after the election. Forebodingly, the party also adopted a new motto: "No politics without force."¹¹⁸ Thus, by 1990 the organization found itself at a crossroads with a "grass-roots division between those who remained convinced of the merits of the peaceful, democratic path to power and those who had no faith in the regime's willingness to extend inclusivist politics to Islamists."¹¹⁹ This development, which bears striking similarities with Iran in the wake of the White Revolution, meant that confrontation with the government approached inevitability.

Ben Ali too disliked the 1989 election result. If Ennahda could obtain 13 percent of the vote in government-controlled elections it had to be considered a serious opponent.¹²⁰ The fact that Ben Ali had announced the country's move to political pluralism with great fanfare made backtracking complicated,¹²¹ but the Islamists' dramatic response to the election gave the president an

¹¹⁴ Human Rights Watch 2009; Murphy 1999: 172–73; Noyon 2003: 103.

¹¹⁵ Magnuson 1991: 179.

¹¹⁶ Murphy 1999: 180.

¹¹⁷ Qtd. in Perkins 2004: 190.

¹¹⁸ Hermassi 1995: 120.

¹¹⁹ Murphy 1997: 118.

¹²⁰ Murphy 1999: 180.

¹²¹ Waltz 1995: 178–79.

escape route. Framing the Islamists' threatening statements against the backdrop of the Iranian Revolution a decade earlier and the Islamic Salvation Front's (*Front Islamique du Salut*—FIS) activities in neighboring Algeria, Ben Ali warned that the Islamists were about to replace the vanishing communists as the new enemy of liberal democracy.¹²² At the same time, the Algerian civil war and the Gulf War aggravated already existing disagreements within Ennahda and allowed the radical wing of the movement to escalate its engagement with the state.¹²³

In late 1990 the government arrested a number of militants for allegedly plotting to kill the president.¹²⁴ While many Tunisians registered these accusations with skepticism, the government's accusations gained traction in February 1991 when armed men attacked the RCD headquarters in the Bab Souika district of Tunis.¹²⁵ Ghannouchi remarked from exile that although the party leadership had not planned the attack, or was even aware of it beforehand, it was "an understandable reaction undertaken by a group of Muslim youth activists against the tyrannical and oppressive policies of the regime."¹²⁶ Naturally this was all the government needed to justify its labeling of Ennahda as a fundamentalist terrorist organization endangering Tunisia's stability.¹²⁷ With his characterization of the Islamists substantiated, the president sensed that he "enjoyed complete impunity among Western governments" in confronting his opponents.¹²⁸ Consequently, "foreign policy represented once again an integral part of domestic politics... by allowing the regime to 'sell' this conflict, both politically and financially speaking, to its main partners at home and abroad."¹²⁹ In effect, Ben Ali's democratic rhetoric no longer restrained him since the Islamists were clearly uninterested in political dialogue, opting instead for a violent confrontation with the state.

Between 1990 and 1992, the government arrested roughly 8,000 suspected Ennahda supporters. Following the Bab Souika incident 28 people were arrested in February and March of 1991 and brought to trial. Five of the accused received the death penalty, and three of them were executed in October. In the spring and summer of that year, another 500 people were arrested, including 200 security personnel, in connection with the alleged conspiracy to assassinate the president. Additional waves of repression and arrests followed¹³⁰ and "within two years, Ennahda had virtually been demolished in Tunisia."¹³¹

While repression of Islamists was common fare in the region, Ben Ali's efforts to defeat his most potent opponent were still atypical as "there was

¹²² Borowiec 1998: 6–7; Jones 2004: 70; Perkins 2004: 190.

¹²³ Perkins 2004: 193

¹²⁴ Perkins 2004: 193. ¹²⁵ Entelis 1997: 46; Noyon 2003: 105.

¹²⁶ Qtd. in Murphy 1999: 196. ¹²⁷ Perkins 2004: 210.

¹²⁸ Erdle 2004: 21. See also Krämer (1994: 218). ¹²⁹ Erdle 2010: 403.

¹³⁰ Noyon 2003: 105. ¹³¹ Murphy 1999: 199.

no major bloodshed, no epic showdown, no street fighting, no guerilla war; it was an implosion, rather than an explosion."¹³² It is noteworthy that the regime relied almost exclusively on the courts to silence the Islamists, and mostly avoided sentencing the accused to death. At these trials, which were observed by hundreds of international lawyers and observers,¹³³ "the government went to great lengths to explain its legal procedures, preparing information packets in several languages and comparing its procedures to European ones."¹³⁴ The government had fought the Islamists on the premise that they constituted a threat to liberal political principles, and the information campaign was thus "designed to reveal to the Tunisian public and Western observers the dangers posed by An-Nahda."¹³⁵ Indeed, the regime sought to present the trials—and its entire struggle against the Islamists—as a good fight in the name of Western political values.¹³⁶ As Susan Waltz notes, "the relevance of this story is not that Ben Ali's government found means of clamping down on the Islamists, *but rather that it felt constrained to cloak its actions in the formality of law.*"¹³⁷

The regime's strategy appeared to have worked. In October 1995 Jacques Chirac visited Tunis and bestowed his blessing on Ben Ali's struggle against the Islamists. The French president endorsed the regime's "doctrine, 'democracy without the fundamentalists' . . . implicitly supporting the official government position that no one but the Islamists would be the target of repression."¹³⁸ The downside of this policy, however, was that the same rhetoric that made the Islamists a relatively easy target gave the human rights movement considerable leverage in its dealings with the state.¹³⁹

Human Rights Activism under Ben Ali

The bargain Ben Ali struck with opposition groups following his rise to power allowed him to rapidly consolidate power. His call for unity, formalized in the 1988 National Pact,¹⁴⁰ rested on a professed respect for human rights. The advantage of this stance was that repression of Islamists, who frustrated with the slow pace of liberalization resorted to violence, could be justified as necessary in order to protect Tunisia's enlightened view on women's rights and the virtues of a secular state.¹⁴¹ The disadvantage consisted of the

¹³² Erdle 2010: 235.

¹³³ Murphy 1999: 198–99.

¹³⁴ Waltz 1995: 183.

¹³⁵ Noyon 2003: 107.

¹³⁶ Murphy 1999: 199–200.

¹³⁷ Waltz 1995: 179 (emphasis added).

¹³⁸ Garon 2003: 126. See also Entelis (1997: 48–49).

¹³⁹ Waltz 1995: 179.

¹⁴⁰ For details about the National Pact see especially Anderson (1991: 244–60), but also Murphy (1999: 174–75), Perkins (2004: 187–89), and Tessler (1990: 172).

¹⁴¹ Dalacoura 2007: 175.

implicit legitimization of human rights groups, which necessitated alternative approaches to social control.¹⁴²

Ben Ali's earliest attempt to subdue the human rights movement took a familiar form. The government had for decades neutralized competing power centers by absorbing them into the state structure, with the previously potent labor unions standing out as the most important historical example. Now Ben Ali looked to improve his image by incorporating the human rights movement into the regime and appointing some of the LTDH's most prominent members to his cabinet in 1988 and 1989.¹⁴³ Presented as evidence of the government's commitment to human rights, the move was in fact little more than an effort to co-opt the movement.¹⁴⁴

Some observers feared that the government's action meant that the League "would simply collapse,"¹⁴⁵ concerns that increased as the LTDH passively witnessed the government's repression of the Islamists in the early 1990s. In fact, many liberals shared the government's distrust of the Islamists and privately approved of Ben Ali's forceful approach. The League's docility, however, did not spare the organization the government's wrath once the Islamists had been defeated. Although it had largely remained loyal to the government, some of its members had spent the years following Ben Ali's rise to power documenting his regime's human rights violations and publishing the findings at home and abroad.¹⁴⁶ Due to the weakness of Tunisia's opposition parties, these individuals, and by extension the human rights movement, emerged as the regime's most credible challenger in the aftermath of the Islamists' collapse. The moral trump the League held thanks to its identification with human rights only amplified its threatening potential in the eyes of the government. Furthermore, the human rights movement, unlike the polarizing Islamists and the Left, symbolized the disturbing prospect of a unified opposition based on universal values. Such a powerful discourse, the regime reasoned, must not only be co-opted—its alternative articulations had to be destroyed.¹⁴⁷

Still, the LTDH had to be handled with care. Ben Ali's regime depended on Western trade and economic support to feed its population and keep powerful elite interests in check, which meant that measures likely to alienate its foreign allies were out of the question. The violent repression that had been applied against the Islamists with implicit Western approval did therefore not pass the litmus test in the case of the human rights movement. Instead, Ben Ali resorted to legislation. In March 1992, a new law was passed that prohibited the accumulation of positions in parties and "general organizations," meaning that no individual could simultaneously chair a political party and

¹⁴² Gränzer 1999: 127.

¹⁴³ See Chapter 3.

¹⁴⁴ Waltz 1991: 37, 1997: 84.

¹⁴⁵ Waltz 1995: 139.

¹⁴⁶ Murphy 2001: 7.

¹⁴⁷ Murphy 2001: 7.

hold a leadership position within the LTDH. The law also forbade organizations from restricting their membership, which allowed RCD members to “flood” the LTDH and gain influence through internal elections.¹⁴⁸ Failing to construct a coherent response to these challenges, the League dissolved itself later that year.¹⁴⁹ The government also sought to freeze the League’s assets, but “with international condemnation hotting up over what was seen as a blatant attempt by Ben Ali to contain legitimate criticism,”¹⁵⁰ the regime soon had to capitulate when in March 1993 a Tunis court declared that maneuver illegal.¹⁵¹ Far from an admission of defeat, the regime’s acceptance of the court’s ruling was “motivated by a desire to deflect widespread international condemnation of the government’s moves.”¹⁵² Despite its new lease on life the resuscitated League resigned itself to a lower public profile when it re-emerged in 1994. The government’s message had been heard, and for a while self-censorship seemed prudent.¹⁵³

Even with the League temporarily subdued, the human rights questions remained with Ben Ali throughout the mid-1990s as international human rights organizations published “highly critical” reports in response to the regime’s ongoing persecution of dissidents.¹⁵⁴ In 1995 Amnesty International leveled charges of “widespread and systematic human-rights abuse,”¹⁵⁵ which complemented the LTDH’s annual report that “included accounts of violations of freedom of the press, the illegal detention of suspects, the banning of political parties, and poor conditions inside prisons.”¹⁵⁶ Similarly, between 1996 and 1998,

Amnesty International, the Arab Commission of Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues and the U.N. Committee Against Torture all criticized Tunisia’s record and commitment to human rights, citing cases of torture, harassment of government critics, physical abuse of prisoners and severe restrictions on the freedom of the press.¹⁵⁷

The international press, once again with the French outlets leading the way, relayed the human rights organizations’ findings to the wider public.¹⁵⁸ Ben Ali’s campaign to silence Tunisia’s human rights movement thus turned out to be a more complicated task than he may have anticipated.

The regime’s image continued to deteriorate over the next few years. The arrests of high-profile opposition leaders, including Mohamed Moadda and Khemais Chammari, contributed to this development, as did the international media’s continued reporting.¹⁵⁹ European governments responded

¹⁴⁸ Erdle 2010: 109–10.

¹⁴⁹ Gränzer 1999: 127.

¹⁵⁰ Murphy 1999: 206.

¹⁵¹ Murphy 1999: 206; Waltz 1995: 84–85.

¹⁵² Murphy 1999: 206.

¹⁵³ Gränzer 1999: 127.

¹⁵⁴ Wood 2002: 98–99.

¹⁵⁵ Qtd. in Wood 2002: 98.

¹⁵⁶ Qtd. in Wood 2002: 98.

¹⁵⁷ Wood 2002: 98–99.

¹⁵⁸ Garon 2003: 153; Sadiki 2002a: 75–76.

¹⁵⁹ Murphy 1997: 119–20.

to politically motivated arrest with outrage, “diplomatic disappointment,” and anything in between.¹⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the LTDH scored a major victory in May 1996 when a Tunis court decided that the League should be considered a private, not public, association, and that the law of 1992 therefore could not be applied to the organization.¹⁶¹ Tellingly, this decision coincided with some of the most damaging European criticisms directed at Ben Ali’s government. May 1996 saw the European Parliament pass its unprecedented resolution chastising the regime for not living up to the political conditions outlined in the 1995 Association Agreement,¹⁶² and between 1995 and 1997 European governments, especially Switzerland and France, made their displeasure known to Ben Ali as they treated his visits with less fanfare than they had in the past.¹⁶³ In 2000 the European Parliament passed two more resolutions “alerting its member governments to abuses of human rights in Tunisia and urgently demanding a meeting of the European Union–Tunisian Association Council to discuss the situation.”¹⁶⁴

Due to the regime’s “obsession . . . with the country’s ‘image abroad,’” and the EU’s interest in promoting human rights advocacy groups in partner countries,¹⁶⁵ the late 1990s witnessed the sprouting of new rights-based organizations, including the National Council for Liberty in Tunisia (*Conseil National pour les Libertés en Tunisie*, CNLT). The CNLT functioned as an important complement to the LTDH by assuming a more outspoken and confrontational position,¹⁶⁶ but it was not the only new group to surface in this period. In the years surrounding the millennium shift, with the EU “pointing out that [Tunisia] had largely defaulted on its contracted obligations under the association accord,”¹⁶⁷ groups such as the Rally for an Alternative International Development (RAID), the Tunisian Center for Judicial Independence (CTIJ), the Bar Association, the Democratic Women’s Association, and the Tunisian Association of Young Lawyers, all either recommenced their activities or came into existence. In addition, in late 2001 four opposition parties decided to combine forces under the umbrella of the Democratic Alliance.¹⁶⁸

While all of the aforementioned groups struggled to make meaningful progress over the next decade,¹⁶⁹ “this shift from parties and unions to human rights activists, and from traditional socio-economic demands to rights and liberties issues, reflects a pragmatic understanding of the current political landscape.”¹⁷⁰ By embracing the human rights narrative legitimate claims could be made against the government, if not at home, then at least

¹⁶⁰ Murphy 1999: 208.

¹⁶¹ Murphy 1999: 207.

¹⁶² Murphy 1999: 208; Pinfari 2011: 33–35.

¹⁶³ Garon 2003: 152–53.

¹⁶⁴ Murphy 2001: 14.

¹⁶⁵ Powel and Sadiki 2010: 54.

¹⁶⁶ Erdle 2010: 252.

¹⁶⁷ Erdle 2010: 133.

¹⁶⁸ Erdle 2010: 122; Sadiki 2002a: 72–73.

¹⁶⁹ International Federation for Human Rights 2005; Powel and Sadiki 2010: 74.

¹⁷⁰ Alexander 2010: 65.

abroad.¹⁷¹ This strategic epiphany spared the human rights movement the fate of the Islamists and allowed it to set the tone of dissent in the years leading up to the 2011 revolution. In fact, recognizing that adherence to liberal values constituted the most effective approach to challenging the government, the Ennahda leadership-in-exile committed itself “to using only democratic and nonviolent means to achieving a democratic and tolerant Islamic state.”¹⁷² In addition, and again learning from the rights-focused groups, the party sought to improve its relations with Western countries.¹⁷³ Hence, following their respective bouts with the government, it was the Islamists that learned from the human rights activist, rather than vice versa.¹⁷⁴ As one commentator concluded in the year preceding the revolution, “the main link between secularists and Islamists today is their common struggle for liberty and democracy.”¹⁷⁵

Egypt: Democracy, Rights, Freedom, and Change

As noted previously, Sadat’s ascension to power, much like Ben Ali’s, was not unproblematic. In order to consolidate power and keep Nasserite and other leftist elements at bay, Sadat exploited the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Egypt’s principal Islamist organization that had survived Nasser’s eradication attempts in the late 1950s and 1960s.¹⁷⁶ Similarly to Bourguiba, Sadat reckoned that the reintroduction of Islamists would shift the political balance decisively in his favor.¹⁷⁷ He therefore ordered the release of thousands of Brothers from jail, permitted the publication of the organization’s newspaper, and even allowed Islamists to organize on university campuses where leftists and Nasserites had hitherto dominated.¹⁷⁸ Notwithstanding its utility for the regime, the Brotherhood never received legal status and instead remained a banned organization.

Despite the uncertain nature of this arrangement, the MB maintained a working relationship with the government until the Brothers’ moral compass was irrevocably upset by Sadat’s decision to make peace with Israel. The Brotherhood had viewed the warming relationship with the United States as problematic in its own right, but the prospect of reconciliation with the Jewish state made compromise with the regime impossible. In addition, the

¹⁷¹ Hibou 2011: 102. ¹⁷² Human Rights Watch 2009. See also Gasiorowski (1992).

¹⁷³ Allani 2009: 265–67. ¹⁷⁴ Waltz 1995: 162. ¹⁷⁵ Erdle 2010: 275.

¹⁷⁶ Osman 2010: 54–55, 84; Rutherford 2008: 81; Shehata 2010: 21–22.

¹⁷⁷ MacQueen 2008: 76; Rutherford 2008: 81–82. For more details about the Brotherhood in this period, see for example Carré (1983).

¹⁷⁸ Abdalla 2008: 226–27; Hassan 2006: 42; Osman 2010: 81; Roussillon 1998: 366; Rutherford 2008: 82; Vatikiotis 1991: 421–22.

Muslim Brothers considered Sadat's willingness to receive the exiled shah an outright provocation. The organization's stance led Sadat to conclude that the Brothers' had served their political purpose. Beginning in the summer of 1979 and lasting until his assassination, Sadat arrested and tried thousands of dissidents, including many Islamists. By the time he was gunned down on October 6, 1981, the president had made sure that his successor would inherit a nation in political turmoil.¹⁷⁹

Islamist Opposition to Mubarak

Mubarak quickly recognized the need to release some of the pressures that had built over Sadat's final years. To that end he freed many political prisoners, in particular members of the Muslim Brotherhood. In Mubarak's mind, Sadat's main mistake had been his failure to distinguish between moderate and radical Islamists. To control the violent wing of the movement, which Mubarak identified as the real threat to the state, he therefore sought to rebuild a working relationship with the Brotherhood.¹⁸⁰ The fact that the MB had since long proclaimed itself a nonviolent group intent on influencing the system from within made reconciliation with the state possible from both parties' point of view.¹⁸¹ Mubarak's insistence that his government was moving in the direction of democratic reform and multiparty politics further incentivized the Brotherhood to participate in the political game. By siding with the government in its struggle against extremist groups, such as al-Jihad (the organization responsible for Sadat's assassination), and despite remaining an unrecognized political organization, the MB took significant steps toward legitimacy. In the relatively free and fair parliamentary elections of 1984 and 1987, the Brotherhood successfully ran its candidates on the lists of established opposition parties¹⁸² and established itself as the largest opposition bloc in parliament.¹⁸³

But the Brotherhood's most effective tactic was not party politics. Instead, it focused its efforts on university campuses and, in particular, professional syndicates. Whereas trade unions had historically been co-opted by the government, white-collar syndicates representing doctors, lawyers, engineers, and journalists maintained a semblance of autonomy.¹⁸⁴ When the Brotherhood began to "infiltrate" the syndicates in the 1980s the associations' political

¹⁷⁹ Blaydes 2011: 149; Cook 2007: 86; Roussillon 1998: 371–73; Stacher 2012: 70; Vatikiotis 1991: 420–23. See also Kepel (1985).

¹⁸⁰ Cook 2007: 77; Shehata 2010: 54.

¹⁸¹ Rutherford 2008: 83; Shehata 2010: 53.

¹⁸² Cook 2007: 77; Dunne and Hamzawy 2008: 19. For details about the 1984 elections, see Kassem (1999: 95–97), Kienle (2000: 14), and Owen (1994: 187). On the 1987 elections, consult Vatikiotis (1991: 462–63).

¹⁸³ Cook 2007: 89.

¹⁸⁴ Kassem 2004: 112; Marfleet 2009: 29.

significance increased further.¹⁸⁵ Because many professionals were uninterested in syndicate activities (only around 20 percent voted in administrative council elections), it was relatively easy for the Brotherhood to gain control of these associations.¹⁸⁶

Despite government-imposed constraints, the MB sustained its commitment to working through institutionalized channels. Unlike in Tunisia, it was the regime that first abandoned its implicit arrangement with the Islamists. Government repression replaced accommodation for two main reasons. First, the regime recognized the potential threat represented by the MB's electoral successes and control of the professional syndicates, which by 1992 encompassed "all the major professional associations (except that of the journalists) and all the university student unions."¹⁸⁷ Second, the Brotherhood's organizational ability, including its charitable work in geographical and social areas neglected by the state, frightened Mubarak. The combination of mobilization capacities and mass appeal made the MB a force to be reckoned with, leading the government to conclude that it had to be curtailed.¹⁸⁸ The Brothers had hoped that its grassroots legitimacy would "impel the state officially to recognize the Islamists, but instead of conceding to Islamist pressures, the state launched an offensive campaign to uproot their influence."¹⁸⁹

In order to justify repression, Mubarak, like Ben Ali, resorted to guilt by association. By blurring the line between the Brotherhood and more radical Islamist organizations,¹⁹⁰ the regime gained a "legitimate" reason to persecute the Brothers. Claiming that its earlier strategy of conciliation with the MB had been misguided,¹⁹¹ the regime launched a wave of repression targeting all Islamists—moderates and radicals alike.¹⁹² In 1989, the government arrested roughly 10,000 Islamists, many of them without official charges directed at them.¹⁹³ Over the next several years the government detained numerous MB leaders and thousands of the group's members.¹⁹⁴

Since the Brotherhood had largely remained true to its commitment to nonviolent tactics,¹⁹⁵ the most serious charges against those arrested were generally dismissed. Still, simply belonging to an illegal organization often generated prison sentences of between three and five years.¹⁹⁶ Militant Islamists fared even worse. The government's introduction of a new anti-terrorism law¹⁹⁷ and the accompanying launch of a "large-scale offensive"¹⁹⁸ targeting radical Islamists in the summer of 1992 set the scene for "five years of low-level warfare between the Egyptian state and Islamist extremists."¹⁹⁹ In

¹⁸⁵ Kassem 2004: 112.

¹⁸⁶ Roussillon 1998: 382–84.

¹⁸⁷ Rutherford 2008: 85.

¹⁸⁸ Campagna 1996: 280–81.

¹⁸⁹ al-Awadi 2005: 62.

¹⁹⁰ Esposito 1999: 54.

¹⁹¹ Sadowski 1991: 130.

¹⁹² Roussillon 1998: 338; Rutherford 2008: 95.

¹⁹³ Esposito 1999: 56.

¹⁹⁴ Brownlee 2002: 7; Shehata 2010: 56.

¹⁹⁵ Baker 2003: 3.

¹⁹⁶ Esposito 1999: 56; Rutherford 2008: 87.

¹⁹⁷ Rutherford 2008: 87.

¹⁹⁸ Roussillon 1998: 388.

¹⁹⁹ Cook 2007: 2–3.

early 1994 alone, the government arrested 29,000 alleged radicals.²⁰⁰ Similar to the shah's crackdown on moderate opposition elements in 1963, the Egyptian regime's repressive measures in the purported defense of a nation under Islamist attack came to constitute a self-fulfilling prophesy as "the far-reaching repression...gave added incentives to other nonviolent activists to join the ranks of militants."²⁰¹ Islamist attacks on tourists became commonplace and included a highly reported incident in Luxor in 1997.²⁰² Although Westerners were particularly prized targets, Egyptian officials and Copts were included among those killed in these violent years.²⁰³

Contrary to their intentions, the Islamists' violence served the regime well, both domestically and internationally. The militants' choice of methods caused the traditional opposition parties to side with the regime²⁰⁴ since "the vast majority of Egyptians were inherently opposed to militants killing and looting in the name of religion, and condoned the regime's attempts to combat them."²⁰⁵ The confrontation also afforded the state some respite from domestic criticisms during a time in which economic liberalization and IMF-imposed structural adjustment programs strained the Egyptian economy.²⁰⁶

Seen from an international perspective, the timing of the regime's repressive tactics was hardly accidental. Following its support of the Gulf War, the government enjoyed wide Western support. In addition, events in Algeria at about the same time reinforced the West's perception of the Islamists as "a threat to an important ally, and Mubarak was adept at presenting his repressive policies as a necessary means of containing the threat."²⁰⁷ In an interview with Germany's *Der Spiegel* in 1992, the Egyptian president bemoaned the violence in neighboring Algeria where the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was locked in a violent confrontation with the government. The Muslim Brotherhood, Mubarak explained, "is an illegal organization that is behind most of the activities of the religious troublemakers. Have a look at what happened in Algeria. I advised the former president not to permit any religious parties. He flung my advice to the winds. Now Algeria is in trouble."²⁰⁸

Mubarak was likely concerned that Egypt could indeed move in the same direction as Algeria,²⁰⁹ but he also knew that the prospect of an Islamist takeover of Egypt sent shivers down the backs of Western leaders. For the United States in particular, the Iranian Revolution made the containment of "radical Islam" a Middle Eastern priority alongside Israeli security and the free flow of oil.²¹⁰ In many ways then, the campaign against the Islamists was a low-risk

²⁰⁰ Rutherford 2008: 87.

²⁰¹ Monshipouri 2009: 92.

²⁰² Harb 2003: 287.

²⁰³ Esposito 1999: 54; Osman 2010: 97–99.

²⁰⁴ Roussillon 1998: 389.

²⁰⁵ Osman 2010: 169.

²⁰⁶ Chalcraft 2011: 49; Dalacoura 2003: 46.

²⁰⁷ Dalacoura 2003: 47.

²⁰⁸ Qtd. in Cook 2007: 90.

²⁰⁹ al-Awadi 2005: 76; Shehata 2010: 55.

²¹⁰ Rutherford 2008: 3.

endeavor for Mubarak and provided him with a “potentially defining project.”²¹¹ By the end of the decade, as a result of the regime’s successful use of repressive measures, “most of the militant groups operating in Egypt had declared a ceasefire, renounced violence or had been driven out of the country.”²¹² While the state could bask in the glory of having defeated the Islamist menace, the neutralizing of one opposition trend inadvertently increased the space available to another.

Human Rights Activism

When the United Nations adopted its Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, Egypt was among the nations voting in its favor. Since then the country has signed most major international human rights conventions and has emerged as an important voice for the advancement of human rights in Africa.²¹³ As in Tunisia, domestic concerns about human rights emerged more or less simultaneously among state and opposition actors in the late 1970s, as Sadat accelerated his liberalization agenda in “response to international pressures stemming from the shift in Egyptian foreign policy to the West and in particular to the United States.”²¹⁴ Keen to show Carter his liberal credentials and worried that reports of human rights abuses might jeopardize the new relationship, Sadat strove to control Egypt’s human rights scene by establishing the country’s first two human rights organizations, the Partisans Association of Human Rights in Cairo (PAHRC) and the Partisans Association of Human Rights in Alexandria (PAHRA) in 1977 and 1979 respectively. Far from monitoring the regime’s human rights performance, however, the two organizations functioned as a “government mouthpiece” charged with the task of defending it when “accused of human rights violations in the international arena.”²¹⁵

Sadat had hoped that his embrace of liberal values, which in reality was little more than “a concession to US sensitivities,”²¹⁶ would provide his government with international legitimacy. And although this strategy worked, it also entailed certain side effects. By putting the human rights issue on the domestic agenda the government contributed to the emergence of an independent human rights movement in the early 1980s.²¹⁷ By 1985 an autonomous Egyptian human rights organization had begun to take shape, initially operating as a branch of the Arab Organization of Human Rights (AOHR). The Egyptian Organization of Human Rights (EOHR) broke free of the AOHR in 1987 and unsuccessfully applied for legal status due to the fact that Egypt

²¹¹ Osman 2010: 169.

²¹² Osman 2010: 99.

²¹³ Boyle 1996: 87–88; Dalacoura 2007: 122.

²¹⁴ Dalacoura 2007: 121.

²¹⁵ Kassem 2004: 119.

²¹⁶ Kienle 2007: 248.

²¹⁷ Hicks 2006: 66–67.

already had human rights-protecting agencies in place, which, according to Egyptian law, made the EOHR superfluous.²¹⁸ The EOHR's battle for legal status lasted a decade, and although the lack of formal recognition made its early years difficult, it did not prevent the organization from criticizing the state through "hard-hitting reports on torture in prisons, electoral fraud, and violations of basic civil liberties."²¹⁹

By the early 1990s, roughly 200 of Egypt's 16,000 non-governmental organizations had human rights agendas.²²⁰ The government exercised strict control of these often tiny groups, and many topics were off-limits. In addition to regime-imposed restrictions, human rights groups faced a more existential obstacle: the human rights issue was simply not salient to most Egyptians. To remedy this and increase their own relevance, the human rights organizations joined forces with the Muslim Brotherhood.²²¹ When the regime stepped up its harassment of the Brotherhood in the early 1990s, the relationship between Islamists and human rights activists assumed mutually beneficial characteristics: human rights issues increased in importance as the regime persecuted political dissidents, while those dissidents, usually Islamists, benefited from third-party protection and advocacy on human rights grounds.

According to Tamir Moustafa, "the 1991–1997 period was marked by a significant increase in the activities of human rights organizations."²²² This upswing can be plausibly explained by the wave of repression that targeted Islamists and made human rights concerns pertinent, but an alternative, or complementary, explanation emphasizes the international context. The collapse of the Soviet bloc caused international human rights organizations to lobby Western governments "to monitor and punish autocratic regimes"²²³ in order to promote democracy and liberal values around the globe. With the threat of communism seemingly averted there was no longer any reason to allow Cold War fears to trump human rights concerns.²²⁴ The international community's attention to human rights benefited Egyptian organizations like the EOHR by increasing their relevance.

Through reports amounting to "hundreds of pages of documentation every year in both Arabic and English,"²²⁵ the EOHR established links with organizations like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights, the United Nations, the African Commission for Human and People's Rights, the International Commission of Jurists, the International Organization for the Freedom of Expression, the UN Economic and Social Council, and the International Federation for Human Rights, as well as foreign embassies in Egypt. As a result, the organization became more

²¹⁸ Hicks 2006: 75; Kassem 2004: 119–20.

²¹⁹ Moustafa 2007: 114.

²²⁰ MacQueen 2008: 84.

²²¹ MacQueen 2008: 84–85.

²²² Moustafa 2007: 145.

²²³ Rutherford 2008: 19.

²²⁴ Rutherford 2008: 18–19.

²²⁵ Moustafa 2007: 146.

Table 4.1. Major Egyptian rights organizations established 1985–1999

1985	Egyptian Organization for Human Rights
1988	Ibn Khaldun Center
1992	Legal Research and Resource Center for Human Rights
1993	Nadim Center for the Management and Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence
1994	Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
1994	Center for Human Rights Legal Aid
1995	Center for Womens' Legal Aid
1996	Group for Democratic Development
1996	Land Center for Human Rights
1997	Arab Center for the Independence of the Judiciary and the Legal Profession
1997	Human Rights Center for the Assistance of Prisoners
1999	Association for Human Rights Legal Aid

Source: Adapted from Moustafa 2007: 147.

difficult for Mubarak to control, leading the president to complain that “most of these human rights organizations abroad get their information from a so-called human rights organization here.”²²⁶ The EOHR’s international success showed Egyptian activists a pathway to legitimate opposition, and as a result, “over a dozen more Egyptian human rights associations were established in the 1990s, focused on a variety of issue areas.”²²⁷ Table 4.1 depicts Egypt’s expanding human rights stage of the 1990s.

The human rights organizations’ championing of Islamists in court frustrated the regime,²²⁸ but arguably in a more indirect manner than one might assume. Islamists were generally found guilty, especially in the military courts the regime began using in the mid-1990s,²²⁹ and there was relatively little the human rights activists could do to prevent this. However, the human rights organizations used the trials to raise domestic and international awareness of Egypt’s human rights situation. By combining their advocacy with scathing criticisms of the government that were published abroad, they inflicted significant damage on the regime’s reputation.²³⁰ Human rights violations continued to occur on a large scale even after Egypt signed the Barcelona Declaration in 1995, but thanks to the human rights organizations’ activities Europe’s attention was now, at least nominally, fixed on Egypt’s human rights performance. As a consequence, it became increasingly easy for human rights groups to “leverage international pressure on the Egyptian government.” In

²²⁶ Weaver 2000: 166; Hicks 2006: 66–67.

²²⁷ Moustafa 2007: 146. For further details, see Hicks (2006: 86–87).

²²⁸ Hassan 2006; MacQueen 2008: 82.

²²⁹ Eposito 1999: 56; Moustafa 2007: 136–37; Roussillon 1998: 388–89; Rutherford 2008: 87.

²³⁰ Dalacoura 2003: 52; Moustafa 2007: 146.

response, the government, which could not employ the repressive measures it had directed at the Islamists without appearing hypocritical, sought alternative avenues to controlling the human rights movement. To that end, the regime “began to turn the screws on the human rights movement as early as 1995 through intimidation, smear campaigns in the state press, and discouraging donors from contributing to local human rights NGOs. Beginning in 1998, the regime engaged in a full-fledged campaign to undermine the human rights movement.”²³¹

Restrained by concerns over its international image, the regime resorted to legislation in its efforts to curb the human rights movement, much like Ben Ali had done a few years earlier. In 1999 the government proposed a law that among other things made it illegal for NGOs to receive foreign funding or even communicate with foreign organizations without the government’s explicit approval.²³² Since domestic funds were hard to come by, a ban on international funding would make many groups’ survival highly uncertain. Reacting to the proposed law, eight advocacy organizations issued what became known as the “Geneva Statement,” in which they argued that the human rights groups’ precarious situation forced them to consider moving abroad. In addition, the signatories demanded a meeting with President Mubarak, and, indicative of the internationalizing strategies that by now was a prominent feature of the Egyptian opposition movement, demanded a second meeting with Mary Robinson, the UN’s High Commissioner for Human Rights, who was scheduled to visit Egypt the following month.²³³

The Geneva Statement caused international human rights groups to condemn the proposed law and even prompted a harsh reaction from Washington. State Department spokesman James Rubin declared that the law represented “the wrong direction to go if Egypt wants to energize civil society and promote development,”²³⁴ and US embassy staff in Cairo “raised concerns in several meetings with high-ranking figures in the Egyptian government.”²³⁵ Mobilization against the law, which was ultimately thrown out,²³⁶ had inspired Egyptian activists and hinted once more at the regime’s vulnerabilities.

International pressure on the regime increased in the wake of the 9/11 bombings. As noted in previous chapters, President Bush determined that democracy promotion in the Middle East would from now on anchor his administration’s counter-terrorism strategy. For Egyptian human rights organizations, Washington’s Freedom Agenda constituted

²³¹ Moustafa 2007: 182–83.

²³² Kassem 2004: 120; Kienle 2000: 97; Moustafa 2007: 184–85. See also Pratt (2006).

²³³ Langohr 2005: 211.

²³⁴ Kassem 2004: 121.

²³⁵ Moustafa 2007: 185.

²³⁶ Apiku 2000.

Table 4.2. Human rights organizations established 2002–2004

2002	Egyptian Center for Children’s Rights
2002	Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights
2002	South Center for Human Rights
2003	Egyptian Association for Supporting Democracy
2004	al-Marsad al-Madani for Human Rights
2004	Arab Penal Reform Organization
2004	Egyptian Association for Developing Legal Awareness
2004	Egyptian Association to Support Democratic Development
2004	Egyptian Center for Housing Rights
2004	Habi Center for Environmental Rights
2004	South Center for Human Rights

Source: Adapted from Moustafa 2007: 207.

an important political opportunity as “the idea of democracy promotion now fueled the discourse and demands of the Egyptian opposition.”²³⁷ As Table 4.2 shows, the next four years witnessed another proliferation of rights-emphasizing NGOs.

Pressured by the White House’s rhetoric, the government once again sought to co-opt the human rights discourse by creating the National Council on Human Rights (NCHR) in 2003. However, this move mainly “had the effect...of legitimizing political activism by civil society groups.”²³⁸ Thus, although Mubarak’s renewed commitment to human rights was far from sincere, his rhetorical pretense

did have a critically important effect on Egyptian politics. With Washington watching and Mubarak posturing as a reformer, activists who had previously worked at the margins, or who had been subject to repression, were relatively freer to pursue their agendas in new and innovative ways. Although wary of the U.S. role, seemingly overnight, political activists were organizing summits and writing reform manifestos, and those with invitations to conferences at glitzy hotels in places like Doha, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai sharply questioned Egyptian government ministers who were on the program. Journalists and columnists, in particular, took the opportunity to unleash a torrent of criticism on Egypt’s first family.²³⁹

²³⁷ Albrecht 2007: 63.

²³⁸ Dunne and Hamzawy 2008: 30. Shehata (2010: 39) makes a similar point as she explains that the NCHR’s creation came to “signify that, at least on the formal and discursive levels, the regime felt obliged to pay lip service to the human rights agenda, which had been previously dismissed as a foreign import.”

²³⁹ Cook 2012: 264.

As Chapter 5 will show, the most troubling result of the regime's liberalization discourse, as far as it was concerned, was the emergence of civil society organizations that took their grievances to the streets. In just over a year (2004–05) at least 14 “pro-reform movements” saw the light of day,²⁴⁰ thus manifesting “the synergy between US pressure and the debate for reform that it helped initiate at the domestic level.”²⁴¹ For these groups, that beside the now famous Kifaya included Journalists for Change, the National Rally for Democratic Transformation, Intellectuals for Change, Doctors for Change, Youth for Change, Writers for Change, the Association of Egyptian Mothers, and the Movement of White Ribbons, “‘change’ seems to be the buzzword or the common denominator,” a battle cry fully compatible with Washington's call for political progress.²⁴²

The Brothers Reformed

Ever since their crushing defeat in the mid-1990s the Muslim Brotherhood had sought to distance itself from the radical Islamists by emphasizing its commitment to nonviolent means of struggle. During those difficult days the MB had embraced human rights norms for one simple reason: its members were tortured and subjected to trials that fell significantly short of international standards, making the raising of the human rights banner a much-needed source of protection.²⁴³ Since then, the human rights organizations' activism had shown the Brotherhood the proactive utility of the human rights frame and contributed to the organization's decision to transform itself. While its social conservatism remained intact, its political attitudes became increasingly moderate and based on “the fundamental principles of democracy as defined by international law.”²⁴⁴ While the sincerity of its commitment to liberal democracy was (and remains) debatable,²⁴⁵ there is no question that the organization's loud, public commitment to such ideas benefited it greatly. As one commentator notes, the Brotherhood “smoothly adapted to the current reform debate, which is centered around more civil rights and freedoms, the abolition of emergency law and human rights abuses, and free elections.”²⁴⁶

Recognizing the advantage of aligning itself with other civil society organizations, in particular those agitating on the basis of human rights, the Brotherhood intensified its “charm offensive”²⁴⁷ in the early 2000s by calling for a “dramatic expansion of civil society,”²⁴⁸ and changing its slogan from

²⁴⁰ Shahin 2010: 106; Arafat 2009: 157. ²⁴¹ Dalacoura 2005: 969.

²⁴² Shahin 2005: 2. See also Osman (2010: 191).

²⁴³ Rutherford 2008: 96; Shehata 2010: 55–56. ²⁴⁴ Dalacoura 2011: 1235.

²⁴⁵ Bowker 2010: 182; Rutherford 2006: 728; Shahin 2005: 4, 2010: 112.

²⁴⁶ Albrecht 2007: 69. See also Al-Sayyid (2004). ²⁴⁷ Osman 2010: 101.

²⁴⁸ Rutherford 2008: 173.

"Islam is the Solution" to "The Constitution is the Solution."²⁴⁹ The MB's arguably most important and shrewd initiative took place in 2004. When the Bush administration accelerated its Freedom Agenda by introducing various reform initiatives, the Brotherhood pounced²⁵⁰ and "unveiled its own reform initiative in March 2004, which demanded democratic freedoms and the suspension of emergency law."²⁵¹ In a series of interviews granted in connection to the launching of its reform program, MB leaders characterized their organization "as supporting democracy in an authoritarian state and supporting human rights in the context of human rights violations by the state."²⁵² They also identified the organization's objectives as "the advancement of the Egyptian people through peaceful political participation and continued stability,"²⁵³ and the establishment of "a republican system of government that is democratic, constitutional, and parliamentary and that conforms with Islamic principles."²⁵⁴

The Brotherhood's new rhetoric served it well in the 2005 parliamentary elections. In a political climate characterized by American pressure on Mubarak to permit greater electoral competition,²⁵⁵ the MB ran an effective pro-democracy campaign with a "particular emphasis on adopting laws that strengthen the protection of civil and political right,"²⁵⁶ thus "presenting a picture of [itself as] a moderate and respectable movement which espouses the internationally prestigious principles of human rights."²⁵⁷ Despite government attempts to contain its most potent opponent, the Brotherhood's candidates secured 88 seats—20 percent of the available total²⁵⁸—and "morphed from a highly secretive, hierarchical, antidemocratic organization led by anointed elders into a modern, multivocal political association steered by educated, savvy professionals."²⁵⁹ With the benefits of running a Western-compatible campaign confirmed, the Brotherhood sought to exploit the momentum by presenting its moderate credentials to a wider international audience.²⁶⁰ Accordingly,

the group launched an English-language website that linked to the online sites of many Western newspapers. In 2006, some of the group's leaders launched the "Re-Introducing the Brotherhood to the West Initiative," listing and addressing many "Western misconceptions about the Brotherhood." The group's deputy

²⁴⁹ Shehata 2010: 55. ²⁵⁰ Dalacoura 2011: 7.

²⁵¹ Dalacoura 2005: 967. See also Dunne and Hamzawy (2008: 22–23).

²⁵² MacQueen 2008: 81–82.

²⁵³ Blaydes 2011: 152. It was important for the MB to emphasize its nonviolent character since if "associated with violent tactics, the international community would rally around the regime and further empower it to eradicate the MB" (Rutherford 2008: 96).

²⁵⁴ Rutherford 2008: 77.

²⁵⁵ Cook 2012: 189–90.

²⁵⁶ Rutherford 2006: 722.

²⁵⁷ Dalacoura 2007: 128.

²⁵⁸ Blaydes 2011: 15; Moustafa 2007: 215.

²⁵⁹ el-Ghobashy 2005: 374.

²⁶⁰ Rutherford 2008: 96.

general guide wrote an article for the *London Guardian* under the title “No need to be afraid of us;” two senior members even composed an op-ed in the American Jewish newspaper the *Forward*.²⁶¹

From here on the MB often worked in tandem with secular civil society organizations, especially when it came to public protest activities. By not leading demonstrations the Brotherhood made it more difficult for the regime to use the specter of Islamism to justify repression. The fact that human rights organizations enjoyed significant international support while the Brotherhood possessed the capacity to mobilize Egyptians made it possible for the two groups to find common—and mutually beneficial—ground. For the regime, this combination would eventually spell disaster.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that in addition to transforming autocracies into façade democracies, amicable international relationships between the West and dictatorial regimes can have another effect on domestic politics. By imposing liberal expectations on autocratic regimes, a country’s close relations with the democratic world have the potential of shaping the opposition by providing it with a structural context from which to challenge its adversary. While always constituting a potentially irksome contradiction, an authoritarian regime’s embrace of democracy and human rights only becomes truly problematic if domestic opposition groups adopt the government’s liberal rhetoric as their own. Thus, whereas violent insurgents tend to be dealt with relatively easily by modern states²⁶²—especially those armed to their teeth by their allies—nonviolent, liberal groups often represent a much more difficult challenge for Western-aligned regimes.

As long as the state’s adversaries permit the regime to monopolize the liberal discourse, the regime’s efforts to maintain power are largely unquestioned by the global community. In fact, violent attacks on a self-proclaimed democracy justify government repression and allow it to respond in kind. In many ways, violent opposition, whether perpetrated by communists or Islamists, benefits the state by lending credence to its official narrative relayed to the West: The opponent is ruthless, uninterested in democracy and human rights, comprises a lethal threat to the country’s political progress, and must therefore be defeated by whatever means necessary.

On the other hand, opposition groups that adopt the liberal rhetoric appropriated by the regime target their adversary’s weakest point. Bound by its

²⁶¹ Osman 2010: 101.

²⁶² Zunes 1994.

own rhetoric and commitment to Western values, a façade democracy may face great difficulties when trying to respond to unarmed, moderate groups that speak the regime's own democratic language. The convergence of state and opposition discourses forced the Iranian, Tunisian, and Egyptian states to implicitly recognize the legitimacy of their opponents' claims. The three regimes still sought to curtail their antagonists' advances, but restrained by their liberal public commitments found themselves forced to do so in ways radically different from their handling of armed insurgents. In short, the liberal opposition groups' emphasis on the same values that the regimes purported to cherish afforded the former some protection from persecution.

Iran's close relationship with the United States impacted domestic politics more than once. In the 1940s and again in the early 1960s, American influence contributed to moments of liberalization. But once it became clear that forces opposed to American interests looked to exploit the regime's reform agendas, communist-backed nationalists in 1953 and Islamists in 1963, the door closed on liberalization just as quickly as it had opened. The brutal crushing of the 1963 Muharram uprising radicalized activists previously committed to a political, nonviolent struggle for reform. While the state labeled the resulting guerrilla movement as communist and unceremoniously crushed it, Iranian students exploited their country's close relationship with the United States and descended on American college campuses in massive numbers. There they began to agitate against their king on the basis of Western political norms and values. When Jimmy Carter was elected president in 1976 the students' rhetoric suddenly matched that of the White House and placed enough political pressure on the shah to make him enact his last reform program. As will become clear in the next chapter, that decision only made him more vulnerable to charges of human rights violations and nonviolent protests.

Tunisia's human rights movement emerged as a direct consequence of Bourguiba's eagerness to please Jimmy Carter. Although the movement faced a constant uphill battle, it proved a much more difficult opponent for the state to handle than the often violent Islamists. In Tunisia, as in Egypt, the fortunes and nature of the Islamist movement fluctuated with domestic and geopolitical developments. When the Tunisian regime found the Islamists useful in its efforts to control other domestic opponents, they were afforded relative freedom to operate. This became particularly clear when Ben Ali sought to consolidate power in the late 1980s and therefore invited the Islamists to participate in the political dialogue.

However, Ben Ali soon turned against the Islamists and accused them of wanting to rewind Tunisia's political gains. When denied the fruits of their cooperation, many Islamists became radicalized, reasoning that since the democratic path had been closed, violence now remained the only option.

But their turn to violence spelled disaster as the regime had no problem justifying—at home and abroad—repression of anti-democratic elements. Tunisia's human rights movement, on the other hand, turned out to be much more resilient. Before the international community's watchful eyes, Ben Ali had to employ inefficient tools in his efforts to control human rights activists. Although the movement was too weak to challenge the state, its nonviolent, political approach to dissent fueled the imagination of others, including the Islamists, especially after both the European Union and the United States responded to 9/11 by calling on their Middle Eastern allies to democratize.

Egypt's story is similar to Tunisia's. Like Bourguiba and Ben Ali, Sadat and Mubarak used the Islamist movement to advance their own agendas whenever possible. But when the Muslim Brotherhood's political potential came to outweigh its usefulness to the regime, the former "ally" became an enemy of the state, denied the legal status the organization had expected to be forthcoming. Predictably, with politics appearing a dead-end the Brotherhood became increasingly radical, resulting in a drawn-out, violent conflict with the government. Exploiting the opportunity fully, the regime equated the Brothers with the radicals and largely neutralized the organization. Like in Tunisia, Egypt's human rights movement, itself a result of the government's eagerness to display its liberal credentials, turned out to be a more difficult challenge for the state to overcome. With violent repression and imprisonment ineffective tools against an opponent perfectly aligned with Western political principles, the regime sought to combat it with legislation and more subtle pressures. These tactics were less effective than the brutal repression unleashed against the Islamists, and when President Bush announced his "Freedom Agenda" Mubarak, like the shah almost 30 years earlier, suddenly found himself severely constrained by his relationship with Washington.

By embracing the same liberal rhetoric that the three regimes and their Western allies espoused, human rights and democracy activists in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt contributed to the creation of an iron cage of liberalism in each country. While not essential to the outcome, it is noteworthy that the Iranian use of human rights was less institutionalized than in Tunisia and Egypt. The abroad-based Iranian students made extensive use of human rights, but they were not explicitly a human rights organization. A plausible explanation for this is the fact that the Iranian student movement emerged prior, rather than in response, to the Helsinki Accords and the Jimmy Carter presidency. The ultimate outcome was, however, identical as the three regimes' liberal rhetoric allowed human rights activists to hold them accountable for their public commitments. As we will see next, the early work of the groups and organizations examined in this chapter inspired others, and eventually led to revolution.

5

Ousting the Dictator

Unarmed Revolutions and Disarmed Regimes

I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.... America respects the right of all peaceful and law-abiding voices to be heard around the world, even if we disagree with them.

—Barack Obama, June 2009¹

We have an obligation to expect that countries with whom we are so closely associated will perform within certain norms of decency when it comes to the question of human rights.

—David Obey, US Congressman, June 2007²

The convergence of a regime, its Western ally, and the opposition's discourses represents the formation of an iron cage of liberalism. As the previous two chapters have shown, the three authoritarian governments' rhetorical commitments to Western core principles obliged them to maintain their liberal façades and to exercise restraint in their dealings with pro-democratic opposition groups. Such groups, on the other hand, relied on their espousal of a liberal discourse to partially shield themselves from the kind of overwhelming persecution that befell leftist and Islamist groups. In short, the state–opposition “consensus” on issues concerning democratic rule and respect for human rights made those principles a serious threat as far as the regime was concerned, and a promising political opportunity from the challengers' point of view.

¹ Obama 2009.

² Congressional Record 2007: H6914–15.

Despite its potential, the iron cage of liberalism is not a powerful mechanism in itself. As long as opposition groups are content to highlight the façade democracy's shortcomings in words alone, the iron cage of liberalism is bound to remain dormant. Since petitions and letters are unlikely to receive ample attention in those countries supporting a given dictatorship, they must be coupled with a form of political struggle that accentuates the contradiction between the regime's rhetoric and its behavior. By "doing," rather than "speaking," democracy and human rights, opposition movements can highlight the discrepancy between their adversaries' words and deeds. Nonviolent tactics are highly suitable for this task since they, by definition, are fully compatible with human rights and must therefore be permitted by any government claiming to embrace liberal norms and values.

This chapter shows how nonviolent movements in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt put sufficient pressure on each government—and indirectly on its Western patrons—to paralyze the regime and thereby allowed the movements to become unarmed revolutions. The emphasis here is on the revolutionary process, but that process is conceptualized somewhat differently from how revolutions are generally thought of. Instead of approaching the three revolutions as sudden outbreaks of mass mobilization, I argue that all three of them were little more than the continuation of protest movements that had been brewing for years. I therefore contend that the revolutions were not primarily the result of an economic downturn or any other conceivable source of popular discontent. What ultimately distinguishes a "revolution" from a "movement" is not differing motivations for mobilization, but rather their outcomes. The task is thus not to understand why people rise up, but why they manage to defeat the state once they are on their feet.

To support the claim that discontent does not explain revolutionary success, this chapter first traces the history of each revolutionary movement. By showing that dissent was if not constant, then at least durable, I hope to shift the theoretical focus from revolutionary causes to revolutionary contexts. The second objective of the chapter is therefore to elucidate how nonviolent revolutionary success depends on a movement's ability to prompt international and domestic allies to withdraw their support from the regime. As in previous chapters, each case is treated individually, beginning with Iran.

The Iranian Revolution

By the mid-1970s the shah had neutralized the guerrilla groups that until then represented the most serious domestic threat to his rule. Still, the

country stirred as a number of factors coincided to unsettle the population. The oil boom burst in 1975, but not before facilitating a global recession. The economic downturn did not necessarily hit Iran harder than other nations in the region,³ but factors unique to the country meant that its consequences manifested themselves in a particular manner. For instance, Iran's close relationship with the West resulted in an enormous influx of foreigners—Americans in particular—which drove up housing prices in the cities and thus contributed to the skyrocketing cost of living.⁴ Notwithstanding the resulting grievances, “the Iranian recession of 1975 generated little public protest,”⁵ although a wave of strikes⁶ coupled with limited student⁷ and bazaar⁸ mobilization, did occur. However, perhaps even more important than these domestic developments were the international ones that helped set the Iranian Revolution in motion.

Jimmy Carter entered the White House proclaiming that “America had betrayed her own principles and alienated progressive forces around the world by supporting right-wing dictatorship.”⁹ As one of Washington's foremost allies, the shah could hardly escape the conclusion that his was one of the dictatorships Carter had in mind, and neither could the king's opponents. As noted in Chapter 3, the shah responded to Carter's election with a broad and well-publicized reform program. The opposition correctly “attributed the Shah's liberalization measures to President Carter's human rights policy”¹⁰ and tailored its resistance to match the new president's rhetoric. As Hamid Algar explains, “it was a question of tactically harassing the regime in a fashion which might be thought to coincide with the new emphasis in American policy abroad.”¹¹ Indeed, “interviews and statements do indicate . . . that professionals and intellectuals were determined to utilize the American human rights policy to wedge an opening by publishing their grievances, hoping to widen the crack in order to change government policies.”¹²

Beginning in March 1977, moderate oppositionists who “hoped to use the human rights issue to maximize its advantage”¹³ commenced “an effort to test the limits of liberalization.”¹⁴ Keen to attract the world's attention, the liberal opposition circulated essays and letters that criticized the shah for his despotic style of rule and called for the implementation of human rights reform.¹⁵ In this period of “pre-revolution,” groups like the National Front and the Freedom Movement re-emerged from their

³ Kurzman 2004: 84.

⁴ Beeman 1983: 205; Foran 1993a: 377; Stempel 1981: 74.

⁵ Kurzman 2004: 136.

⁶ Kurzman 2004: 77; Moaddel 1994: 128.

⁷ Parsa 1989: 101.

⁸ Amjad 1989: 31; Arjomand 1986: 392; Parsa 1989: 105.

⁹ Seliktar 2012: 7.

¹⁰ Arjomand 1988: 130.

¹¹ Algar 1983: 100.

¹² Keddie 2003: 215.

¹³ Seliktar 2000: 62.

¹⁴ Seliktar 2000: 62.

¹⁵ Keddie 1983b: 588. See also Foran (1993a: 378).

involuntary hiatus, and by summer professional syndicates like the Iranian Writers' Association and the Association of Iranian Jurists joined the informal coalition. These groups' "very existence implied an enormous change in the political environment, and they provided important foci for the articulation of grievances and the beginnings of expression of public opinion."¹⁶

Of even greater importance—and even more revealing of the Carter-shah dynamic—was the formation of new organizations focusing specifically on human rights.¹⁷ Foremost among these was the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedom (or the Committee for Human Rights for short) under the leadership of Freedom Movement veteran and would-be first president of the Islamic Republic, Mehdi Bazargan.

Formally organized in December 1977, the Committee for Human Rights coordinated the documentation of civil rights violations... By midsummer 1978 the committee had compiled over 200 case histories of human and civil rights violations during the Shah's regime. It also worked with organizations abroad, including the International Commission of Jurists and Amnesty International.¹⁸

Bazargan and his colleagues "made every effort to tie opposition activities in Iran to the human rights banner and in so doing to explore fully any potential there still might be in showing some attempts to adhere to Carter's human rights program as a means of gaining American political encouragement."¹⁹ On December 29, 1977, twenty-nine prominent activists wrote an open letter to UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, a copy of which was sent directly to Carter, "requesting international help to restore human and civil rights to Iran."²⁰ Thus, in what has been referred to as a "planned campaign,"²¹ the opposition and its "supporters in the United States encouraged the President to recognize that the Iranian dissidents were seeking the same human rights goals the President had been proclaiming."²²

While Iranian activists sought to involve the United States in their conflict with the shah on the basis of the president's human rights discourse, they were shrewd enough to recognize that Washington was unlikely to turn on a trusted ally. Thus, "by 1978 efforts were directed more toward producing American neutrality rather than enlisting positive American support for fundamental reform."²³ Emphasizing the human rights angle turned out to

¹⁶ Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994: 99.

¹⁷ Amjad 1989: 117.

¹⁸ Stempel 1981: 56.

¹⁹ Cottam 1988: 167–68. See also Seliktar (2012: 10) and Westad (1992).

²⁰ Stempel 1981: 89.

²¹ Stempel 1981: 89.

²² Stempel 1981: 89.

²³ Cottam 1988: 162.

be a most fruitful way of accomplishing that objective. For Richard Cottam, a State Department adviser on Iranian affairs at the time, "there is not the slightest question that the timing of opposition activity is directly related to Carter's pronouncements on human rights."²⁴

The Revolution

The Carters rang in 1978 in Tehran as the shah's guests. To mark the occasion the president delivered a toast, asserting that "Iran under the great leadership of the Shah is an island of stability in one of the most troubled areas of the world."²⁵ A mere week later, stability would seem a distant dream as the secular opposition's push for reform was replaced by the religious leaders' calls for revolution.

The Iranian Revolution is frequently dubbed "Islamic," and its outcome certainly justifies the epithet.²⁶ However, the origins of the revolution were neither Islamic nor revolutionary.²⁷ Secular opposition figures like Bazargan pressed the shah for concessions, but did not dismiss the possibility of a constitutional role for the monarch.²⁸ But when the regime on January 7, 1978, slandered Khomeini in a newspaper article by accusing him of being a homosexual British agent, the government, to its own demise, wrested control of the movement away from the progressive secularists and handed it on a silver platter to Khomeini and his hard-liners. Over the course of the following two days, 4,000 radical teachers and students demonstrated in Qom. The city's bazaar shut down in solidarity with the protesters as clashes with the security forces claimed at least two lives.²⁹

The Qom protest marked the beginning of the 40-day protest cycles that become the defining characteristic of the revolutionary movement in the first half of 1978. Based on the Shi'i tradition of mourning the deceased 40 days after their deaths, large processions took place throughout the country on February 18 and inadvertently generated more martyrs that in turn could be commemorated 40 days later.³⁰ While these demonstrations sometimes turned into riots due to government repression they remained largely nonviolent,³¹ even though the shah referred to the 40-day rotation as "a self-perpetuating cycle of destruction."³²

The cyclical protests came to an end in May amidst rumors that the regime planned a massive crackdown for the next round of demonstrations, scheduled for June 17.³³ The summer passed relatively quietly until the Rex Cinema

²⁴ Muravchik 1988: 211. ²⁵ Qtd. in Amjad 1989: 119. ²⁶ Moaddel 1992: 366

²⁷ Irfani 1983. ²⁸ Cottam 1988: 168. ²⁹ Abrahamian 1982: 505.

³⁰ Keddie 2003: 226; Seliktar 2000: 77; Sick 1985: 36. ³¹ Keddie 2003: 226.

³² Pahlavi 1980: 154. ³³ Kurzman 2004: 50.

in Abadan burned down with 400 people inside.³⁴ The government and the opposition accused one another of the arson, and although it is still unclear who the perpetrator was, Iranians overwhelmingly blamed the regime.³⁵ The incident represents a major turning point in the revolution as it “galvanized the revolutionary movement, intensified public hatred of the regime, led to the first massive and peaceful anti-Shah rally in Teheran, and forced the government into a defensive posture.”³⁶

The shah responded to the fire with concessions,³⁷ but merely three weeks later another decisive event irrevocably turned the revolutionary tide against him. In response to a series of large demonstrations during Ramadan, the government declared martial law in the early hours of Friday, September 8.³⁸ Unaware of the decree that now effectively prohibited public gatherings, activists congregated as planned in Tehran’s Jaleh Square later that morning to continue their streak of peaceful demonstrations. The result was a massacre in which security forces opened fire on unarmed protesters, killing at least 86 individuals.³⁹ Black Friday, as it became known, marked the revolution’s point of no return as “compromise with the Shah became extremely difficult if not impossible after this date,”⁴⁰ and forced the remaining moderates to concede their leadership positions to hardliners who argued that revolution was now the only option.

Immediately following Black Friday, strikes appeared on the protest repertoire. Although Iranians had struck regularly throughout the mid-1970s⁴¹ and the country enjoyed a long history of worker mobilization,⁴² strikes had never before been employed on such a massive scale. Oil workers took action first and were soon joined by bazaar merchants and shopkeepers, private sector workers, and public employees⁴³ until local strikes morphed into general ones.⁴⁴ In addition to voicing economic grievances, the strikers made political demands that included “the unconditional release of all political prisoners, dissolution of martial law, and expulsion of foreigners of the respective sectors,”⁴⁵ the “Iranianization of the oil industry,”⁴⁶ and “the return of Khomeini” from exile.⁴⁷ In the face of general strikes and mass demonstrations, the shah opted to intersperse limited repression with significant concessions. As a result, the movement grew drastically throughout the fall and

³⁴ Amjad 1989: 123–24; Kurzman 1996: 156.

³⁵ Algar 1983: 106–07. According to Ganji (2012: 70), “after the revolution, it became increasingly clear that Islamist radicals had set the cinema on fire.”

³⁶ Milani 1988: 198.

³⁷ Menashri 1990: 39–41.

³⁸ Kurzman 2004: 74.

³⁹ Foran 1993a: 381; Keddie 2003: 232; Kurzman 2004: 75; Zonis 1991: 249.

⁴⁰ Bakhash 1990: 17.

⁴¹ Kurzman 2004: 77.

⁴² Abrahamian 1982: 420; Afary 1994: 25.

⁴³ Amjad 1989: 125; Bakhash 1984: 189; Parsa 1989: 126; Stempel 1981: 119.

⁴⁴ Dorman and Farhang 1987: 157; Foran 1993a: 384.

⁴⁵ Parsa 1989: 151.

⁴⁶ Kurzman 2004: 78.

⁴⁷ Amjad 1989: 125.

effectively paralyzed the country by overwhelming both the economy and the state's repressive machinery.⁴⁸ As the shah himself noted in October 1978, "you can't crack down on one block and make the people on the next block behave."⁴⁹ Khomeini, who thanks to his longstanding uncompromising stance against the shah was by now in control of the movement,⁵⁰ recognized the strikes' utility. Thus, in late November, he called upon the Iranian people from his Parisian exile "to go on perpetual strike until the criminal Shah was deposed."⁵¹ When the shah in a last desperate attempt to save his throne appointed opposition politician Shapour Bakhtiar prime minister, Khomeini responded by once again calling "for more strikes and demonstrations."⁵²

The revolution was by no means absolutely nonviolent. Rioting, destruction of property, and even murder all occurred.⁵³ In particular, the last weekend of the revolution (February 9–11, 1979) amounted to a "mini-civil war"⁵⁴ in which guerrilla fighters helped defecting troops defeat the Imperial Guard.⁵⁵ Early casualty estimates ranged between 5,000 and 100,000 dead,⁵⁶ but as the years have passed those numbers have dropped. Kurzman reports that "the Martyr Foundation, established after the revolution to compensate the survivors of fallen revolutionaries, could identify only 744 martyrs in Tehran, where the majority of the casualties were supposed to have occurred."⁵⁷ Even more recently, Abrahamian has suggested that according to the "book of martyrs" published by the government right after the revolution, "only 578" individuals were identified as having been shot in the streets during the sixteen months of revolution.⁵⁸

Rather than emphasizing the violence of the revolution, commentators have overwhelmingly attributed its success to "the strategies of general strike and massive, peaceful demonstrations,"⁵⁹ as "aside from isolated instances, Iranians did not take up arms against the shah's forces... The blood spilling was almost entirely one-sided."⁶⁰ Even the state's use of force was

⁴⁸ Parsa 1989: 146.

⁴⁹ Qtd. in Kurzman 2004: 114.

⁵⁰ Kamrava 1990: 129.

⁵¹ Stempel 1981: 143.

⁵² Abrahamian 1982: 525.

⁵³ Abrahamian 1982: 506–07; Fischer 2003: 197, 208; Keddie 2003: 226; Kurzman 2004: 69; Parsa 1989: 230; Stempel 1981: 130–31; Taheri 1986: 215; Wilber 1981: 335.

⁵⁴ Milani 1988: 231.

⁵⁵ Arjomand 1988: 127; Falk 1980: 81; Moghadam 1987: 17; Stempel 1981: 180. The shah fled the country on January 16 and Khomeini made his triumphant return by the end of that month, meaning that the revolution had already accomplished its most immediate goal by the time of the armed confrontations.

⁵⁶ Zonis 1991: 248.

⁵⁷ Kurzman 2004: 71.

⁵⁸ Abrahamian 2009: 176.

⁵⁹ Foran 1994b: 162. On the predominantly nonviolent nature of the revolution, see Abrahamian (2009), Arjomand (1988: 114–19), Bakhash (1990: 9), Burns (1996: 358), Daneshvar (1996: 1), Dorman and Farhang (1987: 156), Foran (1994a: 230–31), Green (1982: xi), Hoveyda (1980: 186), Keddie (1983b: 3), Kurzman (2004: 48), Milani (1988: 1), Parsa (1989: 2), Parsons (1984: x), Shivers (1980: 74–76), Sick (1985: 81), Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1994: xxi), and Stempel (1981: 50).

⁶⁰ Dorman and Farhang 1987: 156.

surprisingly limited. For a regime backed by one of the world's largest and most powerful repressive apparatuses, the amount of self-restraint exercised by the government—especially considering the existential stakes of the conflict—is astounding to say the least. In fact, had the regime not been so reluctant to unleash its coercive capacities it might have been able to save itself, at least temporarily. The question therefore becomes, “why didn't it?”

The Inefficient Military

It has been suggested that the shah was not prone to violence and “genuinely abhorred bloodshed.”⁶¹ But the king's history of using military force to suppress uprisings in the past suggests otherwise. For instance, he allowed his security forces to crush the 1963 Muharram upheaval and did not exhibit much restraint in his handling of the guerrillas in the early 1970s.⁶² Yet, when faced with his greatest challenge the king vacillated and failed to order his armed forces to deal resolutely with the protesters. Some have sought to explain this seemingly irrational behavior by pointing to the shah's declining health.⁶³ “Reduced repression,” Misagh Parsa writes, “was contrary to the Shah's historical policies and was due in part . . . to the Shah's cancer and the listlessness that resulted from his chemotherapy.”⁶⁴ While the king's deteriorating health may have affected his judgment, it is probably prudent “not to exaggerate the implications of this illness.”⁶⁵ In fact, a nuanced reading of the shah's history of repression suggests that it was not violence he wished to avoid. Rather, the king simply did not want to be personally associated with repressive actions and “was fearful of a failed attempt (and a bloodbath) for which he would have to bear responsibility.”⁶⁶

The shah may therefore have hoped that his generals would make the difficult decisions for him and control the crowds with any means necessary. This could have happened—some officers itched to strike down on the protesters—had it not been for the organizational structure of the armed forces. In order to prevent his military commanders from uniting against him and to guarantee their loyalty to his person,⁶⁷ the shah deliberately sought to “maximize rivalry and mutual resentment among the generals, and placed personal enemies alternately in the chain of command whenever possible.”⁶⁸ The consequence of this royal security measure was that commanders could only issue orders that had received the shah's blessing,⁶⁹ and repression therefore required the king's explicit approval. But unlike in the past, the

⁶¹ Amuzegar 1991: 286.

⁶² Bakhash 1990: 30; Foran 1993a: 365–66.

⁶³ Stempel 1981: 34.

⁶⁴ Parsa 1988: 46.

⁶⁵ Ansari 2003: 196.

⁶⁶ Amuzegar 1991: 301.

⁶⁷ Arjomand 1988: 124.

⁶⁸ Arjomand 1988: 124.

⁶⁹ Afshar 1985: 188. For more on the Iranian military, see for example Zabih (1988).

decision to unleash the military now seemed to require an additional, external endorsement.

The Burden of American Patronage

While no longer a young and insecure ruler, the shah had ever since the 1953 coup grown accustomed to receiving, and generally following, US guidance.⁷⁰ Well-versed in Carter's human rights rhetoric, the shah knew that "other countries would look with horror at mass violations of civil rights,"⁷¹ and therefore wanted Washington's approval before authorizing the use of deadly force. Unfortunately for the king, the opposition's efforts in the preceding decade meant that the human rights issue had assumed centrality in Iran's relationship with the United States.⁷² The US administration began to pressure the shah as early as May 1977 when Secretary of State Cyrus Vance visited Tehran. In his meetings with the king, Vance emphasized that human rights was a central component of US foreign policy,⁷³ which reportedly made the shah "more insecure in his relations with the Americans than ever."⁷⁴ Similarly, and to the shah's dismay, Carter issued a presidential memorandum in February 1978 "pledging to work with nongovernmental organizations to strengthen human rights in Iran."⁷⁵

The administration's insistence on human rights was problematic for the shah, but did not represent the full extent of his troubles. Along with Carter rose a new breed of congressional delegates that "supported disarmament, restricting international corporations, and creating a new global order based on equality and respect for human rights."⁷⁶ Whereas past administrations routinely approved Iranian arms request with wide congressional support, beginning in the spring of 1977 Carter was repeatedly forced to inform the shah that Congress had rejected the king's purchase orders on the basis of Iran's human rights record. In the end the White House managed to push most sales through with the help of powerful lobbying groups, but the shah's human rights reputation was now routinely put on wide display.⁷⁷

Increased focus on the human rights aspect of US-Iranian relations paralyzed both the shah and the White House. Throughout the revolution the king searched for signs that Washington would endorse an iron-fist solution, but Carter's emphasis on human rights made it impossible for the president to "officially convey the suggestion that military force be used, no matter how desperately he might have wished that consummation."⁷⁸ Instead, Carter recalls that "personally and through the State Department I continued to

⁷⁰ Zonis 1991: 209.

⁷³ Ganji 2012: 23.

⁷⁶ Seliktar 2012: 6.

⁷¹ Stempel 1981: 136.

⁷⁴ Radji 1983: 89.

⁷⁷ Seliktar 2012: 8.

⁷² Seliktar 2012: 8.

⁷⁵ Seliktar 2012: 12.

⁷⁸ Sullivan 1984: 270.

express my support for the Shah, but at the same time we were pressing him to act forcefully on his own to resolve with his political opponents as many of the disputes as possible.”⁷⁹ Washington’s approach to the shah’s deteriorating political reality has been described as “a masterpiece of double-talk, and the epitome of the ignorance of the policy makers about the unfolding crisis.”⁸⁰ But even if Carter had understood the full extent of the shah’s predicament, there was little he could do to help. Like the king, the president was constrained by his rhetoric.

Throughout 1978 the shah continued to receive confusing messages from the White House that made him question the robustness of Washington’s support. The first incident to sow seeds of anxiety in the shah’s mind was Carter’s phone call of support two days after the Black Friday massacre. During a five-minute phone conversation, and in a manner that was to become typical of the administration’s approach to the shah’s mounting difficulties, the President “wished the shah the best in resolving these problems and in his efforts to introduce reform.”⁸¹ Similarly, on November 3, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance puzzled the shah by stating publicly that “the continuing violence and the strikes in Iran are a serious problem for the government, and we fully support the efforts of the shah to restore order while continuing his program of liberalization.”⁸²

In his autobiography, the shah blames Washington for his demise, grumbling that “the messages I received from the United States as all this was going on continued to be confusing and contradictory. Secretary of State Vance issued a statement endorsing my efforts to restore calm and encouraging the liberalization program. *Such Herculean fantasies left me stunned.*”⁸³ Clearly, the king recognized that the strategy of concurrent repression and liberalization was untenable, lamenting that “as an ally, I was expected to live up to the West’s idea of democracy regardless of its unfeasibility in a country like mine.”⁸⁴ Most likely the Carter administration had reached a similar conclusion, but because of its very public human rights rhetoric it had little choice but to half-heartedly support the demands of the Iranian people. Without Washington’s approval of a crackdown, the shah shilly-shallied.

Demilitarizing the Military and Neutralizing Washington

As a result of both Carter’s and his generals’ unwillingness to condone or assume responsibility for a military solution to the unrest the shah ordered his troops to refrain from opening fire on the protesters unless violently

⁷⁹ Carter 1982: 442.

⁸⁰ Milani 1988: 217.

⁸¹ Sick 1985: 51.

⁸² Alexander and Nanes 1980: 461.

⁸³ Pahlavi 1980: 164–65 (emphasis added).

⁸⁴ Pahlavi 1980: 21.

attacked.⁸⁵ At the same time the opposition compounded the shah's problem by refusing to contribute to the justification of state violence: Upon realizing that the soldiers had been instructed to exercise restraint the movement doubled down on its nonviolent strategy and attempted to win the troops over.⁸⁶ Khomeini implored the crowds "that under no circumstances were they to clash with the armed forces"⁸⁷ and instructed the demonstrators to "talk to the soldiers, have a dialogue with them."⁸⁸ Those who had participated in the 1963 uprising recalled how the army had brutally ended the protests back then, an outcome the revolutionary leadership naturally wished to avoid.⁸⁹ The strategic choice to employ nonviolent methods thus served two purposes. Not only did it resonate with Carter's implicit insistence that peaceful protest had to be permitted, but it also contributed to the neutralization of the security forces.

One of the first instances of mass appeal to the armed forces coincided with demonstrations marking the end of Ramadan on September 4, 1978. In an apparent effort to follow the leadership's advice, and "far from being violent, the demonstrators made a special effort to establish rapport with the soldiers who lined the demonstration area"⁹⁰ by handing them flowers and pleading with them to join the people.⁹¹ For the armed forces, the situation quickly became untenable. At the height of the revolution the soldiers faced, on a nearly daily basis, demonstrators who urged them to abandon their posts. The result of this popular pressure was that military morale plummeted, and "commanders began doubting the unquestioned loyalty of draftees and enlisted men."⁹²

Military leaders advised the shah to either unleash the troops or withdraw them to their barracks. The king refused to accept either proposal, causing the soldiers to remain on the streets where they were battered with revolutionary propaganda.⁹³ The combination of general strikes that required the army to take over the operation of some economic sectors⁹⁴ and mass demonstrations that peacefully proselytized the soldiers proved too much for the military to handle. By the time millions of Iranians participated in an enormous "human rights march on December 9"⁹⁵ and even larger demonstration the next day, the army's usefulness had effectively been exhausted,⁹⁶ with desertion rates rising rapidly.⁹⁷ In Tehran alone, the two days of demonstrations brought

⁸⁵ Amuzegar 1991: 285; Milani 1988: 196. ⁸⁶ Stempel 1981: 134.

⁸⁷ Heikal 1982: 145. ⁸⁸ Heikal 1982: 155. ⁸⁹ Stempel 1981: 110.

⁹⁰ Cottam 1988: 175.

⁹¹ Abrahamian 2009: 170; Cottam 1988: 175; Foran 1993a: 381; Kurzman 2004: 63; Moaddel 1994: 160.

⁹² Amuzegar 1991: 286. ⁹³ Hoveyda 1980: 187; Kurzman 2004: 115.

⁹⁴ Kurzman 2004: 112. ⁹⁵ Seliktar 2012: 20. ⁹⁶ Milani 1988: 216.

⁹⁷ Stempel 1981: 151.

as many as three million marchers into the streets⁹⁸ and, in the absence of a military clampdown, “marked the end of the Shah.”⁹⁹

The military was not the only target of the revolutionaries’ nonviolent tactics. The shah’s other main pillar of support, the US government, faced a similar propaganda onslaught as Iranian students residing abroad demonstrated in solidarity with their colleagues at home to raise the revolution’s international profile. The regime’s poor decision to compel the Iraqi government to expel Khomeini to France in October 1978 exacerbated the situation further since the until-then internationally isolated godfather of the revolution now had unlimited access to the Western media.¹⁰⁰ European and American journalists, mesmerized as they were by the old ascetic, happily relayed the ayatollah’s message that an Islamic Iran “would become a reliable oil supplier to the West, would not ally with the East, and would be willing to have friendly relations with the United States.”¹⁰¹

That “sufficient numbers of the Western intelligentsia were sympathetic to the revolutionary movement” and saw Iran as a potential “model for transition from authoritarian rule that could be copied elsewhere”¹⁰² helped facilitate Khomeini’s persuasive efforts. Once he had overcome his initial suspicion of the Western media,¹⁰³ the ayatollah “skillfully exploited the modern communication system to spread his attractive gospel of freedom, independence, and Islamic government in Iran and the rest of the world.”¹⁰⁴ In just two months, Khomeini generated “458 pages of . . . messages, speeches, and interviews”¹⁰⁵ that immediately reached both Iranian and international audiences.

Khomeini and his colleagues also targeted the US more directly. In the late fall of 1978, Ibrahim Yazdi, the coordinator of the Muslim Students Association in the United States and a close Khomeini collaborator, “was dispatched on a tour to reassure the public and the administration about the reasonableness of his boss,”¹⁰⁶ and that “the revolution was peaceable, employing the techniques of nonviolence against the murderous assaults of the shah’s forces. The objectives of an Islamic republic, once the shah was gone, were fully compatible with U.S. ideals of personal freedom and human rights.”¹⁰⁷ These carefully weighted words seemingly hit home with the many Americans who were concerned about their country’s alliance with a repressive and militarily addicted dictator.¹⁰⁸ The result of Yazdi’s PR expedition was that “many came away convinced that Khomeini was being unfairly maligned in the West and

⁹⁸ Foran 1993a: 382.

⁹⁹ Arjomand 1988: 121.

¹⁰⁰ Stempel 1981: 124.

¹⁰¹ Abrahamian 1982: 524.

¹⁰² Ansari 2003: 9.

¹⁰³ Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994: 133.

¹⁰⁴ Milani 1988: 202. See also Khomeini (1980: 15).

¹⁰⁵ Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994: 134–35.

¹⁰⁶ Seliktar 2000: 63.

¹⁰⁷ Sick 1985: 112.

¹⁰⁸ Albert 1980.

that the Revolution offered the best hope in fifty years for the triumph of human rights and free political expression in Iran."¹⁰⁹

With his opponents successfully framing the revolution as nonviolent and in pursuit of human rights and democracy, the shah quickly ran out of responses. "In the last few months of its rule," Parsa writes, "the regime added a new type of attack to the repertoire of repression; namely, hooligan attacks on property."¹¹⁰ Through the use of hooligans and agents provocateurs, what the British ambassador to Iran at the time referred to as "thinly disguised state violence,"¹¹¹ the regime hoped to either incite opposition violence that would justify a military response or, alternatively, convince Washington that the hooligans were opposition activists that had to be confronted. However, the plan failed as the revolutionaries generally maintained their nonviolent discipline.

Unable to provoke opposition violence, and with the White House unwilling to condone a crackdown, "the shah himself determined that violent tactics were doomed to fail."¹¹² Even though some White House staffers implored the president to save the regime at any cost, the president ultimately left the king to his own devices.¹¹³ Accountable for his lofty rhetoric about human rights, Carter could hardly afford to be portrayed as siding against unarmed protesters demanding their political and civil freedoms. On December 26, the shah asked the American ambassador point blank if the US would condone brutal repression. Not receiving the reply he sought,¹¹⁴ the shah left Iran three weeks later, on January 16, 1979, never to return.

The Tunisian Revolution

"A striking characteristic of Tunisia's political landscape before the January 14, 2011 revolution," Laryssa Chomiak writes, "was the ostensive obliteration of any oppositional or alternative political space."¹¹⁵ Tunisia's contentious 1970s and 1980s, during which labor, Islamist, and human rights organizations all challenged the state, suggested to Ben Ali that loci of power external to the state and beyond its direct control had to be considered threats. Consequently, civil society organizations in Ben Ali's Tunisia faced numerous restrictions and pressures.¹¹⁶ In an effort to forestall the growth of civil society associations, the government established the *Fonds de Solidarité Nationale* (FSN–National Solidarity Fund) in 1992, an extensive state institution that

¹⁰⁹ Sick 1985: 112.

¹¹⁰ Parsa 1988: 118.

¹¹¹ Parsons 1984: 53.

¹¹² Bill 1988b: 30.

¹¹³ Seliktar 2012: 21.

¹¹⁴ Ganji 2012: 95; Seliktar 2000: 116; Zonis 1991: 257.

¹¹⁵ Chomiak 2011: 68.

¹¹⁶ King 2003: 40–41; Noueihed and Warren 2012: 68; Powel and Sadiki 2010: 74.

identified 1,100 *zones d'ombre* (shadow zones)—economically deprived areas considered at risk of being brought into the opposition groups' (mainly Islamists) spheres of influence.¹¹⁷ These geographical areas then received hefty government funding, thus “reinforcing the perception of the state as key provider of basic needs”¹¹⁸ while denying independent organizations the possibility of making inroads.¹¹⁹

The government's multilayered strategy appears to have worked. Only a year before the revolution one expert proclaimed that “the opposition is weaker today than it ever was before.”¹²⁰ Notwithstanding the explosive growth of civil society organizations—one estimate lands at 8,386 associations in 2003 compared to 2,000 in 1987—very few of these groups had explicitly political objectives.¹²¹ According to Brieg Powel and Larbi Sadiki,

by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the role of the security forces is limited to establishing cordons around office blocks, as the FSN enable the state to claim almost all civil society space for itself. Thus, it restricts the space in which dissent may be concentrated, effectively crushing the dissent before it is able to manifest itself in the form of public demonstrations or uprisings.¹²²

Steffen Erdle's assessment is even grimmer:

Ben Ali is no longer faced with well-organized mass-based social-political movements inside or outside the country, capable of threatening his bases of power or of forcing him to change the course of policies. . . . there is no force in politics or in society that is strong enough to confront the regime or the president.¹²³

But do these assessments do justice to Tunisia's opposition currents in the years preceding the revolution? One author, admittedly writing with the benefit of hindsight, argues that while “political scientists and policy experts consumed their research and analytical agendas with the robustness of Ben Ali's authoritarian state, little attention was paid to the development of informal and extra-institutional political activities that existed even under deepening political repression,”¹²⁴ and that, in fact, “spaces of political contention and resistance have existed all along.”¹²⁵ Tunisia's relationship with the West constitutes a major reason why oppositional space never vanished altogether.

Following the 9/11 attacks, Tunisia's civil society enjoyed increased international support as Western governments and institutions sought to prevent future terrorist attacks by promoting democracy in the Muslim world. The European Commission had already in June 2001 declared its “commitment

¹¹⁷ Powel and Sadiki 2010: 74–75. ¹¹⁸ Powel and Sadiki 2010: 75.

¹¹⁹ Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza are perhaps examples of the types of groups Ben Ali feared.

¹²⁰ Erdle 2010: 268. ¹²¹ Erdle 2010: 250; Hibou 2011: 98.

¹²² Powel and Sadiki 2010: 76. ¹²³ Erdle 2010: 268. ¹²⁴ Chomiak 2011: 69.

¹²⁵ Chomiak 2011: 71.

to intensify the process of mainstreaming human rights and democratisation objectives into all aspects of EU external policies,"¹²⁶ a policy that assumed additional relevance after September 11. The emphasis on democracy and human rights is significant because it reinforced Tunisia's obligations as set forth in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). That the EU never seriously considered imposing negative externalities on Ben Ali's regime despite being aware of its human rights violations is of minor importance to the argument made here. What matters is that both the EU and the Tunisian regime knew what was officially expected of the latter.¹²⁷ As long as human rights violations occurred behind closed doors the EU could continue to support a trusted, albeit problematic ally. However, if such violations became visible to the general public, the European Union and its member states would find themselves cornered since their assistance was tied to Tunisia's human rights performance, with substantial amounts of aid earmarked specifically for civil society and democratization projects.¹²⁸

The EU's main "problem" was that democracy and human rights are so closely intertwined with its *raison d'être* and are highlighted in many of its central documents, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the European Union.¹²⁹ As a result of these commitments, the EU and its members found themselves caught in an awkward contradiction: on the one hand the European Union backed a highly authoritarian police state while on the other it collaborated with civil society organizations struggling against the government the EU supported.¹³⁰ Although it may well be the case that the European Union "had very little impact on the state of Tunisian civil society... that being associated with EU civil society initiatives offers no protection to Tunisian CSOs from being harassed by their own government,"¹³¹ the *potential* for such impact and protection remained enormous. The EU may not have been interested in holding Ben Ali accountable for his human rights rhetoric, but what if it found itself forced to do so? Could Europe really turn a blind eye if Ben Ali's disregard for human rights was put on open display?

Preparing for Revolution

The revolutionary wheels were set in motion in early 2008 when discontent with the country's economic situation led to large demonstrations in the southern Redeyef and Gafsa mining districts.¹³² In a part of the country where

¹²⁶ European Commission 2008: 5.

¹²⁷ Del Sarto and Schumacher 2011: 944.

¹²⁸ Hassan 2005: 34; Powel and Sadiki 2010: 81–82.

¹²⁹ European Union 2000; Powel and Sadiki 2010: 54.

¹³⁰ Powel and Sadiki 2010: 54.

¹³¹ Powel and Sadiki 2010: 76–77.

¹³² Chomiak 2011: 72–73; Erdle 2010: 128; Hibou 2011: xvi.

unemployment hovered around 40 percent,¹³³ the protests were triggered by allegedly corrupt hiring practices as the national phosphate company was accused of employing individuals on the basis of nepotism rather than merit. Soon, the inhabitants of the area took to the streets with protests quickly spreading to nearby areas.¹³⁴

Within days of the first protests, local schoolteachers, wives of miners, neglected youth, and even local union branches joined the expanding movements. The snowball effect that transformed a targeted protest against unfair hiring practices on the part of a local phosphate monopoly into a broad movement quickly culminated in a political movement with set goals. Protesters took to the streets every week to explicitly engage in a dialogue with the Ben Ali government, seeking to negotiate more jobs and improved social welfare and justice.¹³⁵

Protests continued throughout the spring. By June, Ben Ali had seen enough and sent in the army to quell the protests. Two protesters were shot dead.¹³⁶ Although the national press remained quiet and international news outlets could only with great difficulty be accessed from Tunisian Internet connections, cyber activists kept their compatriots updated through emails and Facebook messages.¹³⁷ To prevent the dissemination of news, the government shut down Facebook in August, but was forced to unblock it in early September as the result of an “international pressure campaign.”¹³⁸ Ironically, the shutdown of Facebook incensed the global community in a way repressed demonstrations did not. By then, the Gafsa situation had been diffused, but the damage had already been inflicted on the government. Similar to other contexts in which protests had previously been uncommon, such as the GDR and Czechoslovakia in the 1980s, the Gafsa protests kindled a repressed population’s imagination by showing that dissent was possible. In the following years strikes in textile factories and within the tourism sector occurred at irregular intervals and repeatedly met with government repression.¹³⁹

The last major protest campaigns preceding the revolution occurred in the long summer of 2010. In July and August street protests broke out in the southeastern town of Ben Guerdane,¹⁴⁰ but the best indicator of things to come may well have been the *Tunisie en Blanc* (Tunisia in White) movement. A group of activists who had been active during the 2008 Gafsa protests understood the potential of online activism and decided to target the government’s extensive censorship of the Internet, a salient problem for many Tunisians.¹⁴¹ On May 22, the organizers envisioned, citizens would dress in white and gather for a demonstration outside the Ministry of Technology

¹³³ Chomiak 2011: 72.

¹³⁴ Gobe 2011: 1–3.

¹³⁵ Chomiak 2011: 73.

¹³⁶ Chomiak 2011: 73; Erdle 2010: 128.

¹³⁷ Chomiak 2011: 72–73.

¹³⁸ Chomiak 2011: 73.

¹³⁹ Hibou 2011: xvi.

¹⁴⁰ Hibou 2011: xvi.

¹⁴¹ Azarva 2007: 5; Erdle 2010: 123; European Commission 2004: 8.

and Communication in Tunis. For those too frightened to protest in the open, the organizers devised a second, less high-profile option: Meet with friends, still dressed in white, and enjoy a coffee in a cafe on Tunis' central Avenue Bourguiba.¹⁴² The Facebook group associated with the event appeared online for the six days preceding May 22, during which 5,000 people "liked" the group. Furthermore, "a vibrant political debate ensued among supporters, which was moderated by the event organizers, who stressed the right to non-violent citizen mobilization and encouraged supporters and others interested individuals to discuss topics that have previously been taboo in public."¹⁴³ In the end the authorities pre-empted the protests by arresting several of the organizers and disbanding groups of people dressed in white from cafes. Despite this, Tunisia in White was to some extent still a success. In particular "the way in which young activists were able to mobilize thousands of Tunisians within Tunisia as well as in France, Canada, the U.S., and Ghana,"¹⁴⁴ served as a dress rehearsal for things to come.

The Revolution

Few revolutions' starting points are as well established as Tunisia's.¹⁴⁵ On December 17, 2010, in the town of Sidi Bouzid, a female police officer insulted (and possibly slapped) Mohamed Bouazizi when the fruit and vegetable vendor failed to produce a permit for his cart. Incensed, Bouazizi went to file a complaint with the municipal authorities, and when denied access to the governor vowed to set himself on fire. True to his word, he soon returned and made good on his promise. While Bouazizi fought for his life in the hospital, relatives and friends gathered that evening to demand that the policewoman be held responsible. The small demonstration could have ended like many before it and become just another historical parenthesis. However, one of the participants filmed the protest and published it, along with information about Bouazizi's fate, on a social network site. From there the material spread quickly, and while the national media initially ignored it, an Al-Jazeera journalist decided to broadcast the tape.¹⁴⁶

By December 20, widespread protests were taking place in surrounding towns and villages as Bouazizi's story aroused those walking through life in shoes similar to his—unemployed university graduates, school teachers, students, and struggling entrepreneurs—all of whom identified with the despair and lack of opportunity that seemingly drove Bouazizi to his drastic recourse.¹⁴⁷ The demonstrators

¹⁴² Chomiak 2011: 73–75; Chomiak and Entelis 2011. ¹⁴³ Chomiak 2011: 75.

¹⁴⁴ Chomiak 2011: 74. ¹⁴⁵ Fahim 2011. ¹⁴⁶ Beinín and Vairél 2011a: 238.

¹⁴⁷ Beinín and Vairél 2011a: 237–38; Fahim 2011; Honwana 2011: 2.

publicly proclaimed their rejection of political humiliation, their resentment over being the “left behinds” of a development model that favors the northern parts of the country, their refusal of a political system where university graduates are excluded from public and economic life, and their anger at the growing imbalance in the job market between the high demand for unskilled jobs in the textile and tourism sectors and the increasing supply of high school and university graduates.¹⁴⁸

The protests were largely nonviolent, although police repression at times provoked activists to throw stones and set tires and government building ablaze.¹⁴⁹ When protests turned deadly, which happened on a relatively small scale considering the extent of the protests and the high political stakes, this tended to only outrage the population further and generate additional demonstrations.¹⁵⁰ On December 25, the regime felt forced to publicly acknowledge the unrest and promised to enact measures that would address the protesters’ grievances, including the disastrous youth unemployment rate in the regions where the protests had originated.¹⁵¹

Tunisians deemed the government’s response inadequate. Protests continued and by December 26 Tunis was among the cities rising up against Ben Ali. On December 28, the president felt forced to cut short his vacation abroad and returned to visit Bouazizi in the hospital where the produce vendor still fought for his life. Contrary to his intentions, Tunisians considered Ben Ali’s visit inappropriate, which resulted in even greater disdain for his regime.¹⁵² Demonstrations continued and now included all social classes, including rural workers and lawyers alike. By the beginning of 2011, “strikes and acts of civil resistance”¹⁵³ began to wrest control of the country away from the government with the protests “no longer a call for jobs and freedom, nor for an end to corruption and police brutality. ‘*Dégage!*,’ or ‘Get out!,’ had become the rallying cry of the Tunisian revolution.”¹⁵⁴

During the last ten days of his reign Ben Ali attempted a variety of solutions to calm the country. He arrested the Internet activists he considered responsible for the mobilization of protests, as well as a musician who had written a popular song called “Mr. President, Your People are Dying.” Violent repression occurred as well, although not on the scale necessary to intimidate the protesters. In his final days, Ben Ali even tried to side with the revolutionaries by sacking ministers and offering concessions, including promises to create 300,000 new jobs and not run for re-election.¹⁵⁵ Sensing perhaps that the

¹⁴⁸ Beinun and Vairel 2011a: 238.

¹⁴⁹ Noueihed and Warren 2012: 76.

¹⁵⁰ In the literature this phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the “paradox of repression” or “backfire” (Hess and Martin 2006; Martin 2006; Smithey and Kurtz 1999: 111–13).

¹⁵¹ Honwana 2011: 2–3.

¹⁵² Honwana 2011: 3.

¹⁵³ Pinfari 2011: 34.

¹⁵⁴ Noueihed and Warren 2012: 75.

¹⁵⁵ Honwana 2011: 3–4.

tide had irrevocably turning against him, the dictator used his last televised speech to assure his people that “I understand you, I understand you.”¹⁵⁶

The president's efforts turned out to be insufficient. On January 13 the revolutionaries successfully called for a general strike and mass protests throughout the country. The next day Tunisia's president boarded a one-way flight to Saudi Arabia. Reflecting on his country's astonishing achievement, Interim Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi remarked six months after Ben Ali's flight that “Tunisia today has an extraordinary image because its revolution happened peacefully, without weapons.”¹⁵⁷

The Burden of European Patronage

That Tunisia rose up against Ben Ali is not a great mystery. Though the country performed better than many of its neighbors, many Tunisians struggled financially as a result of high inflation and unemployment rates, low wages, and growing resource disparities between the rich and the poor. In addition, the country sported a much-feared police force as well as a pervasive culture of corruption, which was highlighted in a US embassy wire leaked shortly before the revolution.¹⁵⁸ That the people revolted in response to these conditions is not particularly puzzling.¹⁵⁹ What is surprising, however, is that unarmed protesters managed to overthrow an entrenched and highly repressive regime. In order to make sense of this counterintuitive outcome it is crucial to understand why the state opted to limit repression in the face of widespread street protests.¹⁶⁰

As noted in previous chapters, Ben Ali had built his regime on an explicit—albeit insincere—foundation of human rights and democracy. In order to maintain this façade the state relied on its press agencies to uphold its liberal international reputation¹⁶¹ and engaged in “an often-vindictive punishment of critics, particularly those who published their criticisms abroad.”¹⁶² After two decades of practice, Ben Ali's regime had become highly skilled at a balancing act crucial to all façade democracies, namely the upholding of a benign image abroad while controlling opponents at home. So why did the 2011 revolution prove too much for his regime to handle? The answer proposed here is simply that the evidence against Ben Ali began to mount up as “the increased space devoted by the western media to violations of human rights throughout the world have doubtless made police crackdowns and other forms of repression less ‘acceptable.’”¹⁶³ This is particularly true for countries that, like Tunisia, have invested significant social capital in the West's core

¹⁵⁶ Noueihed and Warren 2012: 76.

¹⁵⁸ Beinín and Vairel 2011a: 237.

¹⁶¹ Garon 2003: 126; Waltz 1995.

¹⁵⁷ BBC News 2011b.

¹⁵⁹ Erdle 2010: 128.

¹⁶² Owen 2012: 79.

¹⁶⁰ Nepstad 2011a.

¹⁶³ Hibou 2011: 102.

political principles. Ben Ali and his domestic allies' international obligations caused the government to vacillate in the face of popular, unarmed protests. In the absence of repression the population's fears diminished, which in turn allowed the demonstrations to grow beyond what the state could manage.

In their numerous agreements with Tunisia, Ben Ali's international patrons required that his government respect human rights.¹⁶⁴ While these demands were almost never coupled with political pressure on the regime to actually uphold its contractual obligations, they still represent an accumulation of unintended pressure. Most Western leaders had little interest in seeing a reliable ally like Ben Ali removed from power, but they were at the same time expected to express an indisputable commitment to their societies' central values. With the nonviolent protests broadcast on social media sites and by international news outlets, Tunisia's democratic allies now found themselves with their backs against the wall.

While rightly criticized for their long response time during the December and January events, the suggestion that the absence of official Western outrage somehow encouraged Ben Ali during the crisis misses the point.¹⁶⁵ What mattered was not that Europe and the United States failed to criticize the Tunisian leader, but rather that they abstained from expressing their support for the regime. For a leader that had based much of his power on close relations with the West, his allies' silence was likely almost as disconcerting as public denunciation would have been.

Surprised by the outbreak of the revolution, European leaders struggled to find an appropriate response. France, Tunisia's closest and most important European ally, only mustered a reaction on January 9. Critics have pounced on the French refusal to chastise Ben Ali or even characterize his government as an "unequivocal dictatorship," when the focus should be on the country's statement the following day that it "deplores violence and calls for calm."¹⁶⁶

Overwhelming violence might have saved Ben Ali, if only temporarily, but the French statement meant that it would have come at the high cost of international condemnation. Like the shah, Ben Ali must have hoped for his allies to explicitly permit the use of violence, and eventually a hint of such approval seemed to arrive. On January 11, French Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie—coincidentally a close personal friend of Ben Ali's—suggested that France should help its ally-in-need by using the "savoir-faire of our security forces."¹⁶⁷ Although she later explained that she simply meant for France to help control the demonstrations, her political opponents responded with indignation. Laurent Fabius, the socialist former prime minister condemned Alliot-Marie's suggestion by declaring on national radio that

¹⁶⁴ See Chapter 3.

¹⁶⁵ Pinfari 2011: 36.

¹⁶⁶ Pape 2011: paragraph 4.

¹⁶⁷ Qtd. in Pape 2011: paragraph 5.

here is a people who rises up after 23 years of dictatorship, the police fire into the [crowd], and the only thing that the [French] government says is: 'We are going to help you through police cooperation.'... It is one thing to have state-to-state relations. It is another to pat a dictator on the back.¹⁶⁸

Fabius might simply have hoped to score political points by criticizing the sitting government, but his rebuke is indicative of a particular dynamic not unique to the Tunisian case. Representatives for democratic countries like France simply cannot justify the support of a dictator when the people rises up to seemingly demand the precise values the West sees as its political foundation.

The EU faced a similar dilemma, which was exacerbated by the fact that it had only months earlier, in June 2010, come under attack from INGOs and think-tanks for not reacting when the Tunisian parliament adopted a penal code amendment that would prevent human rights activists from agitating abroad.¹⁶⁹ That time the EU could maintain its silence due to the affair's scant public attention, but during the revolution—which dominated the news reporting around the world—that sort of response was no longer possible. Therefore, when forced on January 10 to address the scheduled upgrade of Tunisia's relationship with Europe to "advanced status," the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, and the Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, Štefan Füle, explained that while the negotiations "would continue, they would involve greater commitment to 'human rights and fundamental freedoms.'"¹⁷⁰

This might seem like a paltry response from a powerful ally capable of exerting significant pressure on Tunisia, but it is important to keep in mind that the EU was under immense internal pressure from several member countries, including France, Spain, Italy, and Malta, to not "undermine a government that was perceived as a bastion against Islamic radicalism and, most importantly, illegal immigration."¹⁷¹ Yet, any negative proclamation from its northern benefactor placed real limitations on Tunisia's government. While intended as a highly diplomatic and minimalist rebuke of Ben Ali, the EU's statements likely sent all the wrong signals to Ben Ali and, importantly, to his domestic allies.

Domestic Allies

While 132 people died and another 1,452 were injured during the month-long movement, the revolution was remarkably bloodless considering its stakes and the regime's record of repression.¹⁷² Even though Ben Ali only used

¹⁶⁸ Qtd. in Pape 2011: paragraph 6.

¹⁶⁹ Pinfari 2011: 36.

¹⁷⁰ Pinfari 2011: 36.

¹⁷¹ Pinfari 2011: 38.

¹⁷² Murphy 1999: 165.

his repressive apparatuses in a relatively conservative manner, the revolution's death toll rose in the second week of January as the revolution gathered momentum. Between January 8 and January 12, human rights groups reported fifty deaths while charging that security forces had shot protesters in the back. This claim was backed by forensic experts who testified to chest, abdomen, and head injuries caused by firearms. Most assumed that Ben Ali had ordered the crackdown, but such an assumption rhymes poorly with the fact that the president had "warned the police not to shoot demonstrators" just a few days earlier.¹⁷³ Furthermore, when Ben Ali later faced trial in absentia for his role in the protesters' deaths, the court "only" managed to find him guilty of "complicity in the murders," as no available evidence suggested that Ben Ali had ordered the security forces to open fire.¹⁷⁴ In fact, none of the police officers accused of shooting demonstrators acknowledged receiving orders to kill and instead cited self-defense as the reason for shooting.¹⁷⁵

Although the charged officers' response was certainly self-serving, this does not mean that it is not true. We may never know what orders Ben Ali actually issued, but that the president ordered open, lethal repression seems unlikely for two reasons. First, as discussed in the previous section, the president, like any other authoritarian leader dependent on Western patrons, was keen to maintain his wholesome image since his domestic legitimacy was closely intertwined with his international standing. Those Tunisians who profited from his regime and therefore supported it, did so largely because of Ben Ali's links to the West. The Tunisians who reaped the greatest benefits from their country's access to Western markets were industrialists who had been granted access to lucrative European markets through government assistance.¹⁷⁶ Ben Ali and his associates had handpicked individuals to be trusted with the firms and areas of the economy in which the largest profits could be made. Through this corrupt scheme the president maintained control over the economy and simultaneously enriched himself. With time, however, the government-made entrepreneurs' autonomy from the state increased and made them "key actors in refurbishing the state's image."¹⁷⁷ But by the time of the revolution, these businessmen's loyalty rested with their business endeavors rather than with a regime whose use of violence would jeopardize their economic arrangements with the West. Like Ben Ali, they must have known that repression of unarmed demonstrators might force the West to disavow Ben Ali, and, quite possibly, impose economic sanctions against Tunisia. For the country's elites, Ben Ali had become a liability, in particular if he resorted to violence.

¹⁷³ Beinín and Vairel 2011a: 240–41.

¹⁷⁴ Al-Jazeera 2012.

¹⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch 2012.

¹⁷⁶ Cammett 2007: 139; Cassarino 1999: 71; Murphy 2006: 523; Owen 2012: 78–79.

¹⁷⁷ Cassarino 1999: 73.

Similarly, the commanders of the military and the security forces had little reason to endorse a violent response to the uprising. In the past, especially during the tumultuous last three decades of the twentieth century, the military had been willing to help control a population infested with either Islamists or leftists. But ever since the neutralization of the Islamists those days were now long gone. Furthermore, the military, like the business community, had more to lose than gain from supporting a violent crackdown. Virtually all of Tunisia's high-ranking officers had received parts of their training at Western academies, and "Europeanisation has therefore been particularly noticeable in the military and security sectors in Tunisia."¹⁷⁸ Even though respect for human rights might not always have been prioritized within Tunisia's security forces, all of its commanders were familiar with their existence. If outright repression was an option in the early days of the revolution, it diminished as one in the course of the uprising, in particular as the cameras of international news organizations threatened to expose any overreaches committed by the security forces.¹⁷⁹

But in addition to possible fears of facing trial in The Hague, members of Tunisia's military would have had few reasons to come to Ben Ali's rescue if called upon in mid-January. Both Bourguiba and Ben Ali kept the military poorly funded and equipped, instead preferring to rely on the police and the internal security forces to ensure domestic stability.¹⁸⁰ In short, the internationalization of the unarmed revolution and its broadcasting around the world meant that "once the uprising reached a critical momentum, Ben Ali would have few loyalists left to turn to."¹⁸¹ Rather tellingly, "even after demonstrations had engulfed the capital, Ben Ali could not muster a single pro-regime demonstration."¹⁸²

The lethal violence used by the security forces, mainly in the city of Kasserine, was perpetrated by "members of a special militia that was organised independently from the presidential guard."¹⁸³ Some of them were employed as snipers charged with the task of shooting participants in funeral processions, but for the majority of them their assignment was to "commit acts of vandalism." Under the pretense of being anti-Ben Ali protesters, their objective was to breed chaos while making it appear as if the state had nothing to do with it.¹⁸⁴ While far from an optimal response to a popular uprising, a regime forced to uphold its liberal façade had few other options at its disposal.

¹⁷⁸ Powel and Sadiki 2010: 60.

¹⁷⁹ Honwana 2011: 10–11; Mabrouk 2011: 632.

¹⁸⁰ Silverman 2012: 20–23; Springborg 2011: 398.

¹⁸¹ Noueihed and Warren 2012: 73.

¹⁸² Noueihed and Warren 2012: 76.

¹⁸³ Ryan 2011.

¹⁸⁴ Ryan 2011.

The Egyptian Revolution

By the late 1990s the Egyptian government had defeated the radical Islamists and effectively brought the country's democratic voices of dissent under control. However, the dawn of the new millennium brought with it the rebirth of opposition activism. In 2000, a "series of movements"¹⁸⁵ that would last until—and beyond—the fall of the regime commenced when Egyptians took to the streets in solidarity with the second Palestinian *intifada*.¹⁸⁶ For the regime, this outpouring of emotion constituted a dilemma. While protests are by definition unpredictable and therefore undesirable from the state's point of view, the regime found itself hard-pressed to ban demonstrations targeting Israel, especially since one of the government's most universally recognized shortcomings in the eyes of the Egyptian people was its peace arrangement with the Jewish state.¹⁸⁷ The government therefore permitted the protests to run their course, even though the movement discourse soon transformed to target the Egyptian state.¹⁸⁸

Three years later, in 2003, Egyptians again mobilized in disguise, this time against the US invasion of Iraq. While Washington was the explicit target of the massive demonstrations, implicit complaints focused on Egypt's compliance with the Western invasion of a fellow Arab state.¹⁸⁹ As in 2000, the protest discourse caught the regime in a bind: repress the demonstrations and confirm the public's view of the government as a henchman of the West, or embolden the people by allowing them to protest. Due to the government's resulting hesitation, "for one full day, the unthinkable happened—protesters occupied *Midan al-Tahrir*, the central square in downtown Cairo."¹⁹⁰ Security forces retook control of the capital the next day, but a dangerous precedent had been set and street politics was back on the agenda.¹⁹¹

The Pro-Democracy Movement

Around the same time, the opposition movement also began to benefit from the fact that "external pressure from the Bush administration to initiate political reform put the government further on the defensive."¹⁹² The regime's relationship with the US thus became a double weakness—not only did Egyptians hold Mubarak responsible for US foreign policy, but Washington also expected him to exercise restraint in his handling of the resulting backlash. Although few interpreted Bush's Freedom Agenda as the effective abandonment of

¹⁸⁵ el-Mahdi 2009: 87.

¹⁸⁶ el-Mahdi and Marfleet 2009: 9.

¹⁸⁷ Chalcraft 2011: 52.

¹⁸⁸ Chalcraft 2011: 52.

¹⁸⁹ Dunne and Hamzawy 2008: 24; Osman 2010: 180.

¹⁹⁰ Moustafa 2007: 206.

¹⁹¹ el-Ghobashy 2011.

¹⁹² Moustafa 2007: 206.

Mubarak, “there was a sense in Egypt that Washington, which for so long had supported Egyptian authoritarianism with military, diplomatic, and financial support, was playing a critical role by supplying political cover for the opposition.”¹⁹³ Opposition leaders, regardless of their political persuasions and views of the United States, later agreed that “U.S. policy was decisive in cracking open the door of Egyptian political reform.”¹⁹⁴

The Egyptian Movement for Change, or Kifaya (“Enough”), was one of the first groups to recognize the political opportunity presented by Washington’s new discourse. Created in August 2004 as a “nonpartisan, umbrella pressure group reflecting the major political trends in society,”¹⁹⁵ Kifaya brought together a variety of activists, professionals, and intellectuals. Embracing President Bush’s democratization rhetoric, the organization focused much of its efforts on opposing Mubarak’s re-election in the upcoming 2005 elections. While initially small, Kifaya’s “unprecedented protests attracted new participants and opened a wider mainstream debate” about issues that had previously been out of bounds for the opposition.¹⁹⁶ For Egypt, this was a truly revolutionary development. Protests had occurred throughout the country’s post-independence history, but never before had a head of state been the explicit target.¹⁹⁷ Bush’s rhetorical emphasis contributed directly to Egypt’s new protest culture as Kifaya leaders later acknowledged “that Washington’s outspoken support for democracy was providing [the] movement a certain amount of protection from the Egyptian state.”¹⁹⁸ Still, by the end of 2005 Kifaya was running out of steam. Having failed to both prevent Mubarak’s re-election and expand its own protest agenda, the organization relinquished the opposition baton, but not before having showed other groups that anti-government activism was possible.¹⁹⁹

That Kifaya served as a midwife in Egypt’s democracy movement is hardly in doubt as “from early 2005 onwards, there was a proliferation of movements calling for political reform.”²⁰⁰ Even the normally cautious Muslim Brotherhood joined, and since the regime had made it clear to the Brothers that it would not tolerate Islamist mobilization over domestic issues, “the decision to take to the streets marked a fundamental change in the Brotherhood’s stance toward the regime.”²⁰¹ That the state employed soft repression against Kifaya’s openly political protests and refrained from putting “a sudden end to the movement”²⁰² likely sent all the wrong signals to the Brotherhood. Thus, Egypt’s new political environment, in part triggered by Bush’s Freedom Agenda, should “be understood in the context of a series of mutually

¹⁹³ Cook 2012: 265. See also Craner (2006).

¹⁹⁴ Cook 2012: 265.

¹⁹⁵ Arafat 2009: 158.

¹⁹⁶ Arafat 2009: 158.

¹⁹⁷ Beinun 2005: paragraphs 3 and 4.

¹⁹⁸ Cook 2012: 265.

¹⁹⁹ Dunne and Hamzawy 2008: 24.

²⁰⁰ Durac 2009: 79.

²⁰¹ Albrecht 2007: 68.

²⁰² Albrecht 2007: 70.

reinforcing initiatives within which shared networks and overlapping leaderships grew in confidence, learning strategy and tactics and developing a space in which they could overcome their ideological differences."²⁰³ As activists from divergent perspectives and persuasions observed each other challenge the state, protest began to become normalized.

Several organizations, including Kifaya, lost much of their momentum in 2006 when President Bush began to renege on the Freedom Agenda. The pro-democracy movement as a whole, however, did not. The next challenge against the regime came from within. Already in May 2005, the Egyptian Judges Club, "a largely social body that lobbied episodically on behalf of judicial independence,"²⁰⁴ threatened to boycott the upcoming elections unless the government committed itself to improve judicial independence in the country. Since Egyptian law mandated that judges supervise elections, without judges there would be no elections.²⁰⁵ The regime eventually gave in to some of the judges' demands, but sought to exact revenge as soon as the American liberalization pressure eased. In March 2006, the government brought charges against two judges who had denounced the government's fraudulent practices during the 2005 elections while implicating several of their colleagues in the plot²⁰⁶—accusations that tarnished Egypt's image abroad as a country where an independent judicial system upholds the rule of law.²⁰⁷ When the government brought the two judges before a disciplinary court in April, pro-democracy activists mobilized intermittent streets protest for several weeks in Cairo and Alexandria. In July, new protests occurred daily in response to Israel's war in Gaza.²⁰⁸

While the regime remained in control of Egypt's political landscape following the country's protest boom in 2004 and 2005, its task was complicated by the simultaneous emergence of "the most intense period of industrial strikes in Egypt's history.... Between 2004–8 ... more than 1.7 million Egyptians participated in more than nineteen hundred strikes."²⁰⁹ An attempt to organize a nationwide general strike on April 6, 2008, failed to come to full fruition,²¹⁰ but symptomatic of a context in which "a cycle of contestation had emerged in which each phase of activity was related to earlier actions and to the responses of the state,"²¹¹ that failure would later contribute to revolutionary success. One of the revolution's most important youth organizations, the April 6 Movement, had been instrumental in the attempted general strike and learned valuable lessons from that experience.²¹² The trend of labor mobilization continued in the two years preceding the revolution with Egypt's

²⁰³ el-Mahdi 2009: 97.

²⁰⁴ Dunne and Hamzawy 2008: 24.

²⁰⁵ Dunne and Hamzawy 2008: 24–25.

²⁰⁶ Rutherford 2008: 160; Vairel 2011: 39.

²⁰⁷ Vairel 2011: 39.

²⁰⁸ Vairel 2011: 39–41.

²⁰⁹ Stacher 2012: 7.

²¹⁰ Chalcraft 2011: 53.

²¹¹ el-Mahdi 2009: 97.

²¹² Cook 2012: 277.

Land Center for Human Rights reporting more than 700 incidents of worker protests in 2009 and several hundred in the first few months of 2010.²¹³

To fully appreciate Egypt's opposition environment in the 2000s, it is crucial to recognize its interconnected nature. As Jason Brownlee points out, demonstrations organized by Kifaya and similar organizations "seemed to embolden other groups to articulate their criticisms and manifest the depth of their popular support."²¹⁴ More specifically, "workers' struggles which followed the apparent demise of the pro-democracy movement have an organic connection with the latter" insofar as the

movement acted as a test balloon, exposing the limits of the regime's "liberalization" measures and political reforms and its capacity to resist popular demands for change. Kifaya introduced new mechanisms to the political process that transgressed the movement itself. Though not fully successful it deepened collaboration among oppositional actors and strengthened politics from below, introducing tactics that have been taken up by others to great effect.²¹⁵

The Revolution

Although January 25, 2011, is usually recognized as the starting point of Egypt's revolution, the ousting of Hosni Mubarak was the logical culmination of the country's decade-old protest movement. In June 2010, Wael Ghonim, the Google executive who would become one of the faces of the revolution, anonymously started a Facebook group called *Kullena Khaled Said* (We are all Khaled Said) after learning of Said's death at the hands of two members of the secret police. The officers had allegedly dragged the young man out of a cafe and brutally beaten him to death for possessing a video showing several policemen dividing up confiscated drugs and money between themselves. The Facebook group grew rapidly and mobilized several small-scale protests throughout Egypt over the coming months, but the sporadic protests failed to initiate a mass movement.²¹⁶ Instead, it was a neighbor that sprung Egypt into action.²¹⁷

Events in Tunisia emboldened Egyptian activists, but despite Ben Ali's ouster only ten days earlier few believed that the protests scheduled for January 25 would resemble those in Tunisia. Even though over 100,000 people indicated that they would attend via the Khaled Said Facebook page,²¹⁸ "most observers—including the Mubarak security apparatus and protest planners—suspected that the demonstrations scheduled for 'Police Day' would look like the

²¹³ Qtd. in Beinín 2011: 201.

²¹⁴ Brownlee 2007: 149.

²¹⁵ el-Mahdi 2009: 101. See also Chalcraft (2011: 53).

²¹⁶ Ghonim 2012: 70–81, Ch. 4.

²¹⁷ Noueihed and Warren 2012: 107.

²¹⁸ Ghonim 2012: 160.

hundreds of protests that preceded it.”²¹⁹ Learning from past failures—and from conversations with their Tunisian counterparts²²⁰—the activists refined their strategies by organizing multiple protests (in order to make dispersion and repression more difficult) that would later merge in downtown Cairo. Organizers used Internet forums to emphasize that the demonstrations would be nonviolent, to offer advice on how to respond to a government crackdown, and even to provide a list of approved, non-divisive demands and chants.²²¹ Notwithstanding these measures, on the eve of the scheduled demonstration nobody quite knew what to expect.

January 25 took everyone by surprise. In Cairo the demonstration “was at least fifty times larger than all but a few protests since 2001 when the government began sporadic and limited toleration of street demonstrations.”²²² Organizers publicly declared the movement’s political and economic demands, which included the raising of the minimum wage, unemployment assistance, an end to the state of emergency that had been in effect since 1981, the removal of the minister of interior, the release of prisoners held without official charges, the disbanding of the parliament, and, importantly, the introduction of a two-term limit on the presidency.²²³ Large protests also occurred elsewhere, including in Alexandria and the normally quiescent city of Suez. That the regime failed to stop most of the demonstrations throughout Egypt emboldened the organizers, who called for a “Million Man March” in connection to the Friday prayers on January 28.²²⁴ By then, “a seamless shift” had occurred “from the economic and more limited (though substantial) political demands in the call to the January 25 ‘Day of Wrath’ to the demand for an end to the entire autocratic regime.”²²⁵

Throughout the revolution, protesters emphasized the nonviolent nature of their movement. Mohamed ElBaradei, the former International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) director, was only one of many leading figures who knew how to portray the movement to Western audiences.

In interview after interview, he said all the right things about a peaceful transition to democracy, soothed general concerns about future relations between Cairo and Washington, assured viewers there would be no breach of the Egypt–Israel peace agreement, and declared that while the Muslim Brotherhood would be a feature of the Egyptian political arena, it would not dominate the politics in a new Egypt.²²⁶

But the prospect of a peaceful transition appeared far from certain. On January 27, the government shut down the Internet in an effort to disrupt the

²¹⁹ Stacher 2012: 7–8.

²²⁰ Noueihed and Warren 2012: 108.

²²¹ Ghonim 2012: 164–69.

²²² Beinin and Vairel 2011a: 243.

²²³ Beinin and Vairel 2011a: 242–43.

²²⁴ Noueihed and Warren 2012: 108.

²²⁵ Beinin and Vairel 2011a: 245.

²²⁶ Cook 2012: 289.

protesters' means of communication, a move widely interpreted—including by the international media—as an attempt to conceal an imminent massacre. And indeed, the government used more force on January 28 than it had a few days earlier. Still, it showed relative restraint, employing tear gas and rubber bullets against crowds throughout the country.²²⁷ Demonstrators responded by attacking police stations and setting official buildings on fire as Egypt balanced on the brink of chaos.²²⁸

The promise of all-encompassing violence was, however, not kept. "Hundreds of thousands of protesters throughout the country defied the 6:00 P.M. curfew proclaimed by the regime and remained in the streets throughout the night,"²²⁹ and by the next day "the police melted away" as protesters occupied Tahrir Square.²³⁰ Facing the prospect of sustained protests the government chose to shift its strategy from repression to accommodation and "tried to bribe public sector employees with a fifteen percent wage increase."²³¹ When some workplaces reopened after the weekend on Sunday, January 30, "many people collected their salaries, went to work, discussed the situation with their colleagues, and then joined the protests."²³²

The following day represents an important milestone with the military declaring its neutrality in an announcement carried by both public radio and television. In its communiqué, the army declared that it "supported the legitimate demands of the Egyptian people and approved of 'peaceful' demonstrations to express such demands; the army was going to protect the demonstrators and had no intention of using force against them."²³³

From this point on Mubarak's situation became increasingly untenable. With the police out of the picture and the military declaring its neutrality, the president's options quickly diminished. In a sign of desperation "pro-Mubarak forces"—that is, hired thugs, plainclothes policemen, and "some genuine supporters of the president"²³⁴—attacked the occupying crowds. February 2, a date sometimes referred to as the "Battle of the Camel," was one of the revolution's most violent days that saw protesters repel attackers, among them tourist guides on camel backs. Revolutionaries threw stones and Molotov cocktails while the military simply observed.²³⁵ Over the next nine days the demonstrators remained in the square, but the routinization of the movement threatened to turn it into a sideshow that only mobilized massive crowds on the weekends. Furthermore, as Mubarak offered additional concessions, including a promise to not run for re-election, many Egyptians favored a return to normal life.²³⁶

²²⁷ Noueihed and Warren 2012: 108.

²²⁸ Aly 2012: 23.

²²⁹ Beinín and Vairel 2011a: 245.

²³⁰ Noueihed and Warren 2012: 108.

²³¹ Beinín and Vairel 2011a: 245.

²³² Beinín and Vairel 2011a: 245.

²³³ Aly 2012: 42–43.

²³⁴ Cook 2012: 287.

²³⁵ Noueihed and Warren 2012: 109.

²³⁶ Noueihed and Warren 2012: 110.

Even the protesters in Tahrir Square began to tire, and for a while it looked as if the revolution might fail to oust the president. But when Ghonim was released from custody on February 7 and made an emotional television appearance, the revolution regained its momentum.²³⁷ Four days later, Mubarak's vice president Omar Suleiman appeared on state television to declare that the president had stepped down. Responding to this development, President Obama noted that "in Egypt, it was the moral force of nonviolence—not terrorism, not mindless killing—but nonviolence... that bent the arc of history toward justice once more,"²³⁸ and indeed, a sustained and predominantly nonviolent movement had removed yet another dictator from power. "In hindsight," Mona el-Ghobashy reflects, "it is simple to pick out the vulnerabilities of the Mubarak regime and arrange them in a neat list as the ingredients of breakdown. But that retrospective temptation misses the essential point: Egyptians overthrew a strong regime."²³⁹ The questions then become "how could they?" and "why did the regime not use overwhelming force to keep itself afloat?"²⁴⁰

The Burden of American Patronage

When Mubarak declared on February 10, just a day before his ouster, that he would not abandon the presidency, Barack Obama responded with "unusually strong criticism for one of Washington's key Arab allies."²⁴¹ The president maintained that "the Egyptian government must put forward a credible, concrete and unequivocal path toward genuine democracy and they have not seized that opportunity."²⁴² This clear stance stood in sharp contrast to the "cautious endorsement of political change"²⁴³ that characterized the administration's attitude in the early days of the revolution. Rather than a principled stance for the revolutionaries, Obama's late support of the movement should probably be interpreted as little more than resigned acknowledgment of the fact that one of America's most loyal and important allies in the Middle East was beyond rescue. In fact, the president enjoyed minimal agency in the situation. As the leader of the free world he simply could not side with a human rights violating dictator when the entire world watched an oppressed people peacefully rise to demand democracy, freedom, dignity, and human rights.

²³⁷ Cook 2012: 290–92.

²³⁸ Obama 2011.

²³⁹ el-Ghobashy 2011.

²⁴⁰ Field Marshal Muhamed Hussein Tantawi, the commander-in-chief of the Egyptian armed forces, testified after the revolution that Mubarak had never ordered the army to open fire on the crowds. While his testimony may be disputable, Tantawi had little reason to lie at that stage of the process. The army had after all performed in an exemplary fashion during the revolution and might have looked even better in the eyes of the people had it become clear that the military leaders actively sided with the protesters by disobeying presidential directives (BBC News 2011a).

²⁴¹ Noueihed and Warren 2012: 97.

²⁴² Qtd. in Noueihed and Warren 2012: 97.

²⁴³ Berger 2012: 604.

However, balancing values against interests had not always represented a dilemma for American politicians. As noted previously, ever since Egypt signed its peace agreement with Israel the United States had assumed the role of generous Cairo supporter. While most US politicians recognized Egypt's role in American foreign policy, the concrete task of justifying the relationship befell the White House. In Congress Egypt was less sacrosanct, even though its delegates rarely opposed the enormous aid allocations destined for Cairo. This state of affairs began to change in the wake of Bush's Freedom Agenda when human rights lobbyists managed to bring the hypocrisy of simultaneously promoting democracy and providing aid to dictators to Congress' attention.

Some members of Congress, like Roger Wicker, bluntly proclaimed that the US "do foreign assistance for altruistic reasons, certainly for humanitarian reasons, of course. But the main reason we do foreign assistance is we do it in the American national interest."²⁴⁴ Yet others found this assertion troubling. Recognizing that sending billions of dollars to a repressive regime rhymed poorly with Washington's stated objective of promoting democracy in the region, representatives like Tom Lantos, Joe Pitts, and David Obey introduced amendments designed to reshape Egypt's assistance package.²⁴⁵ Seeking to slash aid to Egypt by capitalizing on Bush's pro-democracy rhetoric, Obey, who in the 1990s had been one of Egypt's most ardent supporters on Capitol Hill,²⁴⁶ asserted in 2005 that he was "looking for a way to send a clear signal to Egypt that we find their human rights record to be an embarrassment."²⁴⁷

Despite efforts like these, congressional attempts to pressure Egypt to improve its human rights record were usually deflected by American presidents keen to safeguard US national interest, even at the expense of democracy.²⁴⁸ But the risk of being accused of hypocrisy on Middle Eastern democratization meant that the Bush White House could not completely ignore calls from Congress and lobbyists to honor its own rhetoric. The result was a schizophrenic arrangement in which the US provided enormous aid to the Egyptian leadership while simultaneously funding the opposition. For example, in August 2007 President Bush signed the ADVANCE Democracy Act, which "enshrined Washington's declared commitment to promote democracy abroad into law."²⁴⁹ As a result, civil society groups and human rights organizations received support from American agencies that indirectly helped undermine an important ally. Thus, while the White House remained loyal to the regime, the US government helped fund its opponents.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁴ Congressional Record 2006: H3539–40.

²⁴⁵ Berger 2012: 609–10; Cook 2012: 221–24.

²⁴⁶ Cook 2012: 224.

²⁴⁷ Congressional Record 2005: H5299.

²⁴⁸ Azarva 2007: 3.

²⁴⁹ Noueihed and Warren 2012: 22.

²⁵⁰ Cook 2012: 270.

President Bush's Freedom Agenda solidified the iron cage of liberalism in which US–Egyptian relations by now played out. This meant that both Washington and Cairo came under increasing pressure to honor their respective discourses on democracy, freedom, and human rights. Crucially, Mubarak must have suspected that human rights-based complaints could have detrimental effects on Egypt's relationship with the United States, and by extension, on his regime. In the early 2000s, Congress had threatened to cut aid to Egypt on several occasions due to the government's harassment of high-profile dissidents.²⁵¹ If such relatively minor human rights violations could propel American legislators into action, then how would they respond to a televised massacre of protesters demanding the values that US–Egyptian relations purportedly rested upon?

The Military

Egypt's seventeen days of revolution claimed at least 846 lives and thousands were injured.²⁵² Notwithstanding these tragic numbers, the violence could have reached much higher levels considering the state's repressive capabilities and the existential threat it faced. In contrast to later events in Libya and Syria, Egypt's military stood by and watched the regime fall. Its cautious handling of the revolution "led many pundits and the press to label the military's unwillingness to use violence as a sign of neutrality."²⁵³ But the military commanders' decision to endorse the revolutionaries' right to peacefully demonstrate²⁵⁴ becomes quite puzzling given that "the regime is an existential issue for the officers [as] the very nature of the political order provides significant benefits to the members of the military enclave and their allies."²⁵⁵ For some reason, however, the "existential issue" expressed itself in the military's willingness to abandon the regime, not to maintain it. To understand the army's decision to remain a seemingly impartial observer, it is necessary to shed light on the structure of the military establishment and its international connections.

Ever since the early 1980s, largely thanks to generous US aid,²⁵⁶ the military "carved out its own significant and lucrative portion of Egypt's commercial and industrial sectors."²⁵⁷ By securing US military aid Mubarak assured himself of the commanders' loyalty.²⁵⁸ Thanks to US assistance, the military establishment developed into a collection of wealthy industrialists.²⁵⁹ In the three decades preceding the revolution, the army's business interests became virtually

²⁵¹ Blaydes 2011: 200.

²⁵² Aly 2012: 21.

²⁵³ Stacher 2012: 11.

²⁵⁴ Aly 2012: 43.

²⁵⁵ Cook 2007: 18.

²⁵⁶ Aly 2006; Cook 2007: 81; Mitchell 2002: 241.

²⁵⁷ Cook 2007: 19.

²⁵⁸ Frisch 2002; Zaki 1995.

²⁵⁹ Blaydes 2011: 199; Cook 2012: 223; Droz-Vincent 2007: 201; Roussillon 1998: 373–74.

all-encompassing and came to include, in addition to weapon and uniform manufacture, agribusiness, consumer goods (such as refrigerators and washing machines), car manufacture, infrastructure development, tourism, and aviation.²⁶⁰ In short, the army became a profitable business benefiting from a symbiotic relationship with the state: the government secured US aid while the army provided the stability upon which that aid was conditional.²⁶¹

While Mubarak had initially served as a guarantee for US funding, over time the military leaders established their own connections within the American bureaucracy. Symptomatic of this development, “two dozen senior Egyptian military officials” found themselves at the Pentagon when the revolution broke out, “halfway through an annual week of meetings, lunches and dinners with their American counterparts.”²⁶² In the thirty years following the signing of peace with Israel, thousands of Egyptian military officers had received training in American military academies like the National Defense University and the Army War College. There, in addition to learning all the latest in warfare, the officers “were exposed to the values of a democratic society, such as human rights and civilian rule over the military.”²⁶³ This meant that Egypt’s military leaders comprehended fully the dilemma represented by a nonviolent uprising. Since they knew how a brutal crackdown would look on Western TV, the army’s self-restraint and active approval of the demonstrations was likely encouraged by “the live feed from *al-Jazeera*, which in media parlance ‘covered the story wall-to-wall.’”²⁶⁴ Hence, as the demonstrations gathered momentum the military’s options became clear: side with the dictator and risk losing \$1.3 billion annually in addition to a highly profitable business empire, or assume neutrality and maintain a favorable image both abroad and at home. Whereas Mubarak had for decades personally ensured the maintenance of the beneficial status quo, the unarmed protests now made him a liability from the military’s point of view.

The demonstrators’ preference for nonviolent tactics was central to keeping the military out of the conflict. Had the activists attacked the military they would have justified the type of repression that could have saved the regime. Instead, having learnt from events in Tunisia as well as from other nonviolent uprisings in the preceding decades,²⁶⁵ especially Serbia’s 2000 Bulldozer Revolution,²⁶⁶ the demonstrators embraced the troops in Tahrir Square and gave them flowers.²⁶⁷ Fraternization between demonstrators and soldiers made it unlikely that orders to brutally repress the crowds would be

²⁶⁰ Blaydes 2011: 199; Cook 2007: 19; Frisch 2002: 106–07; Richards and Waterbury 1996: 341; Richter 2007: 185; Springborg 1998: 107.

²⁶¹ Bianchi 1989: 5. ²⁶² Bumiller 2011.

²⁶³ Christian Science Monitor Editorial Board 2011. ²⁶⁴ Cook 2012: 288.

²⁶⁵ Noueihed and Warren 2012: 109. ²⁶⁶ Kirkpatrick and Sanger 2011.

²⁶⁷ Cook 2012: 287.

obeyed, yet such orders were probably never issued. The commanders, and Mubarak himself, knew that outright repression would have forced external allies to abandon Egypt's leaders and without external support the regime had few hopes of survival.

Despite these obstacles, the regime did resort to limited violence. The problem, from the government's point of view, was that such repression had to be disguised or camouflaged. Convicted criminals were released from prison and directed to confront demonstrators alongside plainclothes police officers, internal security agents, and hired thugs.²⁶⁸ While certainly intimidating, these measures were ill-suited to stem the revolutionary tide.²⁶⁹ More importantly, they soon emerged as the regime's only option. As one commentator notes, "from the first day broad international solidarity with the revolution was evident. Across the west [*sic*] people declared their support for the demands of the Egyptian people."²⁷⁰ In that context it became virtually impossible for any Western leader to side with a blatantly human rights offending dictator. Consequently, when disguised violence failed to throw Egypt into anarchy, the regime was out of ideas. In the evening of February 11, nine days after his last serious attempt to end the revolution, Mubarak surrendered his office.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to explain the Iranian, Tunisian, and Egyptian revolutions by pointing not to the proximate causes of each overthrow, but rather to systemic compatibilities and contradictions. Instead of making the unarmed nature of the revolutions a peculiar feature to be mentioned in a footnote, I have argued that the revolutionaries' reliance on nonviolent methods of struggle is precisely the reason why they managed to oust their authoritarian opponents. The presence of an iron cage of liberalism in each of the three countries meant that nonviolent protest was fully compatible with the liberal discourse that by the time of the upheavals had achieved state-opposition consensus. Liberal unanimity also meant that repression of nonviolent demonstration would represent a severe violation of the dominant narrative. Put succinctly, the Iranian, Egyptian, and Tunisian revolutions occurred in a context in which unarmed protest had to be permitted.

What made the situation so problematic for each dictator was of course not that repression would symbolize a domestic betrayal of the regime's

²⁶⁸ Beinín and Vairel 2011a: 245; Cook 2012: 187; Noueihed and Warren 2012: 109; Stacher 2012: 8; Vairel 2011: 33–34.

²⁶⁹ Stacher 2012: 8.

²⁷⁰ Aswany 2011: x.

discourse. Instead, and in line with the central argument of this book, repression of massive crowds became nearly impossible since it would likely have forced a response from the government's Western allies. Such an international reaction is likely to have been political rather than military in nature, but it would almost inevitably have included economic sanctions targeting the regime and, importantly, its key domestic allies. As a result, the three dictators found themselves under pressure from three different, but highly interrelated, directions: (1) A nonviolent mass movement whose actions mirrored the regime's words, (2) apprehensive Western allies who could ill afford to be seen as complicit in the repression of unarmed citizens demanding democracy, freedom, and human rights, and (3) domestic economic and military elites concerned with losing their profitable arrangements in the event of their government's fall from Western grace. Faced with this accumulation of pressures it is hardly surprising that all three leaders vacillated.²⁷¹ Their hesitation resulted in the absence of overwhelming repression, which in turn reduced the populace's fears and ensured that subsequent demonstrations and protests would be even larger.

As noted, the regimes' Western allies were caught in a severe dilemma of their own. Since the protests were unarmed and seemingly led by neither communists nor Islamists, there was relatively little democratic leaders in North American and Europe could do other than concede that the protests were legitimate and that the three governments needed to handle them in a civilized fashion. To complicate matters further, all three revolutions received ample attention in the media. What the West therefore came to witness first hand was a movement in its image. In the case of Tunisia and Egypt, the protesters

were young. They spoke English or French....They looked and sounded like people might on the streets of London or New York. They were not chanting religious slogans. They did not carry weapons. They drew satirical cartoons and penned sardonic raps about their leaders. The Western media adored them. They all voiced similar aspirations for freedom of expression, for decent jobs and pay, for better opportunities, for the right to choose their governments.²⁷²

The role played by the Internet received much attention in the wake of the "Arab Spring," but also during Iran's Green Movement in 2009, with the activists' use of social media immediately being portrayed as a decisive reason for Egyptian and Tunisian revolutionary success.²⁷³ Yet the Iranian Revolution looked almost identical to its successors, and it managed without

²⁷¹ Aswany 2011: 137.

²⁷² Noueihed and Warren 2012: 6.

²⁷³ Acuff 2010: 221–22; Alizadeh 2010: 5; Bruns et al. 2013; Ghonim 2012; Khamis et al. 2012; Khondker 2011; el-Nawawy 2010; el-Nawawy and Khamis 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Wall and el Zahed 2011.

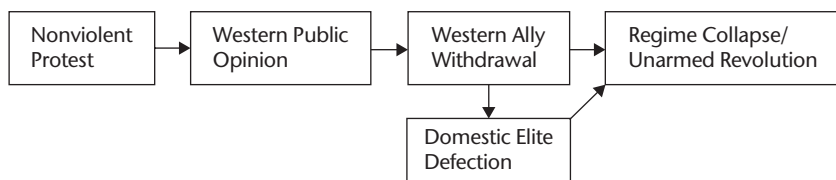


Figure 5.1. From nonviolent protest to unarmed revolution.

Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. Thus, rather than focusing on the particular technologies used, it is the broadcasting effect of those technologies that matters. It is true that Tunisian and Egyptian revolutionaries used the World Wide Web as an organizational tool in the early days of the revolutions, but the Internet also played a more direct part in the fall of the two regimes. Complementing, and arguably even kick-starting the traditional media's coverage of the two revolutions, activist reporting of the revolutions on social media sites soon guaranteed that the iron cage of liberalism would come into full effect.²⁷⁴ Perhaps recognizing the importance of exposure abroad, activists posted their experiences on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, thereby ensuring that government repression would come at a high international cost for the regime. In other words, it was the Internet's ability to publicize the revolution to the rest of the world that mattered most since it reduced the likelihood of the type of massive repression that constituted the movement's most immediate threat.

In Iran, Internet activism was obviously not possible, but the international media, which had been focused on Iran's human rights situation since a few years prior to the revolution, served a functionally equivalent role. In particular the BBC²⁷⁵ "did cover in some detail the series of strikes, both localized and general, which began in the summer of 1978, took hold in the fall, and continued until the end of the revolution,"²⁷⁶ thereby forcing the Carter administration and the shah's regime to act in concordance with the human rights rhetoric they had both espoused. As long as the protesters remained predominantly nonviolent before the eyes of the international press, the king proved to be as paralyzed as his Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts would be three decades later.

The chain of events that led to the three regimes' collapse in the face of nonviolent protests is captured in Figure 5.1. Since pressure from their own constituents is what forces Western leaders to abandon authoritarian allies, it

²⁷⁴ Ritter and Trechsel 2014.

²⁷⁵ Milani 1988: 204, 220; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994: 30, 133; Stempel 1981: 182.

²⁷⁶ Dorman and Farhang 1987: 157. See also Milani (1988: 204, 220), Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1994: 30, 133), and Stempel (1981: 182).

is of critical importance that this key audience is aware of the revolutionary movement's ongoing struggle, as "a movement that is not reported does not take place."²⁷⁷ That Western audiences could observe the revolutions, either through news reports (in the Iranian case) or on live television and online (in the Tunisian and Egyptian cases), helps account for the three regimes' relative self-restraint. The traditional media and social media's main impact on these three unarmed revolutions was thus to reinforce the debilitating effects of the iron cage of liberalism by bringing the movements to Western attention.²⁷⁸

In the face of internationally broadcasted nonviolent uprisings, it soon became impossible for the shah, Ben Ali, and Mubarak to order naked repression of hundreds of thousands of people in the streets. As Charles Tripp notes, "there is the obvious challenge to the capacity or to the will of those in power to use that armed force extensively and ruthlessly. The fate of the Shah of Iran, of Ben Ali in Tunisia and of Mubarak in Egypt showed that in the final analysis this was lacking and they fell."²⁷⁹ In the absence of a credible communist or Islamist conspiracy to justify massacres of unarmed protesters, the three leaders were beyond rescue. Some commentators have suggested that Western governments "abandoned" their autocratic allies once they appeared to no longer be of much use,²⁸⁰ but such an assessment oversimplifies the dynamic of international politics in episodes of unarmed domestic struggle. The three dictators did indeed lose their Western support, but this was not due to intricate schemes devised in the White House or European presidential palaces. Rather, nonviolent mass protest forced democratic states to distance themselves from authoritarian regimes. To suggest that Western governments were willingly complicit in the three revolutions therefore misses the point: the shah, Ben Ali, and Mubarak were "abandoned" only because they could no longer be supported. The revolutionaries' use of nonviolent tactics within the context of an iron cage of liberalism accounts for Western leaders' unenthusiastic decisions to let valuable allies fall.

²⁷⁷ Downing 1996: 22. See also Bob 2005.

²⁷⁸ Ritter and Trechsel 2014.

²⁷⁹ Tripp 2013: 132.

²⁸⁰ Moubayed 2011: 4.

Part IV

Further Comparisons and Conclusions

6

Confrontational States

Outside the Iron Cage of Liberalism

Democracy and liberalism, both of which are inspired by Western culture, must not become encrusted in the foundations of Islamic regimes.

—Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, January 1997¹

The days of looking the other way while despotic regimes trample human rights and rob their nations' wealth and then excuse their failings by feeding their people a steady diet of anti-Western hatred are over.

—Dick Cheney, US Vice President, January 2004²

In the preceding chapters I have argued that Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt's intimate relationships with the West had far-reaching consequences for domestic politics in each country. By imposing its liberal framework on its authoritarian allies, the democratic world inadvertently steered the three regimes and their domestic opponents in a liberal direction. Once state and dissident discourses converged, the resulting iron cage of liberalism made unarmed revolutions possible by constraining the government and legitimizing the opposition's use of nonviolent tactics in the pursuit of democracy, freedom, and human rights internationally. But as Sami Moubayed notes, "there are two kinds of leaders in [the Middle East]: those who rely on their people for support, and those who rely on the West."³ This chapter therefore asks "what happens to nonviolent revolutionary movements when animosity and distrust characterize relations between democratic states and autocratic regimes?" In order to answer this question I introduce three "negative" cases—Iran's 2009 Green Movement and the "Arab Spring" uprisings in Libya and Syria that began

¹ Qtd. in Boroumand and Boroumand 2003: 138.

² Cheney 2004.

³ Moubayed 2011: 4.

in 2011—with an eye to further testing the limits of this book’s theoretical framework.

The cases examined in this chapter are negative in the sense that the outcome of interest—unarmed revolution—is absent. That unarmed revolutions failed to materialize does not imply regime stability (in Libya, Gaddafi’s regime collapsed as the result of an externally supported civil war), but simply that the nonviolent tactics used successfully in the study’s three primary cases proved insufficient to generate a similar outcome in Islamic Iran, Libya, and Syria. The argument advanced in this chapter is that civil resistance was ineffective against states operating outside the iron cage of liberalism. In fact, states unrestrained by their non-commitments to Western political norms and values do not only appear to be more resilient to nonviolent pressures, but are also better equipped to counter popular demands for democracy and human rights. As this chapter will show, the regimes in Tehran, Tripoli, and Damascus have found it relatively easy to employ “anti-Western nationalism to discredit democracy discourses.”⁴

The dynamic described below is in many ways the opposite of that outlined in the previous four chapters. Unlike pre-revolutionary Iran, Egypt, and Tunisia, the countries analyzed here can be characterized as “confrontational states”⁵ that have not “committed, even rhetorically, to Western-style political liberalization and . . . are outside the bounds of what the international community deems to be respectable states.”⁶ Such states tend to pay a high economic price for their unwillingness to fall into line with a world order dominated by the West, and as a consequence Islamic Iran, Libya, and Syria faced both trade restrictions and international isolation in the years leading up to their respective revolutionary challenges. Western leaders have traditionally reasoned that economic and political pressure will eventually cause sufficient popular suffering and discontent to force obstinate states to reform. Yet, as Barry Rubin points out “it is a Western, not an Arab, idea that the populace’s desperation at their countries’ difficult plight would make . . . Arab and Iranian leaders . . . move toward compromise and moderation. But the rulers themselves reasoned in the exact opposite way: Faced with pressure to change, they became more demanding.”⁷ And, as this book argues, more repressive.

After brief synopses of the three initially nonviolent revolutionary movements’ failures, the chapter individually examines international relations and domestic politics in Iran, Libya, and Syria. In the conclusion I return to the three uprisings to argue that unarmed revolutionary

⁴ Ehteshami et al. 2013: 223.

⁵ al-Sayyid 2013: 213.

⁶ Aarts and Cavatorta 2013: 11.

⁷ Rubin 2007: 3.

failure can be explained by the absence of an iron cage of liberalism in each country. Admittedly, this chapter lacks much of the historical depth provided in the preceding ones. However, the purpose here is simply to show what happens to a nonviolent revolutionary movement's chances of success when the backdrop of an iron cage of liberalism is removed from the equation.

The Unarmed Revolutions That Never Were

Iran: The Green Movement of 2009

Surveys predicted that Iran's 2009 presidential elections would come down to the wire. In the last few weeks of the campaign, the main challenger, Mir Hossein Mousavi, had narrowed the distance to incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the country prepared for a nail biter. However, the results, which were curiously announced before all polling stations had even closed, awarded Ahmadinejad a first-round landslide victory. While the extent of the fraud perpetrated by the regime is contested, most commentators agree that violations did indeed take place.⁸

In the following days, millions of Iranians took to the streets and to cyberspace to protest what they perceived to be a government conspiracy to steal their vote.⁹ The crowds were also enraged by the fact that the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was expected to remain above electoral politics, endorsed both Ahmadinejad's victory and the government's violent reaction to the unarmed demonstrations.¹⁰ Over the next several weeks the protesters employed various nonviolent tactics, including mass demonstrations and boycotts of government goods, in what quickly became dubbed the "Green Revolution."¹¹

Iranian activists had learned important lessons from unarmed revolutions elsewhere,¹² but so had the regime.

After studying for years the "color revolutions" in Eastern Europe, the Revolutionary Guard was well prepared to tackle the Green Revolution on its own soil. Basij forces and Ansare Hezbollah groups formed the first line of defense. In a brutal display of force, they attacked demonstrators, killing and wounding scores.¹³

As a result of the government clampdown, over 100 protesters died and at least 4,000 people were arrested in the six months following the

⁸ Seliktar 2012: 165; Zaccara 2012: 200–04.

⁹ Acuff 2010: 221; Kurzman 2010: 8.

¹⁰ Parsi 2012: 89–91.

¹¹ Bayat 2010a: 51; Jahanbegloo 2010: 18; Parsi, Elliot, and Disney 2010: 161–62; Seliktar 2012: 165–66.

¹² Beissinger 2007.

¹³ Seliktar 2012: 165–66.

elections.¹⁴ The main wave of protests came to an effective end by late August, and although sporadic protests occurred during the remaining months of the year, the nonviolent Green Movement ultimately proved unable to seriously challenge the Iranian regime.

Libya: The Fall of Gaddafi

Libya was the third country to fully experience the “Arab Spring,” but the country’s revolutionary struggle soon took a course radically different from the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings it sought to mimic. The unrest began on February 15, 2011, when a few hundred protesters gathered outside a police station in Benghazi,¹⁵ but the revolution “officially” began two days later when peaceful demonstrators in the same city called for democratic reforms. In many ways the logical continuation of the wind of change sweeping across the region, “the language of the protestors, their rhetorical style, their youthful composition, and their grievances all fit perfectly within the unfolding narrative. *But Qaddafi was the first of the Arab leaders to immediately unleash the full brutality of his military apparatus against the protest movement.*”¹⁶

In the days that followed, the government repeatedly reacted to nonviolent protests with violence.¹⁷ State repression had occurred in response to protests in Tunisia and Egypt as well, but Gaddafi’s “was not the selective repression of the typical Arab autocrat determined to make an example of some challengers. Qaddafi’s rhetoric and the behavior of his troops signaled an eagerness to do far more,”¹⁸ with the Leader famously promising to “cleanse Libya house by house.”¹⁹ On February 19, Gaddafi’s son Saif al-Islam, who had completed a doctoral degree at the London School of Economics and up to this point been heralded by the West as a potential driver of political liberalization in Libya, gave an interview on state television in which he, like his father, put forth a theory about foreign mercenaries and crazed, drug-fueled protesters who were nothing like the demonstrators in other countries. In response to Saif’s interview, the Libyan people took to the streets in even greater numbers, causing the government to resort to “extreme violence.”²⁰ In the face of state brutality, protesters armed themselves and “almost immediately, the Libyan protest movement turned into an alarmingly bloody civil war.”²¹

¹⁴ Parsi et al. 2010: 161; Tezcür 2013: 218.

¹⁵ Deeb 2013: 64.

¹⁸ Lynch 2012: 168.

²¹ Lynch 2012: 169.

¹⁶ Lynch 2012: 167 (emphasis added).

¹⁹ Reuters 2011.

¹⁷ Deeb 2013: 64.

²⁰ Lynch 2012: 169.

Syria: From Nonviolent Revolutionary Movement to Civil War

In stark contrast to the massive crowds descending onto the streets in Egypt and Tunisia in early 2011, “only a handful” protesters heeded calls for mass demonstrations in Damascus during that time.²² Rather than the examples set by the revolutions overthrowing Ben Ali and Mubarak, it was the mid-March arrest of fifteen boys in the southern town of Dera’a that sparked revolutionary events in Syria. The boys’ crime: to graffiti the “Arab Spring” slogan “the people wanted the fall of the regime” on a wall. When it became known that the local government had jailed and tortured the boys, protesters gathered in the city to demand the end of martial law (enforced continually since 1963), increased personal freedoms, and amnesty for political prisoners.

Bashar al-Asad’s regime, apparently convinced that Syrian protests differed markedly from those elsewhere in the region, deployed army troops to the area, but initially responded with concessions and allowed the demonstrations to continue for four days. At that point, however, the regime lost its patience and opened fire on the protesters. As the protests spread casualties now became commonplace, and with spring turning to summer the regime employed increasingly brutal means of repression, including the use of rooftop snipers.²³ By late summer, more than 2,000 Syrians had died.²⁴

The regime’s brutality set a vicious cycle in motion, as

the previously largely peaceful demonstrations increasingly became dotted with armed elements that sought to protect themselves and their families and to take the fight to the regime forces. Soon enough rebel militias formed, drawn in part from Syrian army defectors and operating as the “Free Syrian Army.” Blood was now also on their hands, and they knew that they could not turn back.²⁵

With neither side prepared to give in, the Syrian Revolution, which at first looked very similar to its predecessors in the region, transformed into a civil war. At the time of writing, the UN’s human rights office has decided to no longer provide estimates of the conflict’s death toll due to its inability to confirm the veracity of its figures. The organization’s last estimate was reported in July 2013 and suggested that more than 100,000 people had died.²⁶ According to the opposition-aligned Syrian Observatory for Human Rights that operates out of Great Britain, 140,041 people had been killed as of mid-February 2014.²⁷

Based on their initial appearances it would have been nearly impossible to distinguish the eventually failed revolutionary movements in Islamic Iran, Libya, and Syria from the successful ones in pre-revolutionary Iran, Tunisia,

²² Lesch 2012: 54.

²⁴ Lynch 2012: 183.

²⁷ Solomon 2014.

²³ Lesch 2012: 48–49; Stacher 2012: 16–17.

²⁵ Lesch 2012: 165.

²⁶ Heilprin 2014; McDonnell 2013.

and Egypt. All six began as nonviolent challenges against repressive regimes, but while the latter ousted their respective autocrats, the former either succumbed or deteriorated into violent struggles against the state. Crucially, in the successful cases the regimes failed to order the movements repressed, or used their security forces only selectively and ineffectively. Where nonviolent resistance failed, on the other hand, the governments relied heavily on naked repression.²⁸ To explain this decisive difference, it is necessary to analyze the link between international relations and domestic politics in each of the three “failed” cases, beginning with Iran.

Iran: Between Two Revolutions?

International Relations

At the time of the Green Movement the relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the West—the United States in particular—was far from amicable. The 1977–79 revolution had been waged against an autocratic ruler deemed responsible for Iran’s economic and social decay, but also in the name of national autonomy with many Iranians despising the country’s servitude to the West. It might therefore not have been surprising if the shah’s removal had resulted in the immediate severing of ties with the United States.²⁹ In reality, however, both the Carter administration and the new Iranian government recognized the benefits of a continued relationship. Prime Minister Bazargan, a political realist, concluded that the prevailing Cold War environment obliged Iran to stay on good terms with all powerful states.³⁰ To that end, “Bazargan endeavored to normalize relations with the United States, and the United States, which also wanted workable relations with Iran, responded positively” by agreeing to several high level meetings.³¹

Unfortunately, Iran’s post-revolutionary leadership was hardly characterized by unanimity.³² While Bazargan sought to salvage Iran’s relationship with the United States, Khomeini’s hard-liners trumpeted their desire to export their explicitly anti-imperialist revolution elsewhere, verbally attacking both the West and the Soviet Union in the process.³³ To complicate matters further, Iran’s new leadership began to sponsor terrorist activities abroad,³⁴ which soon caused the country to find itself grouped with fellow “international pariahs, such as Syria, Libya, and North Korea.”³⁵ The definite

²⁸ See Nepstad (2011) on the role of repression in unarmed revolutions.

²⁹ Pirseyedi 2013: 164. ³⁰ Hunter 2010: 38. ³¹ Hunter 2010: 38.

³² On Iran’s post-revolution international relations, see for example Ehteshami and Varasteh (1991).

³³ Bani-Sadr 1991: 7; Limbert and Gasiorowski 2002: 68–69.

³⁴ Behrooz 2012: 374–75; Limbert and Gasiorowski 2002: 68–69.

³⁵ Limbert and Gasiorowski 2002: 69.

break in relations between Iran and the United States, and by extension much of Western Europe, occurred when Iranian university students seized the American embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979. The ensuing hostage crisis lasted for 444 days.³⁶ To punish Iran's leadership, the United States joined a number of Western nations in supporting Iraq in its war with Iran.³⁷ Due to Washington's history of equipping and training Iran's army, American officials were able to assist the Iraqi military effort by identifying its enemy's strengths and weaknesses. The US also imposed an economic embargo on Iran and provided Iraq with large quantities of weapons, "including weapons of mass destruction."³⁸

Deprived of access to American arms, Iran was compelled to reconfigure its international alliances and established close ties with the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites.³⁹ In the immediate context of its war effort, Iran's realignment meant that it could now replenish its military.⁴⁰ Warming relations with the Soviet Union became even more critical when Iran's already infected relationships with the United States collapsed completely in the 1980s. Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 meant that Tehran now found itself on opposite sides of the United States in yet another armed conflict, and relations between the two countries deteriorated further due to Iran's role in the bombing of American barracks and the taking of hostages in Lebanon.⁴¹

A 1986 American scheme to sell weapons to Tehran via Israel in order to fund Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries, the infamous Iran-Contra Affair, could potentially have thawed the relationship between the two countries. Khomeini backed the arrangement, but members of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri's (Khomeini's designated successor) staff leaked information about the deal to a Lebanese newspaper. The exposé caused massive scandals in both Iran and the United States and represents Washington's final Cold War attempt to find an opening in relations with Tehran. For Montazeri personally, the episode initiated his fall from political grace: Ali Khamenei, not Montazeri, would eventually replace Khomeini as Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic.⁴²

Following the Iran-Contra Affair the US stepped up its support for Iraq by using its influence to protect Saddam Hussein from international rebuke for using chemical weapons against Iranian troops. In addition, American intelligence helped Iraq inflict serious enough damage on Iran to force the latter to accept a ceasefire in August 1988.⁴³ Washington also engaged Tehran directly after an American warship struck a mine in the Persian Gulf in April 1988.

³⁶ Behrooz 2012: 371. ³⁷ Behrooz 2012: 374.

³⁸ St. Marie and Naghshpour 2011: 145. ³⁹ Boroumand and Boroumand 2003: 140.

⁴⁰ Pirseyedi 2013: 50. ⁴¹ Hunter 2010: 41.

⁴² Behrooz 2012: 375. For details about the Iran-Contra Affair, see Crist (2012: 175–202).

⁴³ Behrooz 2012: 375–76.

Iran was blamed, and just four days later the United States retaliated by sinking an Iranian vessel and bombing two oil platforms. In July, the US Navy shot down an Iranian passenger flight Washington claimed had been headed in the direction of an American battleship while ignoring communication attempts. Although the US government eventually apologized for the “error” and offered reparations to the victims’ families, the incident hardly improved the two countries’ relationship.⁴⁴

The end of the Iran–Iraq war and Khomeini’s coinciding death made reconciliation with the United States at least possible. The election of the pragmatic Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to the presidency in 1989 also offered observers hope that relations between the two nations could be repaired. Iran, eager to rid itself of the US embargo, used its influence to help secure the release of hostages in Lebanon and declared itself neutral during the Gulf War.⁴⁵ However, these gestures failed to impress Washington since Iran continued to sponsor terrorist activities, including assassinations of Iranian opposition figures abroad. Furthermore, the country maintained its opposition to the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, which did not win it many friends on Capitol Hill.⁴⁶ Ultimately, Rafsanjani’s half-hearted efforts failed to satisfy American policymakers. Instead, in 1995 the US Congress imposed new sanctions on Iran—and Libya—through the Iran–Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) that levied heavy penalties against any company investing more than \$40 million in either country’s oil industry.⁴⁷

With the Iranian people longing for a new national direction the moderate Mohammad Khatami won the presidency in 1997 and proposed a “dialogue of civilizations” with the West. Iran’s relationship with Europe “improved rapidly”⁴⁸ during Khatami’s first years in power, but the US remained unconvinced. Even though “the Clinton administration came very close to admitting and even apologizing for the American role in the 1953 coup... strong forces in both countries (the Republican-dominated Congress in the United States and the conservative faction in the IRI) managed to arrest any progress.”⁴⁹

The Iranian hard-liners maintained their opposition to Khatami’s outreach efforts until the consequences of 9/11 possibly changed their outlook. In early May 2003, with the US fighting at the time relatively successful wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Ayatollah Khamenei and other leaders began to fear that they might be next in line for US-orchestrated regime change.⁵⁰ Therefore, Khatami, with Khamenei’s approval, allegedly sent a letter to the White

⁴⁴ St. Marie and Naghshpour 2011: 147–48.

⁴⁶ Hunter 2010: 51.

⁴⁷ Hunter 2010: 53.

⁴⁹ Behrooz 2012: 383.

⁵⁰ Hunter 2010: 57.

⁴⁵ Behrooz 2012: 379.

⁴⁸ Behrooz 2012: 383.

House through Tim Guldimmann,⁵¹ the Swiss ambassador to Iran.⁵² According to Trita Parsi, the letter's contents

astonished the Americans. The Iranians put all their cards on the table, declaring what they sought from Washington and what they were going to give in return. In a dialogue of "mutual respect," the Iranians offered to end their support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and pressure them to cease attacks on Israel. On Hezbollah, the pro-Iranian Shiite group in Lebanon that Iran had helped to create, Tehran offered to support its disarmament and transform it into a purely political party. The Iranians offered to put their contested nuclear program under intrusive international inspections in order to alleviate any fears of weaponization. Tehran would also sign the Additional Protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and even allow extensive American involvement in the program as a further guarantee and goodwill gesture. On terrorism, Tehran offered full cooperation against all terrorist organizations, above all, al-Qaeda. Additionally, Iran would work actively with the United States to support political stabilization and the establishment of a nonsectarian government in Iraq.⁵³

Naturally, the Iranians wanted something in return for these concessions, but besides a potentially controversial prisoner exchange none of the demands appear outlandish. Supposedly, some members of the Bush administration favored a positive response to the letter, while others, including Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, categorically rejected dialogue.⁵⁴ In the end, the letter went unanswered.⁵⁵ Soon thereafter the tide turned in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and had there ever been an Iranian offer on the table, it had now expired.

Maziar Behrooz has described the US–Iranian post-revolution relationship as "one of missed opportunities for improvement."⁵⁶ With the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency in 2005, even such opportunities became increasingly rare. By then the US was no longer fighting successful wars and the risk of an American invasion of Iran appeared small. Consequently, the United States was now more useful to the Iranian leadership in the shape of a villain than as a partner. Therefore,

in the political discourse of President Ahmadinejad and of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei'i, the United States and Israel were portrayed as a threat

⁵¹ As the United States has no embassy in Iran, the Swiss embassy serves as the recognized diplomatic channel between the two countries.

⁵² Hunter 2010: 61.

⁵³ Parsi 2012: 2.

⁵⁴ Parsi 2012: 4.

⁵⁵ Parsi 2012: 4–5. The authenticity of the letter has been debated, and several former members of staff in the White House and the Pentagon have testified that the Bush administration considered the letter a fabrication, or, at the very least, that it lacked official anchoring (Kessler 2006, 2007). Nonetheless, the episode is retold here because it is symptomatic of the mutual distrust that characterizes US–Iranian relations.

⁵⁶ Behrooz 2012: 383.

to Iran's security and the U.S. invasion of Iraq used to expose it as a power-hungry hegemon wrecking [*sic*] havoc on the region but unable to impose its will.⁵⁷

As long as the Bush administration continued its strategy of demonizing Iran, opinion polls suggested that the Iranian foreign policy of confrontation with the West received wide support among the population.⁵⁸ For the regime, this state of affairs was highly convenient: Blaming the US for the country's misfortunes without risking an invasion provided the Ahmadinejad government with both legitimacy and quiescence at home.

In contrast to its predominantly hostile relations with the United States, Iran's relationship with Europe has fluctuated significantly over the past three decades. Following the revolution few European countries had reasons to shun the new leadership, and some might even have hoped to take advantage of reduced US influence in Iran. Even in the face of the drawn-out American hostage crisis, and the even more prolonged war with Iraq, "Iran maintained a reasonable level of economic and political relations with most European countries."⁵⁹ European nations were initially willing to aid the new regime, but as troubling incidents like the Rushdie Affair and, more acutely, Iran-sponsored terrorist activities and hostage taking became commonplace, European leaders began to withdraw much of their support.

Relations with Europe improved in the wake of the Gulf War, but assassinations of exiled opposition figures in Berlin and Paris in the early 1990s reversed this development and caused European leaders to cancel visits to Tehran. Iran, meanwhile, was frustrated by Europe's enduring denunciation of its nuclear program and human rights record, complaining that longstanding European allies in the region had largely been spared criticism over their human rights performances, which often differed little from that of Iran.⁶⁰ Not even Khatami's more reconciliatory attitude toward the West managed to force a breakthrough in relations with Europe. One of the last major attempts to improve relations took place in 2003–04 through the proposal of the so-called Brussels Agreement, but several factors, including American disapproval, caused the negotiations to collapse. The United States did not wish to see its pressure on the Iranian regime mitigated by Europe at a time when Washington sensed that regime change was imminent.⁶¹

With the West largely unapproachable, Iran strengthened its bonds to other powers, such as Russia and, to a lesser extent, China.⁶² For Russia, relations with Iran have always been a component of its larger foreign policy puzzle,⁶³ and although Moscow has often used Iran to limit US influence in the region it has not been averse to join the chorus of nations condemning

⁵⁷ Ehteshami et al. 2013: 236.

⁵⁸ Ehteshami et al. 2013: 236.

⁵⁹ Hunter 2010: 81.

⁶⁰ Hunter 2010: 81–85.

⁶¹ Hunter 2010: 90–94.

⁶² Behrooz 2012: 383.

⁶³ Hunter 2010: 105.

Tehran when doing so seems prudent. But following the US excursions into Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, Russia has been increasingly eager to support countries like Iran and Syria in order to prevent US domination of the Middle East,⁶⁴ and seeks to “to retain the Iran card in its relations with the West.”⁶⁵ For Iran, Russia is important as a provider of the military hardware and advanced technology the West is unwilling to share with Tehran and gives the country a reliable supporter in the UN Security Council.⁶⁶ Because of Russian support it would be unwise to exaggerate the negative consequences of Iran’s hostile arrangement with the United States. As in the case of other authoritarian regimes, the presence of an external foe can be highly useful domestically, much like bogeymen like Khamenei and Ahmadinejad are useful to American politicians.⁶⁷ Hostility between the two countries has therefore resulted in a symbiotic relationship between hard-liners in each country, since “when either government needs a ‘Bad Guy’ to blame for whatever issue is at hand, they have a readily available ‘Bad Guy’ in the other.”⁶⁸ For pro-democracy activists in Iran, however, this dynamic has constituted a significant obstacle to their efforts.

Domestic Politics

Iran’s international relationships have played a central role in shaping the country’s domestic political context ever since the revolution.⁶⁹ Ironically, liberalization pressures from abroad have generally not served democratic elements in the country well. Rather, such “interference” has legitimized the authoritarian system by equating liberal values with imperialism. Nonetheless, the end of its war with Iraq, combined with the United States’ power demonstration during the Gulf War a few years later, prompted some Iranian leaders to conclude that Western assistance, and thus a change in foreign policy, was necessary if the country was to recover from eight years of devastation.⁷⁰ During his tenure as president, and in sharp contrast to Khomeini’s polemics, Rafsanjani assumed a pragmatic approach to foreign policy but ultimately failed to gain ground with Washington. Rafsanjani’s successor, Khatami, went one step further. Similarly to both Egyptian and Tunisian leaders before him, he sought to incorporate Western discourse into his vision for an Iranian nation in harmony with the rest of the world.⁷¹

In the 1997 presidential election Khatami handily defeated his conservative opponent Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri by running on a platform that emphasized

⁶⁴ Hunter 2010: 109–14. ⁶⁵ Hunter 2010: 114.

⁶⁶ Hunter 2010: 105, 111–12; Pirseyedi 2013: 51.

⁶⁷ Menashri 1999.

⁶⁸ St. Marie and Naghshpour 2011: 154.

⁶⁹ Ehteshami 2012: 127.

⁷⁰ Pirseyedi 2013: 50.

⁷¹ Pirseyedi 2013: 62.

the need to liberalize the country.⁷² He thus came “to power with the explicit mandate to reform the political system by supporting the rule of law, deepening and expanding the role of civil society, and protecting fundamental civil and political rights.”⁷³ Although Khatami emphasized that Iranian civil society should operate “according to Muslim cultural norms,”⁷⁴ his election resulted in an unprecedented wave of liberalization. For instance, the new president moved quickly to reduce the level of censorship in Iranian media, which led to an explosive increase in the number of newspapers, magazines, and books on the market.⁷⁵ Many of these publications sought to redefine Iranian politics by introducing “new concepts and discourses, such as ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy.’”⁷⁶

But despite his wide popular support, Khatami’s efforts were “obstructed by hard-liners within and a hostile United States without.”⁷⁷ The president’s domestic opponents charged that he conceded too much to the West, which forced Khatami to emphasize that his government’s “conciliatory approach to foreign policy did not mean that it would be prepared to compromise the dignity, wisdom, and interests of the Iranian nation.”⁷⁸ Still, his policies permitted public debates about issues like women’s rights and human rights,⁷⁹ marked progress by Iranian standards.

Khatami’s presidency could have set Iran off on a drastically different path than the one eventually taken. In the early 2000s, few Iranian politicians categorically rejected improved relations with the West.⁸⁰ However, with the White House bent on regime change in Iran and principally opposed to negotiations with a proven sponsor of terrorism, Khatami faced an uphill battle. With Washington rebuffing his overtures the president was left at the mercy of the conservative faction of Iran’s ruling elite, which accused him of “submitting to Western pressures and . . . making real concessions in exchange for mere promises.”⁸¹ Not even when Khatami’s re-election in 2001 coincided with joint US–Iranian interests in Afghanistan and Iraq were the two countries able to advance their relationship. This was due in part to American neo-conservatives’ insistence on including Iran in President Bush’s “axis of evil.” The stigmatizing label reduced Khatami’s clout at home, and hence his ability to negotiate abroad.⁸²

After witnessing his preferred candidates fall in both the 1997 and 2001 presidential elections, Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, finally found himself on the winning side when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected Iran’s sixth president in 2005. Unlike his predecessor, Ahmadinejad assumed

⁷² Bakhash 2003; Ehteshami and Zweiri 2007: 5–6.

⁷³ Keshavarzian 2005: 64. See also Behrooz (2012: 382).

⁷⁴ Fadaee 2012: 77.

⁷⁵ Fadaee 2012: 81.

⁷⁶ Fadaee 2012: 81.

⁷⁷ Ehteshami et al. 2013: 234.

⁷⁸ Pirseyedi 2013: 62. See also Tazmani (2012: 249).

⁷⁹ Osanloo 2013: 139.

⁸⁰ Esfandiari 2003: 128.

⁸¹ Hunter 2010: 93.

⁸² Poulson 2009: 27.

a confrontational stance toward the United States and the West.⁸³ Even more disconcerting for Iran's democratic forces, Ahmadinejad reversed Khatami's reforms and labeled "civil society a Trojan horse, and a US-sponsored project for Velvet Revolution."⁸⁴ New directives compelled domestic organizations to register with the authorities only to see their registrations summarily rejected. Harassment of those willing to question the status quo became increasingly commonplace.⁸⁵

With so little political space available for civil society actors, it is perhaps not surprising that the Iranian reform movement that came to the world's attention in 2009 is largely elite-led. Unlike in pre-revolutionary Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt, the driving force behind Iran's pro-democracy movement has been composed of members of the Iranian government. For instance, the three leaders of the 2009 Green Movement—Khatami, Mir Hossein Mousavi, and Mehdi Karroubi—are all former high-ranking politicians, having served as president, prime minister, and speaker of the parliament respectively.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, a vibrant civil society has been, and remains, largely absent. Mass protest did not vanish after 1979—indeed, students rose in response to government excesses in both 1999 and 2002⁸⁷—but in contrast to Egypt and Tunisia Western pressure on Middle Eastern leaders to expand the space available for civil society organizations following the 9/11 attacks was ineffective in Iran.

Limited political space has, however, not dissuaded Iranian activists from embracing the human rights discourse. In fact, a rights narrative has been present in Iran ever since the days of the revolution. In the months following the ousting of the shah, Iranians repeatedly took to the streets in protest of the new regime's suspension of some of the rights that had existed under the shah, in particular the rather extensive women's rights.⁸⁸ In a manner that has since become commonplace in Iran, "the protestors, who held up signs favoring 'equality' and 'women's rights,' were dubbed Western puppets and attacked."⁸⁹ A pattern of associating the "language of rights with Western excesses and a threat of imperialism"⁹⁰ has thus been established, and the rights discourse that had helped the revolution succeed was effectively relegated to the dustbin. Although Khatami resuscitated the notion of human rights during his presidency,⁹¹ Ahmadinejad countered by reviving the practice of associating rights with Western

⁸³ Seliktar 2012: 162–63.

⁸⁴ Fadaee 2012: 86. For a comparison of civil society under the Khatami and Ahmadinejad administrations, see Rivetti (2013).

⁸⁵ Fadaee 2012: 86. ⁸⁶ Tezcür 2013: 204–05.

⁸⁷ Boroumand and Boroumand 2003: 131; Jahanbegloo 2003: 155.

⁸⁸ Osanloo 2013: 136.

⁸⁹ Osanloo 2013: 136.

⁹⁰ Osanloo 2013: 136.

⁹¹ Osanloo 2013: 138–39.

imperialism. Still, activists have referred to Article 27 of the Iranian constitution that permits peaceful protest,⁹² while charging that the government has “no regard for the provisions of the Human Rights Declaration and International Conventions.”⁹³

As Fred Halliday points out, pointing to universal values is hardly a new feature of Iranian politics. Rather, “much of the history of modern Iran has involved . . . challenging indigenous authoritarian power by invoking international standards of rights, constitutional government and accountability.”⁹⁴ But this strategy, which as we have seen was also employed by Tunisians and Egyptians in 2011 as well as by the Iranians themselves in the late 1970s, has not been successful. Unlike those regimes, the Iranian government, subjected as it is to Western sanctions and isolation, has little to lose by ignoring external calls to improve the country’s human rights situation. Whereas the shah, Ben Ali, and Mubarak all strove to display their liberal credentials to the world, Khamenei and Iran’s ruling hard-liners had little incentive to do so in 2009. Instead, they maintained their narrative, effectively linking the opposition’s quest for human rights and democracy to the imperialist West bent on fomenting unarmed revolution in Iran.

In contrast to their Egyptian and Tunisian counterparts, then, the Iranian pro-democracy movement’s embrace of the human rights narrative did not result in leverage against the state. On the contrary, the rights narrative has been a curse in the sense that activists have been forced to repeatedly emphasize that their commitment to Western ideals does not entail Western subservience, at times a difficult argument to make in a country targeted by sanctions. Since the Iranian leadership has for decades vilified the notion of human rights as a foreign concept and part of the West’s sinister plan to impose regime change on Iran,⁹⁵ the human rights rhetoric has more often been an obstacle than a tool as far as the liberal opposition is concerned. However, not even the Iranian government is immune to charges of hypocrisy, which is why “elections in Iran are of such importance for the democracy movement.”⁹⁶ Iran may have rejected the Western version of liberal democracy, but it does take pride in its elections, which, unlike elsewhere in the region, have occasionally brought reformists to power. It was within this discursive political context that the Green Movement of 2009 occurred and, ultimately, failed.

⁹² Holliday 2011: 146.

⁹³ Holliday 2011: 146–47.

⁹⁴ Halliday 2003: xiv.

⁹⁵ Poulson 2009: 32.

⁹⁶ Farhadpour and Mehrgan 2010: 132. See also Brumberg (2003: 149).

Libya: From Foe to Friend and Back Again

International Relations

Over the course of the last three decades of the twentieth century Libya emerged as one of the West's most persistent adversaries. Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, the Brother Leader of the sparsely populated North African republic, made opposition to Western hegemony a central element of his 42-year rule.⁹⁷ Libya's recent history as an international pariah nonetheless betrays the country's less hostile post-World War II relations with the West, and with the United States in particular.⁹⁸ The United Nations General Assembly uniquely granted Libya its independence in 1951,⁹⁹ which led both the United States and Great Britain to conclude treaties of friendship with the newly established kingdom.¹⁰⁰ These arrangements provided the new state, which at the eve of its independence ranked as the world's poorest, with much-needed aid and military assistance in exchange for extraterritorial rights, including American access to the Wheelus Field military base.¹⁰¹ In return for Cold War assets¹⁰² Washington made Libya the world's top per capita recipient of US aid.¹⁰³

Libya's early alignment with the West did not stem from ideological considerations. Rather, King Idris I's government—the independent nation's first—lacked both domestic legitimacy and military capabilities, thus making it a likely target of both internal and external attacks. Therefore, and reminiscent of the shah's reasoning in the early 1940s, "the monarchy chose to maintain a close relationship with the United States and its allies because it believed they were in the best position to guarantee Libyan security."¹⁰⁴ As a consequence of the friendly relations between the two countries, American companies found themselves in an advantageous position when massive oil and gas resources were discovered in Libya in the late 1950s, and a decade later US companies produced 90 percent of all Libyan oil.¹⁰⁵ Notwithstanding the country's new source of wealth, domestic discontent was on the rise and Idris would soon prove unable to cling to power. While visiting Turkey on formal business he was overthrown in a coup d'état on September 1, 1969.

In stark contrast to their behavior in Iran a decade and half earlier, the American and British governments refused to intervene on the king's behalf.¹⁰⁶ In fact, for the West the coup may almost have seemed an insignificant development. In order to protect himself from charges of running

⁹⁷ For Libya's pre-independence history, see Simons (1996).

⁹⁸ For details about Libya's long relationship with the United States, see St John (2002).

⁹⁹ St John 2011: 27–28.

¹⁰⁰ Deeb 2002: 385.

¹⁰¹ Ben-Halim 1998: 122–25; Khadduri 1963: 363–82.

¹⁰² Ronen 2008: 9.

¹⁰³ Vandewalle 2006: 45.

¹⁰⁴ Chorin 2008: 159.

¹⁰⁵ Chorin 2008: 158.

¹⁰⁶ St John 2011: 117–18.

the West's errands in the wake of the 1967 Six-Day War, Idris had asked both the US and the British to consider leaving Libya since many Arabs held foreign interference responsible for their countries' defeat to Israel.¹⁰⁷ While his request may have placated some of the king's domestic critics, it reduced his relevance as far as his foreign patrons were concerned. Although the coup-makers—the Free Unionist Officers led by the young and charismatic Gaddafi—embraced a revolutionary ideology based on Arab nationalism and staunch anti-imperialism, their rise to power hardly represented a drastic change in the eyes of those observing events from London and Washington. The importance of American and British cooperation in Libyan oil production was such that working relations continued even after the new regime made the US leave Wheelus Air Base in June 1970, ahead of the agreed-upon schedule.¹⁰⁸ Thus, rather than constituting a “clean break,”¹⁰⁹ the 1969 coup denoted a relatively modest change in the West's relationship with Libya, with most governments convinced that Gaddafi's pronounced anti-communism would outweigh his anti-imperialism.¹¹⁰

The West's misjudgment of the new leadership's malleability soon became evident, however, and caused severe friction between Washington and Tripoli. In the early 1970s, Washington commenced its tradition of accusing Libya of sponsoring terrorists by holding the country's leadership responsible for the assassinations of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics.¹¹¹ The White House also disapproved of Libya's predisposition to involving itself in its African neighbor's domestic affairs, its warming relations with Moscow, the nationalization of American oil assets and pursuit of oil policies contrary to US interests, the country's move towards massive militarization, and its support for radical liberation groups in Palestine, Northern Ireland, and elsewhere.¹¹² In addition, Gaddafi's categorical opposition to the Israeli–Palestinian peace process definitively put Libya on a collision course with the United States.¹¹³ American frustration was then exacerbated by the fact that its allies in the region—Egypt and Tunisia in particular—both raised concerns about Libyan foul play. Sadat accused Gaddafi of “instigating subversive activities” in Egypt, including the 1977 food riots,¹¹⁴ while Bourguiba pointed to Tripoli's involvement in the 1980 Gafsa guerrilla attack.¹¹⁵

The US government also contended that Libya had trained the militant students responsible for the 1979 seizure of the American embassy in Tehran,¹¹⁶ a charge that gained additional traction when Libyan citizens set the US

¹⁰⁷ St John 2011: 42–45.

¹⁰⁸ Chorin 2008: 160–61; St John 2011: 52; Vandewalle 2008b: 13.

¹⁰⁹ Chorin 2008: 160. ¹¹⁰ Cricco 2002. ¹¹¹ Vandewalle 2006: 132.

¹¹² Deeb 2002: 387–88; Ronen 2008: 29.

¹¹³ St John 2002: 106–15; Vandewalle 2008b: 36. ¹¹⁴ Ronen 2008: 15.

¹¹⁵ Damis 1983: 38. See Chapter 2. ¹¹⁶ St John 2011: 119.

embassy in Tripoli ablaze a few months later.¹¹⁷ Consequently, Libya's status was upgraded from nuisance to nemesis: In 1977 the US Department of Defense ranked the country in fourth place on its list of enemies—behind the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea, but ahead of Cuba¹¹⁸—and two years later Libya had the dubious honor of appearing on the US government's inaugural list of state sponsors of terrorism, a designation the country would retain until the spring of 2006.¹¹⁹

Jimmy Carter had introduced trade restrictions against Libya as early as 1978,¹²⁰ but it was during Ronald Reagan's presidency that Libya suffered the full consequences of its antagonistic relationship with the world's most powerful nation.¹²¹ In 1981, several US oil companies withdrew from Libya,¹²² and in the following year the US government imposed an embargo against Libyan oil that severely affected the country's economy. In the first quarter of 1981 Libya exported 1.7 million barrels of oil per day. By the end of the year that number was down to 600,000.¹²³ Not all the reduction was due to US policies—production phase-outs and canceled contracts played a role as well¹²⁴—but Washington undoubtedly seemed poised to achieve its objective, namely to force Libya's behavior (if not its regime) to change by bringing the country's economy to its knees.

With President Reagan considering Gaddafi "an international pariah who should be corralled if not replaced,"¹²⁵ more trade and travel restrictions soon followed.¹²⁶ To the further detriment of the two countries' relationship, the US also engaged Libya militarily in the Gulf of Sirte in August 1981, shooting down two fighter jets over what Libya claimed to be its airspace. While the incident marked the point of no return, Washington's subsequent decision to strengthen its sanctions against Libya by embargoing all crude oil products and prohibiting the export of gas and oil equipment a few months later hardly lessened Libya's sense of maltreatment.¹²⁷

A less committed leader may have succumbed to US pressure and changed course. Gaddafi, however, instead turned to the East and commenced a fruitful relationship with Moscow. In contrast to Egypt, which in the 1960s had been aligned with the socialist world before turning to the West in the early 1970s, Libya thus made the reverse journey and became a Soviet ally. But just like Egypt's turnabout, Gaddafi's alliance with the USSR had little to with an ideological commitment to the patron's values. Quite on the contrary, Gaddafi despised communism and considered it "unacceptable to

¹¹⁷ Ronen 2008: 18. For more on Libya's North African policies, see Entelis (2008).

¹¹⁸ Ronen 2008: 15. ¹¹⁹ Vandewalle 2008b: 36. ¹²⁰ Joffé 2008: 203.

¹²¹ Wright 1981–82: 13–17. ¹²² Vandewalle 2008b: 38.

¹²³ Vandewalle 2008b: 23. ¹²⁴ Vandewalle 2008b: 23. ¹²⁵ St John 2011: 127.

¹²⁶ Vandewalle 2006: 133.

¹²⁷ Stanik 2003: 51–56; Vandewalle 2006: 133; Vandewalle 2008b: 37–38.

Muslims.”¹²⁸ Hence, his alignment with the communist world was a strategic matter, especially since Libya’s neighbors had established close links with the West.¹²⁹ “In effect, Moscow became Libya’s sole foreign support and a counterweight to its enemies in the West.”¹³⁰

Well aware of Gaddafi’s anti-communism, the Soviet Union reciprocated Libya’s pragmatism. With much of the Middle East and North Africa aligned with the West, Moscow could not be overly selective about whom it allowed into its midst. Still, Libya was not a bad client to have since the country’s oil wealth gave it the ability to pay for services rendered. With Soviet help Libya embarked on a dramatic militarization effort,¹³¹ including what an alarmed Sadat referred to as “the largest ever arms deal in the history of the Middle East.”¹³² In July 1977, concerned with growing American influence in the region, Moscow backed Libya during the country’s four-day war with Egypt.¹³³ Nonetheless, the seemingly close relationship between the two countries was largely an illusion.

Perhaps due to the lack of a unifying ideology, the bond between Libya and the Soviet Union was one of convenience. While Tripoli initially served a strategic role in Moscow’s Cold War calculations, its importance diminished dramatically in the mid-1980s when the Soviet Union suddenly changed course. With Gorbachev seeking to ease tensions with the West, Gaddafi’s antics no longer filled a purpose in Soviet external relations.¹³⁴ Rather, as Yehudit Ronen perceptively notes, the USSR’s “relationship with Libya had turned from a strategic asset into a political liability.”¹³⁵

Without Soviet backing, Libya’s international position became increasingly exposed. Deprived of superpower support, Gaddafi resorted to terrorism. Even though Washington often found it difficult to prove Tripoli’s complicity in terrorist attacks, the regime made itself an obvious suspect by openly praising groups the West considered “terrorist” and even bragged about supporting them.¹³⁶ Gaddafi’s regime was held responsible for a series of bombings in 1985 and 1986, including at the Rome and Vienna airports,¹³⁷ an airplane in Karachi, and a Berlin nightclub frequented by American military personnel.¹³⁸ In response, the US attacked alleged “centers of terrorist activity and training”¹³⁹ in Benghazi and Tripoli on April 15, 1986, as part of Operation El Dorado Canyon. Gaddafi’s headquarters in the capital was one of the mission’s targets, resulting in the death of his adopted daughter and 36 others.¹⁴⁰

¹²⁸ Arnold 1996: 122.

¹²⁹ Deeb 2002: 387–88; Ronen 2008: 82.

¹³⁰ Ronen 2008: 81.

¹³¹ Ronen 2008: 84, 89.

¹³² Arnold 1996: 127. For details about the purchase, see Ronen (2008: 84).

¹³³ Ronen 2008: 85.

¹³⁴ Arnold 1996: 131; Ronen 2008: 98–99.

¹³⁵ Ronen 2008: 99.

¹³⁶ St John 2011: 126.

¹³⁷ St John 2011: 126.

¹³⁸ Ronen 2008: 31.

¹³⁹ St John 2011: 127.

¹⁴⁰ Joffé 2008: 202; Ronen 2008: 32–34.

In December 1988, Pan Am flight 103 exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, on its way from London to New York, claiming 270 lives. In September of the following year, French UTA flight 772 met the same fate over Niger, killing 171 people.¹⁴¹ The international community blamed Gaddafi's regime for both incidents, and when Libya refused to extradite the two main Lockerbie suspects the United Nations responded by adopting Resolution 748 in March 1992. The resolution imposed debilitating sanctions on Libya, including a complete ban on all flights to and from Libya, a ban against selling military equipment and aircraft components to the country, as well as a call for all countries to reduce their diplomatic presence and relations with Libya.¹⁴² Although the oil industry was largely untouched by the resolution, many countries and corporations took it upon themselves to limit their dealings with Libya.¹⁴³ The country continued to reap considerable success on the oil market as its European partners refused to heed American calls for a joint embargo,¹⁴⁴ but when dropping oil prices in the mid-1990s exacerbated the sanctions' effects the Libyan government felt forced to find a way to end them. After considerable back-room negotiations,¹⁴⁵ Libya in April 1999 transferred the two Lockerbie suspects into UN custody to stand trial in the Netherlands under Scottish law. In return for Libya's cooperation the UN suspended its sanctions against the country.¹⁴⁶

The United States, however, maintained its unilateral sanctions.¹⁴⁷ Only when Libya agreed to compensate the families of the Lockerbie victims with an unprecedented \$10 million per family¹⁴⁸ and the 9/11 terrorist attacks suddenly provided the two governments with a common enemy—Islamic extremism¹⁴⁹—did Gaddafi's path to American rehabilitation begin to crystallize.¹⁵⁰ And when Washington used Saddam Hussein's alleged pursuit of weapons of mass destruction to justify its invasion of Iraq in 2003, Gaddafi saw the writing on the wall. In December of that year Libya announced that it would voluntarily surrender its unconventional weapons and allow the international community to witness the process up close.¹⁵¹ The last formal obstacle to Libyan reintegration had thus been eliminated,¹⁵² and in February 2004 the United States began to dismantle its sanctions regime against the country.¹⁵³ On May 15, 2006, Libya was finally removed from the state sponsors of terrorism list that legally prevented the US government from lifting its

¹⁴¹ St John 2011: 128.

¹⁴² Deeb 2002: 377–78; United Nations 1992a, 1992b; Vandewalle 2008b: 39.

¹⁴³ Deeb 2002: 377–88; Ronen 2008: 49; St John 2011: 129; Vandewalle 2008b: 39.

¹⁴⁴ Deeb 2002: 389; St John 2011: 134. ¹⁴⁵ Vandewalle 2008a: 219.

¹⁴⁶ St John 2011: 130. ¹⁴⁷ St John 2011: 130. ¹⁴⁸ Koppel and Labott 2002.

¹⁴⁹ St John 2011: 139. ¹⁵⁰ Pargeter 2008: 99.

¹⁵¹ Zoubir 2009: 271–73; St John 2008: 138. ¹⁵² Vandewalle 2008a: 218–23.

¹⁵³ Joffé 2008: 205; Vandewalle 2006: 183.

last remaining sanctions,¹⁵⁴ and on November 20, 2008, Gene Cretz became the first US ambassador to Libya in more than 35 years.¹⁵⁵

Domestic Politics

Libya's shifting international fortunes have had a tremendous impact on the country's domestic political development. Whereas Tunisia and Egypt rhetorically embraced the West's commitment to human rights and democracy, Libya adopted "the socio-economic and cultural interpretation of human rights as understood by the Eastern bloc,"¹⁵⁶ emphasizing the individual's right to housing, education, and healthcare. While Egypt and Tunisia found it difficult to control human rights organizations pressing for civil and political freedoms, Libya therefore developed in a very different direction and "with the exception of self-determination, civil and political rights received no attention and were not an issue in the building of the country between 1969 and 1985."¹⁵⁷ It is noteworthy that this was the time period in which human rights became a global notion, yet Libya, due to its alienation from the West and its ideologies, remained unaffected by the human rights revolution.

Until the late 1980s, Gaddafi's bouts with Washington did not impact the regime negatively at home. On the contrary, it "skillfully exploited the confrontation with the West for its own purpose."¹⁵⁸ Gaddafi's resolve made him a hero to many Libyans, and even those who disagreed with him had to admire his audacity. Reagan had hoped that international pressure on the Libyan government would force it to liberalize, but the most direct consequence of international isolation was that "Libya experienced an increase in repression and authoritarian rule at the expense of human rights, and the sanctions provided an excuse for the increasing level of repression inside the country."¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, US aggression often made the Libyan people rally behind its leader.¹⁶⁰ The David versus Goliath narrative worked to Gaddafi's advantage as long as the world was bipolar and offered an alternative to Western liberalism. However, Gorbachev's rise and his advocacy of *glasnost* and *perestroika* deprived Libya of its patron and drastically altered its position on the international stage. As Giacomina De Bona notes,

the Libyan regime was persuaded to introduce the new discourse on human rights by the more profound normative changes that were taking place at the international level, and the regime's effort was aimed at catching up with the emerging Western international society that had started to materialize in 1988.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch 2009a: 14; Ronen 2008: 71.

¹⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch 2009a: 14; St John 2011: 140. ¹⁵⁶ De Bona 2013: 45.

¹⁵⁷ De Bona 2013: 64. ¹⁵⁸ Vandewalle 2008b: 37.

¹⁵⁹ De Bona 2013: 91. See also Orman (1987). ¹⁶⁰ Vandewalle 2008b: 37.

¹⁶¹ De Bona 2013: 71–72.

As the Soviet Union began to transform, so did the world, and Libya could hardly afford to be the only static actor in the story.

But Gaddafi was unwilling to unconditionally surrender to the enemy's ideology. Rather than simply accepting that the West's view of human rights had prevailed over that of the Eastern bloc,¹⁶² the Leader, characteristically, formulated his own interpretation. In June 1988, Gaddafi bestowed upon his people "The Great Green Charter of Human Rights in the Era of the Masses," which provided Libyans with additional rights, including that of private property. Still, the absence of provisions for civil and political rights meant that the Charter fell considerably short of international standards.¹⁶³ For instance, it said nothing about the freedoms of peaceful assembly (other than for professional purposes), speech, or conscience, and failed to protect citizens from judicial overreaches by the government and its security agencies.¹⁶⁴ Gaddafi reasoned that since Libya was a direct democracy, "the rules of opposition and of free expression did not apply."¹⁶⁵ In contrast to Tunisia and Egypt, the absence of an at least nominally liberal context meant that prospective human rights-based opposition groups were deprived of political opportunities for mobilization and therefore failed to emerge in Libya.

The international sanctions regime of the 1990s did not improve Libya's political environment—the human rights situation remained abysmal throughout the decade¹⁶⁶—but as noted above, it eventually caused enough economic hardship for the regime to re-evaluate its foreign policy. When Libyan gestures caused the UN to lift its sanctions, Washington scrambled for reasons to justify its uncompromising stance and therefore began to add "concerns about Libya's poor human rights record [and] lack of democratic institutions"¹⁶⁷ to its longstanding circumspection over Libya's possession of weapons of mass destruction. Having already jumped through numerous hoops to rehabilitate his regime, Gaddafi may have reasoned that correcting the country's human rights record was a relatively small additional price to pay. Consequently, he enacted beautifying reforms to show that Libya was not the human rights offender its reputation suggested, but rather a worthy member of the international community. For instance, in 2002, "to lend credibility to this 'new era' of improved civil and democratic rights—which, he was aware, was important to the United States—Tripoli released sixty-five Libyans who had been imprisoned for 'political transgressions' since the 1980s."¹⁶⁸

Liberalization progressed slowly during the country's period of re-engagement with the world, and political change "remained elusive and

¹⁶² Forsythe 2012: 8.

¹⁶³ Pargeter 2012: 149.

¹⁶⁴ Mayer 1995: 123–31.

¹⁶⁵ Vandewalle 2008b: 45.

¹⁶⁶ St John 2002: 62.

¹⁶⁷ St John 2008a: 59.

¹⁶⁸ Ronen 2008: 61.

illusory.”¹⁶⁹ Crucially, while engaging in an internationalized rhetoric about the importance of human rights and democracy, “the Libyan authorities did not pursue the institutionalization of norms into domestic law or in the ensuing domestic practices to any meaningful extent.”¹⁷⁰ Some changes occurred, but they were largely cosmetic. As early as 2004, police officers began to receive human rights-related training,¹⁷¹ and in March 2006 the General People’s Committee established a human rights office.¹⁷² Human Rights Watch concluded in a 2009 report that although measures such as these may have an impact on the country’s human rights situation, more than anything “it shows awareness on the part of the General People’s Committee for Public Security of the need to have some form of human rights program on display.”¹⁷³ In other words, the regime did what it had to in order to satisfy the international community’s moderate expectations, but little more. With Libya lacking a tradition of human rights promotion, many of its citizens “implicitly [accepted a] trade-off between limited social and political freedom and a relatively high standard of living.”¹⁷⁴

To compound the regime’s lack of interest in introducing reforms, there existed little political will among external actors to pressure Libya towards democratization since the West was still content to have brought the most problematic of North African countries into its midst. Any liberalization pressure would therefore have to come from domestic opposition groups. However, decades of Western animosity had not only strengthened the regime’s hand in domestic politics by boosting its image, but had also weakened potential challengers by implicitly placing them in the foreign aggressor’s camp and justifying the prohibition of oppositional activities for the duration of Gaddafi’s rule.¹⁷⁵ Although small improvements occurred in the last few years of his reign,¹⁷⁶ “civil society activity has been even more restricted in Libya than in other countries of the region.”¹⁷⁷ As a result of the regime’s harsh treatment of dissidents, virtually all opposition groups, including those operating from abroad, were committed to violent tactics¹⁷⁸ and overwhelmingly organized along Islamist or tribal lines.¹⁷⁹ In short, they were forced to either combat the regime militarily in Libya or nonviolently from abroad, both of which turned out to be blunt tools against an internationally isolated and well-armed autocratic regime.

As in Egypt and Tunisia, Islamist groups continued to challenge the regime in the 1990s, but unshielded by nonexistent human rights organizations they proved no match for the government. In contrast to Mubarak and Ben Ali,

¹⁶⁹ Blanchard 2012: 41. See also Obeidi (2008: 124). ¹⁷⁰ De Bona 2013: 45.

¹⁷¹ Human Rights Watch 2009a: 19. ¹⁷² St John 2011: 79.

¹⁷³ Human Rights Watch 2009a: 19. ¹⁷⁴ St John 2002: 67.

¹⁷⁵ Blanchard 2012: 60. ¹⁷⁶ St John 2011: 80. ¹⁷⁷ Pargeter 2008: 90.

¹⁷⁸ Vandewalle 2008b: 32. ¹⁷⁹ St John 2011: 73.

Gaddafi could leverage his feud with the West against his Islamists opponents. In televised interviews, the Leader accused his Islamist opponents of being stooges of the West, trained and funded by the CIA to fight in Afghanistan during the Cold War, and now used to overthrow his regime.¹⁸⁰ Justifying relentless repression as necessary to secure the nation from foreign interference, “by the end of the 1990s, Qadhafi had succeeded in virtually annihilating all forms of organized opposition in Libya.”¹⁸¹ For instance, the government neutralized the Muslim Brotherhood through a massive crackdown in 1998. The organization’s General Guide and his deputy received death sentences in 2002 while another thirty-seven Brothers received life sentences.¹⁸² Unsurprisingly, “the movement never recovered from this blow.”¹⁸³

Libya’s isolation from the West spared it the expectation of protecting human rights and consequently prevented the emergence of domestic human rights organizations.¹⁸⁴ Instead, as late as 2004, “human rights organisations continued to be prevented from operating, with the exception of the Human Rights Society of the Qaddhafi International Foundation for Charitable Associations,”¹⁸⁵ which, as the name suggests, was hardly free of government ties. Still, in 2005, with Libya on its way toward international reintegration, various opposition groups called the first meeting of the “National Libyan Opposition Conference.” Perhaps responding to the West’s call for the region’s democratization, moderate opposition groups gathered in London to form a transitional government that rejected armed struggle and called on the international community to hold the Gaddafi regime responsible for crimes against humanity. The conference ultimately proved to be a disappointment, largely due to the global community’s unwillingness to jeopardize Libya’s rehabilitation.¹⁸⁶

Even on the rare occasions when the regime did introduce reforms that made activism feasible, the few organizations that did rise to the surface turned out to be ineffective because of “the popular perception that any organization permitted by the regime is an auxiliary of the governmental apparatus and not to be trusted.”¹⁸⁷ Consequently, Human Rights Watch stated plainly in 2009 that “Libya has no independent nongovernmental organizations.”¹⁸⁸ As part of the regime’s ongoing effort to improve its international image, it proposed a series of new laws intended to remedy some of its human rights shortcomings, but even the proposed 2009 penal code continued to make it a crime to establish organizations that are “against the Jamahariya¹⁸⁹ system” or “threatening to its popular authority.”¹⁹⁰ At the time of the outbreak of the

¹⁸⁰ Pargeter 2008: 98.

¹⁸¹ Pargeter 2008: 99.

¹⁸² Pargeter 2008: 91–92.

¹⁸³ Pargeter 2008: 92.

¹⁸⁴ See Chapter 4.

¹⁸⁵ De Bona 2013: 121.

¹⁸⁶ De Bona 2013: 134.

¹⁸⁷ St John 2008: 146.

¹⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch 2009a: 28.

¹⁸⁹ Libya’s peculiar system of direct democracy, “the rule of the masses.”

¹⁹⁰ Qtd. in Human Rights Watch 2009a: 30.

2011 unrest, Libya was arguably more independent of the West than Egypt and Tunisia had been even in the 1980s and therefore hardly constituted fertile soil for an unarmed revolution.

Syria: The Politics of Anti-Western Nationalism

International Relations

Like Iran and Libya, post-independence Syria was initially on good terms with the United States, having benefited from President Roosevelt's sympathies during its occupation by the French after World War I. In the process leading up to Syria's independence in 1946, Washington joined forces with London to convince Paris of the prudence of troop withdrawal,¹⁹¹ and then moved quickly to recognize the new state.¹⁹² But foreboding of the two countries' relationship over the next 65 years, a series of incidents complicated US-Syrian relations. First, and perhaps most importantly, American complicity in the creation of Israel strained relations with Damascus, and since 1948 the Jewish state has featured centrally in most US-Syrian disputes. According to one commentator, "no Arab people, bar the Palestinians themselves, have found it more difficult to accept the legitimacy of Israel's creation at the expense of Arab Palestine."¹⁹³ Second, concerned with communist expansion and eager to secure peace for Israel, the United States orchestrated or supported numerous coup attempts¹⁹⁴ to steer Syria in a desirable direction.¹⁹⁵ When the Syrian authorities unmasked yet another alleged US-sponsored coup attempt in 1957 the country's leadership felt compelled to align itself with Moscow¹⁹⁶ and to join with Nasser's Egypt to form the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958.¹⁹⁷

Syria's first two decades of independence were highly unstable, in large part due to Western interference. But when Hafiz al-Asad wrested power from his fellow Baath leaders in an early morning coup on November 13, 1970, and set in motion his "corrective movement," Syria gained, if nothing else, the semblance of stability.¹⁹⁸ Hafiz was a pragmatic leader who sought to maintain cordial relations with both superpowers¹⁹⁹ and similarly to Bourguiba and Sadat "initiated a brief period of economic openness in which... he encouraged joint ventures between foreign and local investors in selected sectors of the economy such as tourism and the import of agricultural machinery."²⁰⁰

¹⁹¹ Moubayed 2012: 58–69.

¹⁹² Rabil 2006: 35.

¹⁹³ Hinnebusch 2001: 139.

¹⁹⁴ Hinnebusch 2001: 145.

¹⁹⁵ Moubayed 2012: 68–87.

¹⁹⁶ Ginat 2005: 43–44; Rubin 2007: 36.

¹⁹⁷ Moubayed 2012: 175; Zisser 2001: 6.

¹⁹⁸ George 2003: 67–70; Owen 2012: 81.

¹⁹⁹ Leverett 2005: 52–54; Zisser 2001: 37–38.

²⁰⁰ Owen 2012: 81.

As a result, relations with the United States improved in the mid-1970s with Hafiz re-evaluating his country's ties to the Soviet Union.

Between 1974 and 1979 Washington provided Syria with hundreds of millions of dollars in development assistance, economic support, food assistance, and even military training assistance.²⁰¹ But in the late 1970s Hafiz encountered a series of international and domestic crises. Egypt's decision to make peace with Israel and formally realign itself with the West left Syria feeling both betrayed by its former UAR partner and vulnerable to an Israeli attack.²⁰² In addition, the country's domestic quiescence ended when the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood rose to challenge Hafiz's regime, a challenge the president publicly accused Washington of fomenting.²⁰³ In response to these developments, and "driven more by necessity than choice,"²⁰⁴ the Syrian leader felt forced to re-establish close bonds to the USSR²⁰⁵ and sign a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Moscow in 1980.²⁰⁶

In 1979 the US State Department placed Syria on its inaugural list of "state sponsors of terrorism,"²⁰⁷ largely due to the country's involvement in Lebanon. To complicate matters further, Ronald Reagan "reoriented U.S. policy toward Lebanon, adopting a position that all foreign forces, including Syrian troops, should be removed from Lebanon."²⁰⁸ The two countries' enmity "reached an unprecedented low point" as a result of direct confrontations in Lebanon in 1983–84.²⁰⁹ American vessels and planes attacked Syrian troops on Mount Lebanon in the summer of 1983, while Syria allegedly assisted Hezbollah in its attacks on the American embassy in Beirut in April and on marine barracks in October of that year.²¹⁰ These events, coupled with American charges that senior members of the Syrian state were directly involved in terrorist acts against Western and Israeli targets, intensified the hostility between the two countries.²¹¹ In this context Soviet backing assumed extreme importance, especially from the mid-1980s when Washington "took a stronger stand against all those whom it suspected of involvement in terrorist acts against American targets."²¹² Libya's role in the April 1986 Hindawi affair—a failed attempt to bomb a London–Tel Aviv El Al flight—made US military attacks a real possibility and Soviet military backing essential.²¹³

Syria and the Soviet Union had been on good terms at least since the mid-1950s when Damascus began to gravitate toward Egypt and its Communist bloc allies. In addition to the arms Syria felt it needed to achieve strategic parity with Israel,²¹⁴ Moscow and its satellites provided the country

²⁰¹ Prados 2008: 118.

²⁰² Zisser 2001: 45.

²⁰³ Leverett 2005: 54.

²⁰⁴ Lesch 2012: 136.

²⁰⁵ Stacher 2012: 71.

²⁰⁶ Hinnebusch 2001: 149–50; Leverett 2005: 54.

²⁰⁷ Prados 2008: 117.

²⁰⁸ Leverett 2005: 54.

²⁰⁹ Zisser 2001: 41.

²¹⁰ Lesch 2005: 101.

²¹¹ Zisser 2001: 41–42.

²¹² Zisser 2001: 42.

²¹³ Lesch 2005: 101.

²¹⁴ Moubayed 2012: 127; Ryan 2002: 242.

with political, military, and economic aid.²¹⁵ Although Soviet–Syrian relations fluctuated somewhat over the years, “Damascus was more often than not allied with, and supported by, Moscow.”²¹⁶ But like his counterparts in Iran and Libya, Hafiz soon had to come to terms with Gorbachev’s leadership and Moscow’s new international objectives. In 1986 the Kremlin began to normalize relations with Tel Aviv, and within two years Israel and the Soviet Union had consulates in each other’s capitals.²¹⁷ For Damascus, the rapid transformation of the USSR was so troubling that one official later suggested that Syrians “regret the Soviet collapse more than the Russians do.”²¹⁸

The fall of the Communist bloc forced Hafiz to revise Syria’s foreign policy. In need of economic support that was no longer forthcoming from the East, Syria exploited the 1990–91 Gulf War to improve its relations with the West—and with the United States in particular—by committing troops to the war effort.²¹⁹ Since Saddam Hussein’s regime had been hostile to Syria ever since Damascus had opted to support Iran in the two countries’ war, the domestic political cost of joining a Western war against a fellow Arab country was manageable.²²⁰ Around the same time Syria also began to reconsider its longstanding opposition to the Arab–Israeli peace process, not because Hafiz had a sudden change of mind about the Jewish state, but rather because the absence of Soviet support made “a militant policy toward Israel unacceptably risky and futile.”²²¹

Notwithstanding these developments Syria and the US failed to make real progress in their relationship, in large part because the Baath leadership was “careful to adhere, at least publicly, to its ideological commitment to the patently anti-West worldview that had been its guiding principle since it seized power in Damascus in the early 1960s.”²²² Unsurprisingly, that discourse, which included both anti-American and anti-Israeli battle cries, was not appreciated in Washington. Thus, despite President Clinton’s exertions to bring Syria around, Congress “throughout the 1990s curbed any effort or initiative by the administration.”²²³ Washington’s refusal to remove Syria from its list of state sponsors of terrorism was particularly damning since it meant that the country was ineligible for American aid and under restrictive trade sanctions.²²⁴ Although Syria in 1996 narrowly avoided inclusion in what therefore only became the Iran–Libya Sanctions Act,²²⁵ the country’s failure to make peace with Israel and rid itself of the terrorist label meant that Hafiz upon his death in the summer of 2000 passed not only power to his son, but also a highly combustible relationship with the West.²²⁶

²¹⁵ Zisser 2001: 45. ²¹⁶ Lesch 2012: 136. ²¹⁷ Zisser 2001: 43.

²¹⁸ Zisser 2001: 37. See also Quilliam (1999: 158–59). ²¹⁹ Armanazi 1993: 112–15.

²²⁰ Ryan 2002: 244; Ziadeh 2011: 125; Zisser 2001: 52–59. ²²¹ Hinnebusch 2001: 103.

²²² Zisser 2001: 69. ²²³ Zisser 2001: 75.

²²⁴ Hinnebusch 2001: 161; Prados 2008: 110. ²²⁵ Lesch 2005: 104.

²²⁶ Zisser 2001: 76.

Bashar al-Asad assumed power “under a modicum of goodwill”²²⁷ with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright describing him as a “reformer.”²²⁸ After the September 11 attacks the new president sent a cable to the White House in which he “condemned the terrorist attacks that targeted innocent civilians and vital centers in the United States.”²²⁹ In it he also called for “international cooperation to eradicate all forms of terrorism and guarantee the protection of basic human rights, notably the right of humans to live in security and peace wherever they are.”²³⁰ In the following months Syria provided Washington with intelligence on al-Qaeda, an organization that is hostile to the secular regime in Damascus and therefore a mutual enemy of Syria and the United States.²³¹

But the honeymoon was not to last. Notwithstanding Bashar’s gestures the Bush administration placed Syria in the villain camp in its global war on terror. For the White House, opposing al-Qaeda was not sufficient as long as Damascus supported terrorist-stamped organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas²³² and maintained close links with fellow terrorist states Iran and North Korea, both of which were members of Bush’s infamous Axis of Evil.²³³ On May 6, 2002, Undersecretary of State, John Bolton, concretized Syria’s enemy status by labeling the country, along with Libya and Cuba, a “rogue state” for sponsoring international terrorism and pursuing weapons of mass destruction.²³⁴ If slapping the rogue state label on Damascus was not enough to set the two countries’ relationship back significantly, then Syria’s determination to complicate the US war effort in Iraq certainly was.

Since 1997 Syria’s had for economic reasons improved its relationship with Iraq and lucratively helped Baghdad violate the terms of its “oil for food program.”²³⁵ With most of its neighbors already qualifying as American allies, Damascus clearly did not wish to see a US-friendly government installed on its eastern border as well. To prevent this from happening, Syria “allowed Damascus Airport and the Syrian–Iraqi border to become the main gateway for the ‘Sunni insurrection’ ”²³⁶ by permitting Islamists to enter Iraq to fight against the American troops.²³⁷ Washington hardly found Syria’s behavior amusing and in 2003 retaliated by strengthening its sanctions regime against the country through the passing of the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSRA).²³⁸

Although Damascus’ rapprochement with, and interference in, Iraq represented perhaps the greatest irritant in the US–Syrian relationship, others

²²⁷ Lust-Okar 2008: 73. ²²⁸ Ajami 2012: 7. ²²⁹ Qtd. in Lesch 2005: 101.

²³⁰ Qtd. in Lesch 2005: 101. ²³¹ Prados 2008: 117; Rabinovich 2008: 344.

²³² Lesch 2012: 12. ²³³ Bush 2002. ²³⁴ Bolton 2002.

²³⁵ Ehteshami et al. 2013: 227; Eppel 1999: 222–23; George 2003: 22; Perthes 2004: 107; Rabinovich 2008: 343.

²³⁶ Rabinovich 2008: 344. ²³⁷ Khatib 2013: 28–29. ²³⁸ Lust-Okar 2008: 71.

existed as well.²³⁹ First, as already mentioned, in the context of Washington's War on Terror Syria's cooperation with terrorist-stamped anti-Israeli organizations in Lebanon and Palestine put the country "on the wrong side of the essential divide."²⁴⁰ Second, Washington remained frustrated with Syria's unwillingness to make progress in its peace negotiations with Israel.²⁴¹ Third, Syria maintained close relations with Iran, the United States' other nemesis in the region.²⁴² Still, it was Damascus' involvement in Lebanon that eventually brought it to a stand-off with the United States and France. From the floor of the UN Security Council the two countries called on Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon and cease its interference in Lebanese politics,²⁴³ while President Bush demanded in his 2005 State of the Union Address that the Syrian government "end all support for terror and open the door to freedom."²⁴⁴ The crisis culminated in February 2005 with the alleged Syrian-ordered assassination of Rafiq Hariri, a billionaire businessman, former prime minister, and main rival of Syria's ally in Lebanon, Prime Minister Emile Lahoud. In response, outraged Lebanese citizens took to the streets in the "Cedar Revolution" and forced Syrian troops to withdraw from the country. Within months the US and Syria had recalled their respective ambassadors from each other's capitals.²⁴⁵

In the 2006 Foreign Operations Appropriations Act, Congress renewed existing bans on aid to Syria²⁴⁶ and mandated that no less than \$6,550,000 be earmarked for democracy promotion programs in Syria and Iran.²⁴⁷ Contrary to its stated intentions, Congress' actions likely strengthened the regime's hand: Since Syria has long faced comprehensive US sanctions, "both economic and political relations with the United States are minimal"²⁴⁸ and hence of limited importance to Damascus. While US democracy promotion may have strengthened Syrian civil society organizations financially, Western funding came at the expense of reduced legitimacy with the state labeling pro-democracy organizations Western lackeys.²⁴⁹

Compared to its antagonism with the United States, Syria's relationship with Europe has historically been less contentious. Following the country's separation from the Soviet Union in the early 1990s "Syrian relations with the countries of the European Union showed marked improvement,"²⁵⁰ and the EU soon emerged as "Syria's most important trading partner."²⁵¹ However, the country's bonds with Europe have been limited to trade as the

²³⁹ Haykal 2012: xi; Ma'oz 2004: 158–59; Owen 2012: 86.

²⁴⁰ Rabinovich 2008: 344. See also Ajami (2012: 52). ²⁴¹ Lust-Okar 2008: 74.

²⁴² Goodarzi 2006: 3; Rabinovich 2008: 345; Ryan 2002: 242.

²⁴³ Lust-Okar 2008: 75. For a treatise on the Syria–Lebanon relationship, see Chaitani (2007).

²⁴⁴ Bush 2005b. ²⁴⁵ Lesch 2012: 20; Lust-Okar 2008: 75; Prados 2008: 114–15.

²⁴⁶ Lust-Okar 2008: 74–75. ²⁴⁷ Prados 2008: 120. ²⁴⁸ Lust-Okar 2008: 74–75.

²⁴⁹ Lesch 2012: 89. ²⁵⁰ Zisser 2001: 77. ²⁵¹ Perthes 2004: 101.

European Parliament on several occasions “prevented the approval of loans and grants to Syria on grounds of violations of human right.”²⁵² Similarly, and in stark contrast to Tunisia and Egypt, Syria proved unable to put an Association Agreement in place²⁵³ due to some EU member countries’ “political concerns.”²⁵⁴ European criticism increased in the wake of the Hariri assassination,²⁵⁵ and any positive goodwill Europe might have enjoyed in Damascus up to that point quickly evaporated as Syria interpreted the Union’s concerns as the result of American prodding. Consequently, Syria “came to see the EU as a conduit of rather than buffer against U.S. pressures.”²⁵⁶

Even though its relations with the West began to improve slightly with the elections of Barack Obama and Nicolas Sarkozy, Syria found itself largely isolated and still burdened by Western sanctions at the outbreak of the 2011 unrest. The Obama administration exerted substantial efforts to improve relations with Damascus in 2009 and 2010 through several high-level meetings. John Kerry, then-chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, reportedly met with Bashar five times between 2009 and the outbreak of the revolution. However, relations that had been repeatedly damaged over three decades could not be repaired overnight.²⁵⁷ In particular, “the legacy of the Bush administration resulted in tremendous distrust on both sides of the equation.”²⁵⁸

Domestic Politics

Similarly to the other countries examined in this book, Syria exhibits a strong link between its international relations and domestic politics. As in Islamic Iran and Libya, Western hostility has provided the regime with virtually unlimited elasticity when it comes to dealing with opposition groups. Indeed, “regime legitimization depended on Syria’s nationalist defiance of Israel and its Western backers, with the struggle over Palestine and the Golan legitimizing the construction of a national security state.”²⁵⁹ Due to its “very precarious domestic legitimacy...the bottom line was that no nationalist regime—especially an Alawi-dominated one—could, without grave risk, deviate from mainstream opinion in dealing with Israel. If Syria’s government and public opinion can be said to approach a consensus on any issue it is over Israel.”²⁶⁰

While Cairo and Tunis were held hostage to their rhetorical embrace of human rights and democracy, Damascus, like Tripoli and Islamic Tehran, was similarly trapped by its ardent anti-Western discourse. During the Cold War the Soviet presence helped shield anti-Western regimes from direct attacks,

²⁵² Zisser 2001: 77. ²⁵³ Berg 2011: 98. ²⁵⁴ Lesch 2012: 60.

²⁵⁵ Ehteshami et al. 2013: 230. ²⁵⁶ Ehteshami et al. 2013: 230.

²⁵⁷ Lesch 2012: 30, 39. ²⁵⁸ Lesch 2012: 30. ²⁵⁹ Ehteshami et al. 2013: 226.

²⁶⁰ Hinnebusch 2001: 148.

allowing leaders like Hafiz to oppose the United States at a relatively low cost. However, once Moscow no longer possessed either the means or the will to maintain old arrangements, countries like Syria found themselves in a bind: Having spent decades demonizing the West in order to gain domestic legitimacy, reconciliation with the enemy could only occur at an enormous domestic price in the nationalistic credentials upon which the regime was built. Therefore, by the late 1990s friendly relations with the West and domestic legitimacy approached mutual exclusivity.

Rather than a liability then, Syria's antagonistic relationship with the West has constituted a trump. In contrast to their counterparts in Egypt and Tunisia, Syrian leaders "officially justified [the lack of political freedoms] on the basis that the civil society movement was destabilizing the country and serving the interests of 'foreign powers.'"²⁶¹ Western hostility has been the regime's most powerful domestic argument, allowing it

to capitalize on the regional and international pressures to foster support on the street. Syrians are widely skeptical of U.S. intentions, and they generally believe that the United States and Europe are not serious about promoting democracy and human rights in Syria. Thus, many see international pressure on the Syrian regime as a manifestation of hostility toward all Syrians, and indeed, the Arab world more generally.²⁶²

This dynamic became particularly clear in the wake of Syria's humiliating withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. As Washington increased its pressure on Bashar after the Hariri assassination, "Bashar orchestrated a nationalistic response that reinforced the portrayal of internal regime critics as accomplices of the West [and] gave the regime something of a green light to crack down on civil society and democracy activists."²⁶³ Consequently, because of poor US-Syrian relations, rather than bolstering civil society "Washington's efforts to support the prodemocratic opposition have instead undermined the opposition's legitimacy,"²⁶⁴ and in the face of international pressures many Syrians have rallied behind their leader.²⁶⁵ The regime was even able to capitalize on its Lebanese set-back by demanding complete unity within its ranks.²⁶⁶

If the regime has benefited from foreign animosity, the same certainly cannot be said of the opposition. The regime's ability to dominate the political stage, repeatedly justified on the bases of external threats, has meant that "civil society, and particularly organizations that focus on human and political rights, is not nearly as expansive, varied, or entrenched" as they were in Egypt or Tunisia.²⁶⁷ Although Syria's constitution and ratification of various

²⁶¹ Human Rights Watch 2007: 11. ²⁶² Lust-Okar 2008: 86.

²⁶³ Lesch 2012: 15. ²⁶⁴ Lust-Okar 2008: 89.

²⁶⁵ Lesch 2012: 15; Lust-Okar 2008: 86. ²⁶⁶ Ehteshami et al. 2013: 228.

²⁶⁷ Stacher 2012: 13.

human rights agreements seem to guarantee basic political freedoms, reality suggests otherwise.²⁶⁸ Still, at certain points in Syria's history mobilization efforts against the state have occurred. Tellingly, these moments have coincided with regime attempts to foster a better relationship with the West.

In 1976, when Damascus and Washington were on relatively good terms, members of the Syrian Lawyers Union established a human rights committee with the purpose of documenting abuses in the country. The committee remained active for the next few years before the regime shut it down in early 1980—roughly coinciding with the decline of relations with Washington—after the activist lawyers called for a one-day strike in protest of the state of emergency and the lack of judicial independence.²⁶⁹ The Lawyers Union was but one member of a larger coalition of organizations pressuring the government nonviolently, but after the regime resorted to brutal repression of the movement, a parallel movement, this one led by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and less committed to civil resistance, came to the fore. The result was a prolonged and violent showdown with the government that culminated in the February 1982 Hama massacre. An estimated 10,000–20,000 people, many of them civilians, died in the incident that effectively put an end to the Brotherhood's uprising.²⁷⁰

The human rights movement's resurfacing in December 1989 coincided with important shifts in Syria's external relations. Presumably inspired by events in Eastern Europe a number of activists created a new advocacy group, the Committees for the Defense of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria (CDF).²⁷¹ Operating principally from abroad, the CDF published reports and statements for almost two years until the government clamped down on the organization in late 1991 and early 1992. The ensuing arrests and sentencing of several activists to long prison terms caused the nascent movement to collapse.²⁷² Unlike their counterparts in Egypt and Tunisia, Syria's human rights activists found themselves completely at the regime's mercy. Without well-established, friendly relations with the West to maintain, the Syrian regime simply squashed its critics.

The third coming of Syria's civil society coincided with Bashar's ascension to power in July 2000. Like both Mubarak and Ben Ali before him, Bashar sought to consolidate power through populism designed to pacify within-regime opponents. The "Damascus spring" lasted for roughly eight months and included wide-reaching liberalization measures, including prisoner amnesties, relaxation of press restrictions, and the emergence of

²⁶⁸ George 2003: 75; Human Rights Watch 2007: 21, 37.

²⁶⁹ George 2003: 103–04; Human Rights Watch 2007: 8.

²⁷⁰ Hinnebusch 2001: 93–101; Lesch 2012: 7; van Dam 1996: 115–16; Zisser 2001: 10.

²⁷¹ Human Rights Watch 2007: 8.

²⁷² Human Rights Watch 2007: 8–9.

political forums and salons in which dissent was tolerated.²⁷³ In response to these openings Syria witnessed the re-emergence of the CDF and the establishment of new human rights groups, including the Syrian Human Rights Association (SHRA) and the Arab Organization for Human Rights–Syria.²⁷⁴ The regime remained tolerant until the second of two widely circulated documents, the January 2001 “Statement of 1,000” (the first document, “The Statement of 99” had been published in late September 2000)²⁷⁵ called for political reforms, including “more space for civil society activities and passage of a democratic election law.”²⁷⁶ Crucially, the document “explicitly questioned the lead role of the Ba’ath Party.”²⁷⁷ These pleas exceeded what the government was prepared to accept and brought the “Damascus spring” to its abrupt end. Mockingly responding to the opposition’s demands, Syrian Information Minister Adnan Omran asserted that “civil society was ‘an American term’” and that Syrian pro-democracy activists “were backed by foreign embassies which ‘provided financial benefits and privileges.’”²⁷⁸

Accusing pro-democracy activists of being Western agents worked almost to perfection since “it was easy for the regime to paint the opposition inside and outside of the country as tools of the imperialists because this sort of thing was commonplace in Syria during the first couple of decades after independence.”²⁷⁹ Denouncing the opposition on these grounds does not seem to go out of style. In 2005, 250 Syrian dissidents signed the “Damascus Declaration for National Change” (or “Damascus Declaration” for short) in which they called for a democratic transition. However, their initiative amounted to little with the government depicting the signatories as “willing accomplices of those countries that were trying to secure the downfall of the regime.”²⁸⁰ Within a hostile international context such as Syria’s, liberal-democratic protagonists face a near-unsolvable dilemma: Limit regime criticism and lose legitimacy among reform-minded countrymen, or challenge the government and lose that very same legitimacy on the basis of being imperialist agents funded by Washington. Partly as a result of its hostile international relations Syria’s is a “particularly unequal relation of power between state and civil society” as compared to other countries in the region.²⁸¹ It was in this complex environment that the nonviolent Syrian uprising began, and failed, in early 2011.

²⁷³ Lesch 2013: 80. ²⁷⁴ George 2003: 41; Human Rights Watch 2007: 26.

²⁷⁵ George 2003: 39–40. ²⁷⁶ Perthes 2004: 104. ²⁷⁷ George 2003: 45.

²⁷⁸ George 2003: 47. ²⁷⁹ Lesch 2013: 85. ²⁸⁰ Lesch 2012: 89.

²⁸¹ Perthes 1994: 263. Salam Kawakibi (2013) has emphasized the lack of NGO independence in Syria by arguing that the country’s civil society is in fact government organized. See also Human Rights Watch (2010).

Conclusion: Explaining Nonviolent Revolutionary Failure

To understand how the absence of an iron cage of liberalism impacts the chances of nonviolent revolutionary movements in authoritarian contexts this chapter examined Iran, Libya, and Syria's histories of international relations with the West in the decades leading up to attempts at unarmed revolution in each country. Whereas the shah, Ben Ali, and Mubarak—heads of façade democratic states—in the face of similar challenges were constrained by their rhetorical commitments to liberal values and norms, Ahmadinejad, Gaddafi, and Bashar al-Asad had few such international obligations to consider. In fact, each regime's alignment with human rights offenders like Russia and China resulted not only in the absence of an iron cage of liberalism, but also in the presence of the opposite dynamic, what we might call an anti-liberal bunker. Since the three autocrats' foreign backers were unconcerned with human rights violations and democratization, authoritarianism in Iran, Libya, and Syria did not constitute a contradiction of the countries' most important international relationships.

As a result of their hostile relationships with the democratic world, anything “Western,” including “democracy,” “freedom,” and “human rights,” became imbued with negative connotations in Iran, Libya, and Syria. Consequently, the embrace of seemingly Western ideologies and notions, not to mention the acceptance of Western support, came to constitute a serious liability for pro-democracy activists. In contrast to the governments in pre-revolutionary Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt discussed above, the three regimes analyzed in this chapter were therefore able to use the opposition's liberal narrative as ammunition against it by framing dissidents as pawns of the West. While this government strategy had been used for decades, it became particularly useful during the recent uprisings.

In Iran, efficient state repression helps explain the Green Movement's failure, but perhaps even more important were the regime's efforts to isolate the movement from external sympathizers. The government obstructed foreign journalists—present in Iran to report on the elections—from covering the protest movement by confining them to their hotels. Within days, most reporters had left the country with expired two-week visas the authorities refused to renew.²⁸² The Iranian government also pre-empted foreign involvement by framing the protest movement as a joint US–British–French effort “to foment a color/velvet revolution in Iran,” making it almost impossible for Western actors to intervene without confirming the regime's characterization

²⁸² Farhadpour and Mehrgan 2010: 130; Parsi 2012: 89; Parsi et al. 2010: 161.

of its opponents.²⁸³ Furthermore, the foreign conspiracy charge helped the regime justify its violent response.²⁸⁴

Recognizing the delicate nature of the situation, and painfully aware of how little influence his administration wielded in Tehran, President Obama responded to the post-election crisis with caution and refrained from overly harsh statements.²⁸⁵ In addition to its impotence, the West's villain status in Iran meant that American or European support would have constituted a burden for the movement. Indeed, Iranian protest leaders understood the danger of public Western encouragement and realized that "with neither trade, diplomatic relations, nor an embassy on the ground, the United States had few avenues of influence with Iran."²⁸⁶ American support was therefore—in addition to harmful—deemed to be of limited utility.

The Iranian regime's indiscriminate use of violence eventually forced Obama to express his administration's indignation.²⁸⁷ But if the president's words had any effect at all they mainly served to undermine the pro-democracy activists in the same way that his similarly reluctant, but public, disapproval would undermine Hosni Mubarak less than two years later. Somewhat ironically then, the American president's almost identical statements thus helped an enemy remain in power while forcing an ally to abandon his palace.

As a result of Gaddafi's willingness to employ force against demonstrators, Libya's initially unarmed uprising soon transformed into an armed one. Fearing high civilian death tolls, Western leaders felt forced to act when Gaddafi threatened to attack rebels in Benghazi in the early weeks of the conflict. Notwithstanding the fact that Libya with its vast natural resources had only recently been welcomed back into the global community, the EU, the United States, and the UN combined to first impose economic sanctions. In contrast to events in Egypt and Tunisia, Western leaders were on the whole willing to abandon Gaddafi.²⁸⁸ This was partly due to the fact that his response to the unrest differed markedly from that of Mubarak and Ben Ali, but that Gaddafi was not a longstanding ally of the West probably mattered as well. Although the Brother Leader's relationship with the West warmed during his last years in power, he did not enjoy a long history of supporting Western objectives in the region and was therefore expendable.

Meanwhile, Gaddafi's decision to violently repress his opponents can similarly be explained by the lack of a historic bond between Libya and the West. Although his regime's recent rehabilitation came with undeniable perks, they were not of the magnitude that would compel Gaddafi to tolerate mass demonstrations against his rule. On the contrary, he was willing to

²⁸³ Hunter 2010: 34. See also Ansari (2010: 72–73).

²⁸⁴ Ehteshami et al. 2013: 238.

²⁸⁵ Parsi 2012: 100.

²⁸⁶ Parsi 2012: 96.

²⁸⁷ Hunter 2010: 72; Parsi 2012: 95–100; Seliktar 2012: 167.

²⁸⁸ Pinfari 2011: 41.

sever his newfound ties with Europe and the United States by brutalizing his opponents if doing so would allow him to cling to power. A few countries, including Italy and Germany,²⁸⁹ initially opposed sanctions against Libya, but ultimately Gaddafi's history of hostile relations with the West came back to haunt him. On March 17, 2011, the United Nations Security Council approved Resolution 1973 that permitted NATO and its allies—with the Arab League's blessing²⁹⁰—to do whatever necessary to protect civilians.²⁹¹ That the coalition interpreted the resolution to include the right to attack Gaddafi's forces and provide support for the armed rebels is at this point of secondary importance.²⁹² Gaddafi would be dead before the end of the year, putting an end to 42 years of autocratic rule, but not before taking thousands of Libyans with him.²⁹³

When faced with an unarmed uprising of its own and unconstrained by normative commitments to human rights and democracy, the Syrian regime recycled its old tactics of demonizing its opponents by blaming “the protests largely on conspirators inside and (especially) outside the country.”²⁹⁴ Ben Ali and Mubarak had tried to apply the same tactic, albeit on a less comprehensive scale, but only in countries like Syria, Libya, and Iran could such claims resonate with popular perceptions. As one commentator concludes, “the problem is that there have been just enough foreign conspiracies in Syria over the decades to lend credence to such claims.”²⁹⁵ The government's characterization of the protesters as traitors backed by foreign interests not only justified brutal repression, but effectively neutralized the international community. A few days after the Dera'a demonstrations began, President Obama cautiously expressed his admiration for the “courage” shown by the protesters and called upon Bashar to assume a constructive role in the process, but refrained from stronger statements.²⁹⁶

As the regime's brutality increased over the coming months, the White House's message became increasingly confrontational and coupled with “largely symbolic” sanctions.²⁹⁷ Due to the lack of leverage resulting from decades of hostility, Obama remained cautious not to assume a position directly supportive of the demonstrators.²⁹⁸ Only in mid-August, at a time when the initially nonviolent uprising had turned into a full-out civil war, did Obama call on Bashar to step down. By then any hope of an unarmed revolution had since long faded.

Western pressure only caused Bashar negligible discomfort since friendly countries, most notably Iran, Russia, and China, remained in Syria's corner.²⁹⁹

²⁸⁹ Pinfari 2011: 41–42.

²⁹⁰ Hilsum 2012: 197.

²⁹¹ Gertler 2012: 4.

²⁹² Gertler 2012: 19–24.

²⁹³ Black 2013.

²⁹⁴ Lesch 2012: 81.

²⁹⁵ Lesch 2012: 81.

²⁹⁶ Lynch 2012: 184.

²⁹⁷ Lesch 2012: 153.

²⁹⁸ Lynch 2012: 189.

²⁹⁹ de Bellaigue 2010: 223–24.

Iran, Syria's foremost regional ally, provided Damascus with financial aid to offset the economic losses caused by international sanctions and offered valuable expertise in how to combat both "real" and virtual dissent. Russia, and to a lesser extent China, used their seats in the UN Security Council to block any attempt to impose truly debilitating sanctions on Syria or, more importantly, plans for a military intervention similar to what had happened in Libya. The Kremlin has substantial economic and strategic interests to consider: Russian firms have invested heavily in Syria's energy and tourism sectors, and Damascus is Moscow's seventh-largest arms customer. Finally, the port city of Tartous represents Russia's only remaining naval base in the Mediterranean, a strategic asset the Russian military is disinclined to abandon.³⁰⁰ With their most important international relationships unaffected by the domestic unrest, Bashar and his military commanders did not hesitate to unleash indiscriminate violence on their opponents. After all, who would hold them responsible for doing so?

The Iranian, Libyan, and Syrian governments' violent responses to the unarmed revolutionary attempts are symptomatic of a more general consequence of hostile relations with the West. In the years leading up to the three uprisings, liberal opposition groups faced virtually insurmountable obstacles in their efforts to convince the authoritarian states to move in the direction of democracy and greater respect for human rights. Unlike in the Iranian, Tunisian, and Egyptian cases, domestic pleas were not coupled with prodding from friendly Western allies whose voices carried weight in the corridors of power in Pahlavi Tehran, Tunis, and Cairo. At the time of their respective upheavals, none of the three countries had established close relations with the West, nor had they committed to its human rights and democracy rhetoric. As a result, none of the regimes found themselves trapped in an iron cage of liberalism, which meant that Western ideals not only failed to protect pro-democracy activists from government repression, but also made them easier targets for the regimes.

³⁰⁰ Ajami 2012: 161; Anceschi 2012: 143–47; Lesch 2012: 85, 136–38; Lynch 2012: 190.

7

Rights, Rhetoric, and Revolutions

How can one be against human rights nowadays? It's the same as to be against motherhood.

—Giorgi Arbatov, adviser to Mikhail Gorbachev, 1983¹

There is today not a government in the world that does not know that its human rights record will affect its relationship with us.

—Zbigniew Brzezinski, US National Security Advisor, December 1978²

The purpose of this study has been to explain why and how nonviolent revolutionaries managed to overthrow authoritarian leaders in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt. I have argued that the link between international relations and domestic contentious politics holds the key to understanding these three unarmed revolutions. More specifically, the book has shown that Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt's close ties to the West shaped the political scene in each country over the course of several decades by having an inadvertent, liberalizing effect on both the state and the opposition. Eventually, a discourse centered on ideals like democracy and human rights achieved state–society consensus in each country to form a rhetorical context—an iron cage of liberalism (ICL)—in which nonviolent action became a highly potent opposition strategy.

In contrast to most students of revolution and civil resistance, I have eschewed an emphasis on either structural causes or movement strategies in isolation of one another. Instead, the framework advanced here points to the crucial importance of the *compatibility* between structural contexts and the nonviolent character of the revolutionary challenges. To draw on Eric Selbin's work,³ the stories told—and lived—by the protesters came to match the discourses espoused by the three regimes and their Western patrons. Since unarmed revolutionaries challenged façade democratic states fully,

¹ Arbatov and Oltmans 1983: 144.

² Brzezinski 1988: 108.

³ Selbin 2010.

albeit hypocritically, committed to Western political liberalism, mass-based civil resistance became a nearly insurmountable challenge for the regimes to handle. On the other hand, when similar movements confronted states that had little to gain from appearing democratic, brutal repression followed. As a result, the initially nonviolent revolutionary movements in Iran (the Green Movement), Libya, and Syria failed to overthrow their dictators and/or turned into violent conflicts.

In the decades preceding their respective revolutions, Iranian, Tunisian, and Egyptian leaders all developed close links to the West. Iran's and its young king's vulnerable position at the conclusion of World War II, epitomized by the proximity of the Soviet Union, incentivized strong ties with the United States. Washington's British-assisted Operation Ajax that saved the shah's throne in 1953 by ousting Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh cemented the bond between Pahlavi Iran and the White House. For the next three and a half decades, American economic, political, and military support helped the shah build a highly repressive state largely independent of the society it governed.

Tunisia and Egypt's relationship with Europe and the US arose largely from economic necessities, although not in isolation of political considerations. Both countries emerged from the 1960s with faltering economies due to economic experiments inspired by socialism. To reinvigorate their nations' finances, leaders in both countries turned westward and initiated *infitah*, the "opening up" of domestic markets to foreign investors. Tunisia's historic bonds to France and relatively liberal polity made it an ideal partner to the burgeoning European Union, while Egypt's status as a regional powerhouse meant that the country promised to be highly useful to American foreign policy. Consequently, intimate relationships between rulers in the two countries and their Western patrons soon developed.

Close ties to the West were highly profitable for the three authoritarian regimes, both in economic and political terms. Since Western patronage generated considerable monetary flows, the autocrats not only enriched themselves but could also use their new access to wealth and international connections to build domestic systems of patronage that near-guaranteed the loyalty of economic, political, and military elites. The downside of Western patronage, besides accusations of being Western puppets, was that as friends and allies of the democratic world the three leaders were implicitly expected to act in a becoming manner. In short, the shah, Ben Ali, and Mubarak were expected to behave as democrats.

Uninterested in real power sharing the three leaders transformed their governments into "façade democracies," that is, hybrid regimes that adopt the discourse but not the practices of democratic governance. In Tunisia, Ben Ali co-opted the human rights narrative primarily to consolidate power at

home, although the move came with the additional benefit of international legitimacy. Similarly seeking to establish his grip on power in Egypt after succeeding Anwar Sadat, Mubarak positioned himself as a democratic leader inclined toward reform. For the first few years of their respective rule, the two presidents' liberal posturing largely caused opposition challenges to remain within the political realm, affording both Ben Ali and Mubarak time to consolidate power while strengthening their international credentials. Although initially useful, it soon became clear that neither president could easily back-track from the democratic charade without negatively affecting their external support.

The Iranian trajectory differs somewhat from the Tunisian and Egyptian ones. While the shah came under sporadic pressure from Washington to liberalize, most notably in the early 1960s, he did not until the very end of his reign have to cast himself as a democrat. Prior to the mid-1970s, when the West formally established human rights as one of its core principles through the Helsinki Accords, non-Western leaders aligned with the democratic world were less obliged to embrace Western values. Helsinki and the election of a presidential candidate who had run his campaign on a foreign policy platform emphasizing human rights changed this state of affairs. Jimmy Carter's victory and ascension to the White House meant that the shah had to improve his democratic qualifications, which were already under the scrutiny of the Western media and human rights organizations due to Iranian student activism in Europe and North America. Thus, whereas liberalism was the means by which Ben Ali and Mubarak built their relationships with the West, it was imposed on the shah as a result of his already pre-existing bonds with Washington. In the end, however, the result was the same: As close, high-profile friends of the democratic world the three leaders had to present themselves as liberals in order to justify Western patronage to skeptical audiences in the West.

While the three regimes' transformations into façade democracies were undertaken mainly for external reasons, they had important domestic consequences. By articulating a discourse that praised the virtues of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, the shah, Ben Ali, and Mubarak invited domestic critics to challenge their records on these matters. In Iran, Carter's election and human rights rhetoric caused the shah to panic and initiate the liberalization program he assumed would soon be imposed on him. Responding to the shifting political environment, opposition groups began to mobilize specifically on the basis of human rights. As a result, the shah became squeezed between his opponents' and Carter's converging human rights discourses, a narrative he himself, to exacerbate matters further, had publicly declared legitimate. From then on the brutalizing of unarmed crowds could only ensue at an immense political cost.

In Egypt and Tunisia the two regimes' embrace of liberalism initially constituted only a limited nuisance. However, Tunisia's desire for closer bonds with the European Union meant that the regime's previously rhetorical commitments to human rights now became formalized in consecutive binding agreements with the EU. Even though European leaders were characteristically uninterested in imposing conditionalities on Tunis, the now legal dimension of the Euro-Tunisian relationship mandated that gross human rights violations would likely force the EU's hand. This meant that Tunisian human rights organizations could use their government's official commitments to emphasize the discrepancy between its words and deeds in the hope of triggering Western pressure on Ben Ali to reform. Such pressure arrived on several occasions, although never on a scale that threatened the president's hold on power. Still, Ben Ali's formal acceptance of liberal values meant that he could be challenged on precisely those grounds.

Mubarak had similarly embraced democracy as a guiding principle in Egyptian politics, and although domestic and international advocacy groups repeatedly showed that real Egyptian democracy did in fact not exist, it was not until George W. Bush introduced his Freedom Agenda that Mubarak's hypocritical adoption of democracy became a discursive burden. Pressured by the White House to introduce reforms intended to reduce radical currents in the country, Mubarak found himself forced to allow greater political competition and freedoms. As a result, a domestic opposition movement emerged that focused the world's attention on the illiberal character of Mubarak's regime. Even though American pressure subsided once it became clear that the Muslim Brotherhood was the organization that benefitted the most from the democratization push the damage had already been done. Mubarak's vocal praise of democracy could not be undone.

As a result of their close ties to the West, the shah, Ben Ali, and Mubarak eventually found themselves trapped by the liberal discourse they had adopted precisely in order to promulgate their relationships with the democratic world. When large crowds of nonviolent protesters materialized on Iranian, Tunisian, and Egyptian streets to demand the political norms and values the regimes and their Western patrons claimed to promote, the converging discourses of the government, its democratic ally, and the opposition caught each authoritarian ruler in an iron cage of liberalism. Before the Western media's cameras, the three dictators could not order naked repression of the crowds without risking both the international and domestic support on which they depended. Unable to resort to violence they were swept away by the empty hands of unarmed revolutionaries.

The transformation of Western patronage from benefit to burden in the form of an ICL is the result of complex discursive interactions between the regime, its democratic allies, and the domestic opposition that mature over years, or

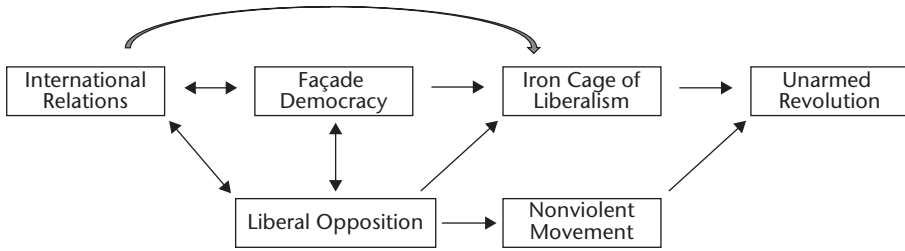


Figure 7.1. From international relations to unarmed revolution (revised).

even decades. Figure 7.1 revises the trajectory from international relations to unarmed revolution presented in Chapter 1. Rather than linear, the dynamic is better understood as an iterative, relational process through which the façade democratic regime, its Western patrons, and the opposition's repeated articulations of the virtues of liberalism reinforce one another and culminate in a rhetorical convergence. In this manner, the regime's instrumental adoption of the West's political narrative comes to constitute a self-perpetuating dynamic from which it cannot easily escape. Consequently, the embrace of liberalism, however farcical, eventually becomes sufficiently institutionalized to constitute the cultural/ideological context in which domestic politics takes place. In that environment, a nonviolent uprising with explicitly democratic aims stands a real chance of becoming an unarmed revolution.

Structure, Culture, and Strategy

Due to its emphasis on the links between international relations, political liberalism, and civil resistance, this book heeds Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly's call to locate the causal mechanisms of revolutions at the intersection of "structure, culture, and strategic calculations."⁴ Indeed, it is precisely the fact that the ICL fuses structural/historical, cultural/ideological, and strategic factors that gives it its restricting quality. Taken individually, international relations, democratic discourses, and civil resistance can each limit a state's range of motion but it is only when combined, I contend, that their impact becomes debilitating. Furthermore, it is the compatibilities and contradictions inherent in this particular combination of factors that renders the ICL a constraining mechanism.

Through international alliances nation-states seek to extend their reach. By aligning with other countries a nation can exert influence in parts of the

⁴ McAdam et al. 2001: 225.

world where it may otherwise have had few prospects of impacting the course of events. Although there are laws that govern how states interact with one another, the absence of an international Leviathan means that when it comes to the most powerful of states there is relatively little the international community can do to restrict their range of freedom. But while powers like Russia and China remain nearly untouchable, equally powerful Western actors like the United States and the European Union do not possess the same level of immunity. Yet, their “vulnerability” does not stem from the threat of sanctions, but rather from the fact that Western powers must hold themselves to a higher moral standard than their non-Western counterparts. It is thus not international law, the United Nations, or the International Criminal Court that imposes restraints on Western power. Rather such limitations stem from the West’s own ideology.

Liberalism, the set of political ideals that affirm each individual’s equality and right to self-determination, constitutes the inviolable foundation of the West and is arguably most directly embodied in the notion of human rights.⁵ As noted in Chapter 1, the West’s successful inclusion of a political and civil interpretation of human rights in the 1975 Helsinki Agreement has been identified as an important reason for the fall of the Communist bloc.⁶ However, once established the human rights narrative trapped not only the West’s enemies but also its friends and, crucially, the West itself in its inherent logic. Since human rights so perfectly embody the ideology through which the West asserts moral superiority, its officials often use them to justify foreign policy, including decisions to wage war. But the West’s unconditional acceptance of all things liberal also means that its representatives *must always* promote human rights and democracy, no matter the stakes or stakeholders. While its statesmen tend to be skilled rhetoricians that can turn most situations into grey zones, there is at least one social phenomenon that is very difficult for even the most talented Western sophist to turn on its head, namely peaceful protest.

The reason why civil resistance makes such a compelling case to Western audiences, I maintain, is due to its compatibility with liberalism and human rights. Indeed, nonviolent protest can be defined exclusively on the basis of the sections 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which afford all people “the right to freedom of opinion and expression” and “the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.”⁷ A popular mass movement that in this manner manages to concretize Western liberalism makes itself a formidable opponent for any state closely aligned with the West, especially if the revolutionary narrative emphasizes the citizenry’s

⁵ Charvet and Kaczynska-Nay 2008.

⁶ Stokes 1993: 23. See also Shepherd (2000: 31).

⁷ United Nations 1948.

pursuit for democracy. Since democratic leaders, actual and self-proclaimed alike, are obliged to recognize the legitimacy of peaceful mobilization for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, repression becomes virtually impossible. And whereas peaceful mobilization is fully compatible with Western liberalism, the suppression thereof constitutes a contradiction of the very same ideology.

When combined in this manner, international democracy–autocracy relations, Western liberalism, and civil resistance constitute the iron cage of liberalism, the mechanism I have advanced as the explanation for unarmed revolution in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt. Rather than looking simply at the relationship between structure and strategy, the inclusion of culture in the shape of a liberal political ideology provides the model with its crucial rhetorical backdrop. It is because democracy–autocracy relations in the late twentieth century and beyond take place in a liberal discursive context that the iron cage of liberalism becomes a restrictive bind. As one scholar perceptively notes, “a lot that is happening in world politics can be adequately contextualized with an appreciation of the linkages between ‘utterance’ and ‘action.’”⁸

It should be re-emphasized that the ICL framework does not assume that Western leaders seek to promote democracy and respect for human rights in client countries. Prioritizing their national interests over the rights and freedoms of people elsewhere, Western leaders only press for liberalization when doing so is perceived to promote their own nations’ agendas.⁹ Ironically, since its support of authoritarian leaders tends to make the West highly unpopular in aligned countries, democratization often becomes counter-productive to Western interests as it is likely to primarily benefit parties and organizations harboring anti-Western sentiments.¹⁰ Thus, in order to maintain their privileged standing in places like Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt, Western leaders must undermine abroad the principles on which their own political systems rest.

As long as the West’s normative betrayal is kept out of the media’s spotlight, relationships with dictators can be maintained. However, when nonviolent protesters plead—implicitly or explicitly—with Western leaders through news outlets or online forums to side with the movement in its struggle for freedom, democracy, and human rights, democratic governments may become forced to forsake longtime autocratic friends. The key here is that such desertions do not emanate from a desire to see democracy flourish—if that was the case direct pressure could have been applied for decades—but rather from a need to maintain credibility at home. With audiences in the West watching unarmed demonstrators fight for rights and freedoms they

⁸ Adib-Moghaddam 2012: 150.

⁹ Pellicer and Wagner 2009.

¹⁰ Alexander 2009: 148; Ottaway 2005.

already enjoy, active support of a dictator comes at a price few Western politicians are prepared to pay. Like their authoritarian allies, Western leaders thus become trapped in the ICL and are held hostage by their own rhetoric. As Jack Donnelly has observed, “respecting human rights is extremely inconvenient for a government, even in the best of circumstances. And the less pure the motives of those in power, the more irksome human rights appear.”¹¹

Some Theoretical Implications

The argument presented in this book should not be interpreted as dismissive of either structural or strategic explanations of unarmed revolutions, but rather as an attempt to fuse the two. Nonetheless, a focus on the interaction between structural, cultural, and strategic factors raises questions about models that privilege any one of the three components. Whereas structural theories may explain the origins of revolutions, they are less well equipped to elucidate the revolutionary process. On the other hand, an emphasis on strategic choices helps untangle the finer details of the revolutionary struggle, but may struggle to properly contextualize it. In short, each approach only tells part of the story.

Scholars of revolution typically agree that structural conditions like demographic changes, military or economic competition, uneven economic development, social inequality, and personalist regimes constitute the fundamental causes of revolutions.¹² The problem with focusing on the origins of revolutions is not that the hypothesized causes are either incorrect or irrelevant from an empirical point of view. On the contrary, it seems rather plausible that between them researchers have unearthed the general causes of revolutions. Instead, there are two theoretical reasons why a solitary focus on causes is insufficient.

First, most of the structural causes identified tend to be so general that they are virtually ever-present in the non-democratic contexts in which contemporary revolutions tend to occur. This means that while the proposed causes can correctly be associated with the vast majority of revolutions, they are also frequently present in countries where no revolution ever transpires,¹³ which naturally reduces their explanatory power. Recognizing that the identification of universal revolutionary causes may not be possible since “the causes of revolutions...necessarily vary according to the historical and international circumstances of the countries involved,”¹⁴ some writers have argued for the

¹¹ Donnelly 1986: 617. ¹² Goldstone 2014: 21.

¹³ See for example Markoff (2013: 239).

¹⁴ Skocpol 1979: 288. See also Tilly (1995: 1596).

“implausibility” of a general theory of revolution.¹⁵ The fact that revolutions are often triggered by unpredictable events raises additional questions about the explanatory power of revolutionary causes. After all, how do social scientists account for the election of a human rights president and the publishing of a slanderous newspaper article, the self-immolation of a fruit vendor and the vacation plans of a president, or the example set by an unarmed revolution in a neighboring country. Hence, we may have to recognize the necessity of chance in any attempt to forecast revolution, which reduces the persuasiveness of strictly structural theories of revolutions.

The second, related reason why an exclusive focus on structures is unadvisable derives from the fact that structures do not explain processes or outcomes. That is, even if we could predict where revolutionary challenges will break out, structures do by themselves constitute poor indicators of whether would-be revolutionaries will manage to defeat the state.¹⁶ As Goldstone notes, “the outcomes of revolutions are never given just from their origins; they are forged in the process of revolution itself.”¹⁷ The conflation of causes with outcomes therefore results in static theories in which the presence of a *revolutionary situation* automatically results in a *revolutionary outcome*.¹⁸ This, I suggest, is not how revolutions work. To understand unarmed revolutions in particular, we must therefore also consider *how* revolutionaries either emerge victorious or perish from their bouts with the state.

Unlike revolution theorists, students of civil resistance emphasize the roles played by human agents and their strategies in episodes of contentious politics.¹⁹ However, tending to overextend their argument they often exaggerate civil resisters’ freedoms and abilities. In the three cases of unarmed revolution examined in this book it certainly mattered greatly that protesters embraced nonviolent methods of struggle, but it is not clear how important the finer details of their strategizing were. Rather than stressing the tactical acumen of shrewd activists it may be more sober to, like Asef Bayat, speak of “nonmovements” and the “collective actions of noncollective actors.”²⁰ Indeed,

it is doubtful that revolutions can ever be planned. Even though revolutionaries do engage in plotting and preparing, revolutions do not necessarily result from prior schemes. Rather, they often follow their own intriguing logic, subject to a highly complex mix of structural, international, coincidental, and psychological factors.²¹

That some of the activists had studied the techniques of nonviolent action and learned from their veteran counterparts in other countries²² does not

¹⁵ Goodwin 2001: 290. See also Kurzman (2004).

¹⁶ Goldstone 1998: 130.

¹⁷ Goldstone 2014: 26.

¹⁸ Tilly 1978.

¹⁹ Schock 2013: 281.

²⁰ Bayat 2010b: 14.

²¹ Bayat 2010b: 2.

²² Beissinger 2007; Bunce and Wolchik 2006, 2011; Gelvin 2012: 53–54.

imbue them with the ability to orchestrate a movement comprising hundreds of thousands—or even millions—of participants. Put succinctly, excessively voluntarist approaches to nonviolent regime change endow their protagonists with too much agency and control, thus overlooking the fact that revolutions are chaotic, and that revolutionary movements are seldom as deliberate as the civil resistance perspective suggest.²³

The main weakness of perspectives that propose a non-contextualized understanding of civil resistance is the assumption that nonviolent tactics are inherently potent. As this book has shown, the use of civil resistance against dictators in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt was successful not because of the intrinsic power of nonviolence, but because state repression became too costly for reasons only indirectly related to the protest movements' demands. Much of the civil resistance research on regime change may therefore be engaging its topic from the wrong direction. Keen to affirm nonviolent actors' transformative power the emphasis tends to be on why civil resistance works, when perhaps it would be more useful to ponder why certain types of regimes abstain from repression.²⁴

This study's findings suggest that understanding regimes is as important as understanding revolutionary movements. To utilize a term common in the civil resistance vocabulary, Iranian, Tunisian, and Egyptian revolutionaries did not succeed because of their ability to devise clever "dilemma actions" (nonviolent tactics that make both state repression and the absence thereof poor government responses) against their opponents. Instead, due to specific structural, historical, and cultural circumstances, the protesters' use of civil resistance *in itself* constituted a dilemma for the regimes. However, in different contexts, as the negative cases of Iran, Libya, and Syria illustrate, the use of nonviolent methods may not at all constitute quandaries for authoritarian regimes, regardless of how sophisticated they may be. In other words, the potency of civil resistance depends more on the rhetorical contexts in which it takes place than on its inherent qualities or the ingenuity of the activists.

The inability of structural and strategic approaches to independently explain unarmed revolutions points not only to the importance of combining the two, but also to the advantage of incorporating culture and ideology into the discussion. Nonviolent revolutionary success does not result simply from clever strategizing under favorable structural conditions. Rather, unarmed revolutions occur when the revolutionary narrative makes a compelling international case for regime change against governments that cannot ignore the global context. The revolutionary movements' explicit pro-democracy rhetoric in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt paralyzed the three states as well as their

²³ Goldstone 1998: 130.

²⁴ Nepstad 2013.

international allies. In contrast, when a similar pro-democracy rhetoric was used against states hostile to the West, it became the movements' Achilles' heels. In Islamic Iran, Libya, and Syria, autocratic regimes used their opponents' Western discourse to accuse them of being foreign agents. In a less clear-cut case, the Shi'i uprising against the Western-backed Sunni regime in Bahrain arguably failed because it did not manage to make its calls for democracy drown out the noise of Iranian support for the movement.²⁵ Similarly, Egyptian protests in response to the military establishment's removal of Mohamed Mursi from the presidency in the summer of 2013 were depicted as a Brotherhood uprising in favor of more Islamism and were subsequently quelled without much international protest. Muddled protest portrayals such as these, where the explicit quest for democracy does not unequivocally emerge as the major movement narrative, tend to make state repression less controversial. How a revolutionary movement is framed²⁶ helps account for its outcome.

Wider Applicability?

Only further research can determine whether or not the framework advanced in this book sheds light on unarmed revolutions other than those examined here. The specificity of the historical and structural processes described in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt makes it impossible to mechanically transpose the argument to cases beyond the ones analyzed in the preceding pages. A comparative historical analysis requires by definition that systematic attention be afforded to the particularities of the cases considered, which limits the prospects for generalization.

But even though the argument as a whole, that is, the trajectory from Western patronage to unarmed revolution, may not be generalizable to other cases, a flexible application of the iron cage of liberalism might hold some wider explanatory promise. The primarily nonviolent movements that successfully challenged Western-backed dictators like Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines,²⁷ Augusto Pinochet in Chile,²⁸ and Chun Doo-hwan in South Korea²⁹ during the final decade of the Cold War display striking similarities with the Iranian, Tunisian, and Egyptian revolutions. In each of these countries, nonviolent mass mobilization eventually forced President Reagan to withdraw his administration's cooperation with the regimes, which helped facilitate the movements' success. In order to firmly establish that US patronage can be linked to the autocrats' falls, empirical research must be

²⁵ Jamal 2012: 147.

²⁶ Snow 2004; Snow et al. 1986.

²⁷ Bonner 1987.

²⁸ Adesnik and McFaul 2006: 17–19.

²⁹ Adesnik and McFaul 2006: 15–17.

undertaken. Yet, the three countries' close relations with the West would at the very least justify an exploration of the potential presence and impact of an ICL in the Philippines, Chile, and South Korea.

Some of the world's more recent unarmed revolutions require more creativity for the ICL to enter into the story. For instance, the wave of unarmed revolutions that overthrew communist governments in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s clearly cannot be explained by Western patronage. Still, the socialist regimes' self-restraint is reminiscent of state responses to mass mobilization in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt. While most of Eastern Europe enjoyed close ties to Moscow, leaders in Berlin and Prague were particularly dependent on the Soviet Union due to their countries' contentious post-World War II histories.³⁰ Thus, whereas communism elsewhere in the region often assumed a "human face" by the end of the 1980s, East Germany and Czechoslovakia were arguably more Stalinist than the Soviet Union itself.³¹

The Helsinki Agreement made human rights a potentially powerful discourse in the Eastern bloc, but it was not until it came to coincide with Mikhail Gorbachev's reform program—famously built around the twin policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*—that pro-democracy activists began to make significant progress. In many ways, Gorbachev's radical new direction can be construed as the functional equivalent of Jimmy Carter's vocal embrace of human rights or George W. Bush's introduction of the Freedom Agenda. Autocratic allies of all three leaders, who had grown accustomed to their superpower patrons' tolerance of heavy-handed means of social control, suddenly had to adapt to a new political order. Importantly, Gorbachev made it clear to his East German and Czechoslovakian colleagues that Moscow would no longer aid or condone violent repression as it had done in the past. This meant that a crackdown on unarmed protesters in 1989 would have to be undertaken at the risk of Soviet withdrawal of support. Under those conditions, leaders in Berlin or Prague were unwilling to assume responsibility for repression. In the absence of government violence—but arguably in the presence of a Soviet-created ICL—East Germans and Czechoslovakians nonviolently brushed their regimes aside.³²

The "color revolutions" that ousted dictators in southeastern Europe and the former Soviet Union at the dawn of the twenty-first century represent a distinct wave of unarmed revolution characterized by their coincidence with elections.³³ In Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, protesters capitalized on allegedly fraudulent elections to oust authoritarian leaders

³⁰ Heimann 2009: 282.

³¹ Judt 1992: 108.

³² Ritter 2012a, 2012b.

³³ Binnendijk and Marovic 2006; Bunce and Wolchik 2006, 2011; Hale 2006; Kuzio 2006; Marples 2006; McFaul 2005; Mitchell 2012; Ó Beacháin and Polese 2010; Van Inwegen 2006.

through massive demonstrations. As in Eastern Europe, it seems farfetched to make Western patronage the explanation for regime restraint. However, the co-occurrence of unarmed revolution and elections hints at the possibility that the iron cage of liberalism, albeit modified, may still be applicable. Indeed, elections may create an “instant ICL” that puts a regime’s democratic performance on global display. The principal difference between the type of ICL that emerges through prolonged international relations and that resulting from a stolen election is that while the former is durable, the latter is a highly temporal political opportunity: Once the election is in the books, so is likely the potential for unarmed revolution. Nonetheless, the execution of fraudulent elections mimics the pressures that emanate from a façade democracy’s close relations with the democratic world by highlighting the glaring contradiction between rhetoric (the embrace of “democratic” elections) and reality (election fraud). With the world watching, even regimes with tenuous links to the West may vacillate in the face of nonviolent protests and thus permit them to morph into an unarmed revolution.

The speculative effort offered in this section is indeed little more than guesswork as careful research is necessary in order to test these propositions. While the ICL may be present in the cases briefly discussed above, it is perhaps more likely that altogether different dynamics and mechanism are at play, and that new theoretical frameworks are needed. Still, future studies of unarmed revolutions may wish to focus their effort on explaining why some regimes exercise restraint in the face of civil resistance while others do not.

The Future of Unarmed Revolutions and the Futures They Bring

This book began by looking to the past, noting the proliferation of unarmed revolutions since the late 1970s. But what does the future hold? Will we witness more unarmed revolutions or fewer? Will the pendulum swing back and make violent struggle against authoritarian states once more the revolutionary’s strategy of choice? The answers to these questions, I suspect, depend on the fortunes of Western liberalism as a credible discourse in the non-Western world.

Stephen Hopgood has recently argued that human rights as a master narrative is on the wane. Having never been much more than Western imperialism in disguise, he argues, the decline of the West—and the United States in particular—as the globe’s normative agenda setter entails that human rights and political liberalism are quickly going out of fashion.³⁴ If Hopgood

³⁴ Hopgood 2013.

is correct, this is a highly encouraging development for authoritarian governments hostile to a Western-dominated world order. The normalization of an illiberal discourse, endorsed by powerful non-democracies like China and Russia, that questions the universality of human rights would provide repressive regimes with a compelling alternative to Western patronage and its implicit expectations.

As we have seen, by aligning with non-democratic powers authoritarian regimes avoid the inherent contradictions that may eventually result in the development of an iron cage of liberalism. Instead, Russian and Chinese backing allows such governments to barricade themselves in anti-liberal bunkers where human rights and democracy discourses remain blunt opposition tools. Consequently, civil resistance, which I have argued depends on its compatibility with liberal norms and values, becomes ineffective in the struggle for political and social change. Whether unarmed revolutionaries will continue to amass domestic victories against dictators may therefore to a significant extent depend on international developments and the fortunes of the West, but it seems unlikely that armed revolution will make a strong comeback. Without direct assistance from external actors, most challengers will find themselves outmatched by the military strength of the modern state.

But should we wish for more unarmed revolutions? Evidence suggests that nonviolent regime change generates better political outcomes than its violent counterpart,³⁵ but does that entail that unarmed revolutions, after the euphoria of street victory subsides, lead to tangible improvements for the individual citizen? Do people achieve greater economic prosperity, and do democracy and human rights take hold? These difficult questions have intentionally been left unanswered in this book, but developments in the cases examined in this book do not seem to offer great hope. Tunisia and Egypt are both struggling to realize their revolutions' promises, while the Iranian Revolution of 1977–79 hardly ushered in a more democratic system.

Is it simply to expect too much from a revolution that it will cure social and economic ills? After all, the overwhelming majority of revolutions, armed and unarmed alike, have at best led to limited gains for most people, and in many cases they have been outright disastrous. Russia and China come to mind. But then again, perhaps the phenomenon of unarmed revolution is too recent for its effects to be properly assessed. Will we eventually look back on this era of unarmed revolution as the advent of a world in which democracy fulfilled its promises and human rights became truly universal?

In a final theoretical twist, the iron cage of liberalism maintains its constraining grip on a society even after the dictator has fallen. Since unarmed

³⁵ Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Karatnycky and Ackerman: 2005.

revolutionary success depends on a movement's ability to embody the West's democracy and human rights discourse, the post-revolutionary leadership's credibility similarly hinges on its ability to immediately incorporate these values into domestic politics. Failure to do so may cause the crowds that ousted the autocrat to accuse the new government of betraying the revolution, while any sign of authoritarian tendencies will permit Western governments to condemn the new leadership and thus set the stage for old elites to attempt a counterrevolution. In short, the victors face the same type of constraint their adversary did. And perhaps this is the reason why unarmed revolution so seldom amounts to much more than political revolution. The West may be forced to see a reliable ally fall, but the liberal economic system and the culture of corruption it has spawned usually remain safe from major intrusions.³⁶

Since political and economic liberalism cannot easily be separated from one another, any attempt at far-reaching economic deliberalization will make the new government susceptible to charges of violating the norms and values for which the revolution was waged. Some democratic progress may therefore occur, but the pre-existing social structures remain intact. The powerful and the rich, with few exceptions, maintain their positions in society while the poor and the downtrodden keep theirs. Regrettably, it appears that democracy, dignity, and human rights constitute the narrative of unarmed revolutions rather than their outcomes. But then again, perhaps the removal of an authoritarian leader is the necessary starting point of any country's long path to prosperity. As always, time will tell.

³⁶ The Iranian Revolution is a rare example where an unarmed revolution did not result in a Western political and economic arrangement.

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