



The Arab Spring

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Thanks to Sarah Adams, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Co-Representative, Lebanon and Syria for compiling this issue of the *Peace Office Newsletter*.

Introduction

by Sarah Adams

The Middle East has come into people's lives and homes in new ways in 2011.

Many of us around the world have been captivated by a scale of revolution that has not been witnessed in recent history. Western leaders in particular have praised the new democracy sweeping the region. Media outlets have provided us with continual coverage of the sweep of events as they unfold. The plight of minorities and the unique politics involved in Christian-Muslim co-existence have come to international attention. Social media has brought youth together in ways we could not have easily imagined.

For those living outside the region, it may be tempting to focus on the positive and immediate nature of the change. Indeed we celebrated with those in Tunisia and shed tears as we witnessed the joy in Tahrir Square. In reality, the change has often been the result of decades of suffering and oppression. And the transition to new leadership and a new political order is likely to be a slow process, with the potential to bring about new types of oppression.

I live and work with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Lebanon, a unique case in the current climate. While the past decades have seen civil war, assassinations of leaders, toppled governments, and on-going conflict with Israel, the country is now one of the few in the region that is not facing a major upheaval. This small country on the Mediterranean is surrounded by countries facing both new and on-going conflict. Lebanon has suffered greatly over the years as a result of both internal and external conflict.

In this newsletter, we'll explore what some have termed the "Arab Spring."

A university president explores the challenges that still await the region, and the necessity to put issues of justice at the forefront as we move into a new phase of leadership.

An Egyptian church leader highlights the role of Christians in the Egyptian revolution.

A Lebanese peace activist urges youth to turn toward nonviolence as the only way to truly affect long-term positive change.

A Muslim partner from southern Lebanon shares the experience of trying to build peace among children in a region faced by ongoing violence.

A Syrian woman reflects on the religious harmony she experienced growing up in Damascus and the continuing role of women as peacebuilders in her country today.

And finally, a Jordanian blogger gives insight into the situation in Jordan and the role that social media has played.

MCC has worked in the Middle East for more than 60 years. Our deep partnerships with local people and organizations here allow us to share in both the suffering and the joy that the region experiences on a regular basis. This is especially true today. Through the articles from our partners in this issue, we hope that you are able to gain further insights into the complicated and compelling stories that continue to unfold here.

Sarah Adams in the MCC Co-Representative for Lebanon and Syria

To be innocent as doves and wise as serpents: reflections on change and hope

by Paul Haidostian

I have been congratulated by many western colleagues for the great freedoms that are being inaugurated in our region . . . I have yet to see a local colleague who can congratulate us with any degree of confidence.

How enthusiastically should we celebrate the recent developments in the Arab world, often called the *Arab Spring*; that is, the mass demonstrations, the breaking of the chains of fear, the organization of cells of young people who call for democracy, the anger of the economically disadvantaged and the calls for overthrowing oppressive policies and archaic regimes?

How objectively can the media, social networks, and video recordings present the truth about the recent events, and have we been able to properly interpret the pictures and movements we watch? These modern means of communication have made it possible to record, to widely and instantly share and post. But no modern or non-modern means can easily interpret what we watch, especially from a distance. In the midst of it all, we may get naively excited, or feel suspicious, or get totally confused.

It is indeed difficult to interpret, even for the local person. For example, it is not uncommon in our experience to see a group of young men demonstrate against a leader one week, and then to rally in support of the same leader a week later. It is not uncommon for people whose slogans include democratic terminology to see democracy as the best path to a new form of hegemony by a majority group. It is not uncommon to watch the details of only pro-government rallies on some channels, and to watch only anti-government demonstration on others; thus reinforcing the bias of the viewers of this or that channel. It is not uncommon for politicians to pin-point areas of injustice, and when they are chosen to lead, they repeat the same injustice.

Obviously, our region has been witnessing major change, a sense of newly discovered freedom, and more. This should lead to some celebration. It is indeed uncommon in the recent history of the region. In the past months, I have been congratulated by many western colleagues for the great freedoms that are being inaugurated in our region. At the same time, and despite hopes of many Middle Easterners for change to lead to positive outcomes, I have yet to see a local colleague who can congratulate us with any degree of confidence.

Truly, the peoples of the countries of the Middle East have had much injustice to protest against, and they are now finding unrestricted and creative means and occasionally unfortunate violent ways to express themselves. But is it clear what justice is being served in this country or that? Do the developments in all the countries experiencing these movements have the same meaning? Certainly not! Not only is the local context different in each case and country, but the geopolitical and economic factors are very different as well. Therefore, the outcomes will certainly be different in each country. History may or may not record the current socio-political quake as a shift into democracy, justice, freedom and advancement of cultures around us. That is to be seen by future generations.

While people know what it is they have suffered from or missed for long decades, they will not easily discover the remedy. Loss of life and fear are also prevalent in the region at this stage. For now, we can only celebrate the early stages of a process whose direction may go in very different ways in this country or another. As often we remind ourselves, we should not easily generalize, especially when it comes to Middle Eastern matters.

Two key observations, therefore, are necessary to make. First, we will have more reasons to celebrate change in Middle Eastern countries if we see that the changes will establish clear foundations on which individual citizens from all ethnic, religious, and ideological groups are considered as legitimate and worthy as all others; worthy to exist, to create, to share, and to develop. For example, if a dictatorship or monarchy is replaced by an exclusivist religious system or a new intolerant majority, then only the new majority or the former victim has reason to celebrate or feel avenged, and that temporarily. In other words, one form of injustice may be replaced by another. The experiences of the North African countries such as Tunisia and Egypt that underwent change in leadership in the past months do not seem to have led to changes in the men-

tality of the political establishment, and alas, the mentality of the whole civic and political culture. If the foundations and value systems of the people do not change for the better, then all the change that happens merely translates to political groups and leaders taking turns in continuing in their oppressive and unjust ways.

Second, the powers of each troubled region as well as the world powers are evaluating the changes in terms of their own strategic net gain; that is, whether or not they can gain new ground if this or that regime falls, and this or that movement rises. As a result, the responses to the change in each country are subjectively determined by whether or not the strategic interests of a particular power are served. I have been watching TV channels of many countries in the region. Each has a list of countries whose revolution it chooses to favor and highlight in the media, and others not to. Both Lebanese political parties and world powers praise the revolts of many nations until a country it considers an ally finds the same fate. Pre-revolution relations determine much of the post-revolution evaluations. We have often criticized the double standards of the western world. This is an intensified period of history in which we can observe multiple standards in action. I say multiple standards, not because we review matters with a high degree of sophistication and differentiation, but because our frail standard of self-interest rules. And ideals suffer the deep wounds of reality.

My observations are neither new to human politics, nor to our own history as Armenians and Middle Easterners. Still, it is important to remember that while we should follow the current Middle Eastern movements as innocently as the doves do, and celebrate the good that may evolve, we should at the same time evaluate matters as wisely as serpents would. While we hope that some justice will be served in the process of change, the future developments may

limit the reasons for celebration. The city of God we yearn for remains to be our calling. Some of it is here, some of it is to come and all of it is in God's fashion and fabric.

In these challenging and uncertain days, the churches in the Middle East, as well as partner churches have yet to express themselves with clarity of vision and confidence. The most common hope among the Christians is that freedom of religion, respect for minority rights, and better opportunities for human beings and societies will prevail. Not much more is clear and detailed in our hopes, and anxiety is evident in the church air.

As always, there is good work that the church needs to do, with deepening faith, even when the map is not yet clear in this time of turmoil and transition. The "what if . . ." and "where to . . ." questions are countless. Christian calling is put to the test again. What is our calling now?

Within this context, Haigazian University, an institution run by the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East, has identified economic injustice as a key problem in the Middle East it should address academically. Since June 2010, the university has been in dialogue with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) regarding the establishment a Center of Economic Justice. Then came the mass protests and calls for justice in the region, which not only made us more confident about the importance of our focus, but also challenged us by the urgency of the matter. The University and MCC are now to be tested in the real field, at this time and place, to see how best our Center can serve the society and bring the word of a just God in the wider and deeper economy.

Our humble means and plans as a church may not seem significant as compared to the larger events and regional developments. They, however, show us that the seeds of justice can only be sown if we faithfully lead others by word, example, plan and spirit into God's gracious realm.

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Christians as Agents of Change in the Middle East

by Andrea Zaki

Although the Egyptian revolution was focused on political rather than religious concerns, one of its unanticipated outcomes has been religious tension between Muslims and Christians.

The January 25th Revolution has indisputably reversed the state of affairs in Egypt. Among the most sudden, remarkable, and influential revolutions of our time, this act of the Egyptian people has triggered radical changes at many different levels. At the political level, the previous regime in all its corruption, tyranny, and despotism has collapsed. Hence, Egypt has begun a new age of democracy. At the economic level, Egypt has become a fertile ground for investors since the departure from power of capitalists who monopolized its economy. Furthermore, against all expectations the Egyptian stock market did not collapse, but swiftly overcame the crisis. At the social level, Egyptian youth revealed their positive potential by expressing their wish to unite to develop their communities regardless of religious, ethnic, or cultural affiliations. Egyptian youth have learned to demand their rights and confront corruption in all its forms. At the cultural level, a unifying sense of cultural awareness has boomed throughout Egypt. Although the Egyptian revolution was focused on national rather than religious concerns, one of its unanticipated outcomes has been religious tension between Muslims and Christians, leading to political uncertainty concerning the concept of a civil state and the formation of the constitution. The revolution riveted the Egyptian public, causing citizens of all age groups to follow the news, whether printed, audio, or visual. Thus the revolution has strengthened the bond between the people and the media and cultivated the public's understanding and engagement with media resources.

Arab Christians and Demographic Challenges

Over the last century the Christian community in the Arab Middle East has clearly declined as an overall percentage of the total population. One can argue that this decline is due to a number of factors: the decline of Arab nationalism; the decline in economic wealth of some Christians due to land redistribution and nationalization of the state economy; the emergence of the state of Israel and the plight of Palestinian refugees; the emigration of many Christians to the West as a result of political and economic marginalization; the adoption of the

Western family model by many Christians resulting in a decrease in the number of children; and religious conversion and persecution in some countries.

One can argue that the calculation of the number of Christians in the Arab World was, and still is, a political issue rather than a demographic fact. This phenomenon is simply due to the size of the group in regions where various countries, such as Lebanon, base their political formula on sectarian politics. Egypt is dealing with the number of Copts, Egyptian Christians, as a small minority in order to minimize their political ambitions. As a result, the demographic position of the Arab Christian is political in nature.

Arab Christians and Current Challenges: A Historical Background

There are many challenges currently facing Arab Christians in the Middle East. Many development organizations in Egypt strive to promote respect for human rights in general, and especially the rights of minorities in the post-January 25 climate. In order to effectively promote the Christian presence, we must reconsider the challenges that prevent the development of the role of Arab Christians.

The Right of National Belonging

Many of the challenges which face Arab Christians are associated with Islamism. Among them is the emphasis on religious identity, when regarded as the only necessary identity for political participation. This concept has led to a restructuring of identity and has resulted in cultural and political disturbance. National loyalty and a sense of national belonging have been replaced by religious loyalty and a sense of religious belonging. This shift from primarily national to primarily religious identity has created a unique situation for Christians as a religious minority, where they have had their national loyalty and sense of national belonging called into question. Religious affiliation has become stronger than national affiliation. In this context, Christians' relation to the 'Christian West' and the consequent potential undermining of their patriotism has been discussed.

Nobody can deny the significance of religious ties: Christianity and Islam both emphasize brotherhood among their followers, which reinforces these internal ties. Yet the reduction of all other identities to the religious identity has contributed to the curtailment of plurality and the creation of a monistic concept of loyalty. This factor has played a major role in undermining patriotism and reducing national ties, which are the foundation of social, political, and cultural cohesion.

The Right of Doctrinal Conviction

Without a doubt the long history shared by Christianity and Islam involves points of convergence as well as points of conflict and mistrust, but coexisting religious groups that do not learn from history do not progress effectively towards a better future. Thus, if one side casts doubts on the doctrines of the other side, this doubt creates bitterness that may lead to marginalization, violence, or withdrawal. Though I believe that both parties are guilty of mistrusting one another, the media space given to those who cast doubts on Christian doctrines is of substantial proportion, much greater than the coverage of the reverse case. Television interviews, newspaper articles, and cassette tapes, casting either direct or indirect doubts on the doctrines of Christians, contributed to the formation of the recently exacerbated social schism.

It is easy for a member of one religion to cast doubts on the doctrines of another religion, but the scars that these doubts create cannot be easily removed, and may linger for several generations. In some cases contempt for doctrine swells and develops into rejection of individuals, which may later evolve to the point of hatred.

Freedom of Belief

Freedom of religious belief is a thorny issue in Egypt. Without a doubt there are attempts by both Muslims and Christians to convert one another. Though I am not interested in addressing the issue of Da`wa, or evangelism, here, the political factors accompanying this process contribute to the culture of fanaticism. Thus the question of freedom of belief is an important issue that must be handled delicately. The recent events Egypt has witnessed, such as the announcement of the conversion of a Coptic priest's wife to Islam and the corresponding Coptic demonstrations, are the best examples of this mental image. Granting every individual the freedom to believe without exercising pres-

sure is a must. Yet the matter does not stop there. Freedom of belief must include freedom of religious education and practice as well as the individual's right to choose what to believe. The pressures related to changing one's religion contributes to the creation of fanatical attitudes toward "the other."

Selective Treatment of History

Historical emphases on Muslim-Christian relations are selective and subject to current feelings. When tolerance is the status quo, Quar'anic texts and historical situations which call for friendliness and respect toward "the People of the Book" are remembered and quoted. When the status quo is intolerant, historical situations of marginalization of "the other" and charging "the other" with unbelief are recounted. This eclectic treatment of history and tradition forms unstable mental images and makes co-existence a relative experience. Thus, the retelling of history and tradition must follow methodological principles and must be based on scientific analysis, the encouragement of new interpretive judgments, and the re-reading of texts in their cultural and circumstantial context. If followed, these changes will create new respect for tradition and history and will contribute to the establishment of a more stable future.

Social and Cultural Alienation

The feeling of alienation is a factor resulting from long-term marginalization and exclusion. Egyptian laws call for equality among citizens. There are no clauses in the Egyptian constitution or laws calling for discrimination between citizens on religious or racial basis. The problem lies in the practices of some leaders and officials.

Discrimination, when committed by persons of responsibility, creates a sense of persecution and tends toward negative images that contribute to an atmosphere of alienation. Thus, individual fanaticism plays a significant role in creating collective stereotypes when the individual is a person of power. This type of alienation represents a social dysfunction and contributes to collective strife. Although social alienation is dangerous, cultural alienation is even more dangerous as it threatens to create collective strife. The issue of cultural alienation is complex and needs more comprehensive study, yet we may refer here to some factors that help create this type of cultural alienation, including: limited space allotted to Christians for

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religious expression in the media; exclusion of the Coptic family from sitcoms; artistic portrayal of the Coptic community as disfigured and suspicious; and limited portrayals of Coptic history. All of these factors have contributed to the formation of cultural alienation.

I have attempted to put forward some challenges that Christians have faced in the last few years. I don't claim to have covered all of the related factors. I have tried to analyze some negative stereotypes of Christians, but this does not mean that Christians themselves haven't contributed to the creation of negative stereotypes about Muslims. Certainly when all factors are studied, it will be found that everyone has contributed, in one way or another, to the creation of negative stereotypes.

I do believe that the development of democracy and the reinforcement of general principles of human rights will contribute to the creation of positive images about "the other," and will contribute to equality which is related to justice. This equality extends beyond political equality to freedom of belief and doctrinal conviction. This equality regards plurality as the basis for political, social, and cultural participation, and it recounts history using scientific methodologies, so that the present may be supportive of the future.

The Role of Christians as Agents of Change

The development of civil society through the practices of democracy can contribute to flexible relationships between majorities and minorities. The dynamic concept of minority in the case of Arab Christians must be supported by a theological position that promotes citizenship and coexistence. The theology of minorities in the Arab world is characterized by either passive resistance or sectarian violence. In *The Mind of the Minority*, George Bibawi argues that the dreams and the visions that occupy the mind of the minority are of the second coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of his millennial reign. Such dreams reflect the desire of the minority to overcome current problems. However, insistence on a literal interpretation of Bible stories makes criticism difficult and reduces the possibility of developing a theology that can meet the needs of the community.

A theology that focuses on heavenly intervention does not encourage dynamic citizenship. Theologies that support sectarian politics—both Muslim and Christian—hinder the promotion of dynamic citizenship. Theological development that encourages pluralism, coexistence, and citizenship is needed.

The Church advocates a secular state while it promotes theocracy, seeing itself as the sole political alternative; with the traditional view of the separation of the Kingdom of Heaven from the Kingdom of Earth with the eschatological expectation of God's intervention in favor of his people. Practically, the Church becomes involved in the political struggle, not as a civil society institution, but as a political alternative. This results in the weakening of civil society in which the development of citizenship is hindered. Dynamic citizenship that is established as the result of a common struggle for political independence and social, cultural, and economic development requires theology that strengthens civil society and accepts comprehensive democracy.

The emphasis on Christian nationalism, the absence of the concept of citizenship, and the limiting of secularization to the political level all create theological contradictions. On one side exists the connection between the Kingdom of God and the current reality; on the other side exists politics as a secular concept achieved through sectarian policies. This contradiction confuses religion with politics at the level of identity formation, but not within government, which tends to have a secular appearance. Thus, religious identities within secular government limit the development of citizenship.

Egyptian Christians must consider *loyalty* in a wider sense, replacing single religious obligations with multiple commitments. The problem with political Islam is its commitment to religion alone. Loyalty in its wider sense will encourage a theology that accepts other ideas and sees the Kingdom of God as a path toward pluralism and diversity. Thus, pluralistic loyalty will contribute to the empowerment of civil society instead of its Islamization or Christianization. The theology that introduces such a concept of loyalty will open the door for interaction between theology and society in a way that affirms citizenship. Citizenship is not a religion, but religion will contribute to its formation. Multiple loyalties will contribute to dynamic citizenship.

Multiple loyalties will also contribute to the restructuring of identity. The theology that considers religious commitments as one component of identity structure is crucial. However, such a relative and flexible concept of identity needs a theology that believes that no one owns the absolute truth. In that context, pluralism will become rooted in the religious context, which tends to believe in a single truth. This notion of absolute truth is one of the root causes of theological problems in the Arab world. To encourage a theology that recognizes multiple loyalties and pluralistic identity and transcends a single legitimate truth, multiple interpretations of religious texts are required.

The pluralistic reading and interpretation of religious text is an essential factor in developing a context that promotes pluralism as the basis of dynamic citizenship. Arab Christian theology also needs this tool to promote pluralism at different levels of the church and society. This pluralism will enhance the practice of the concept at the theological level as well as at the social and political levels. The church will accept the need for openness and involvement with other religious communities. Muslims will contribute to a diverse civil society that legitimizes different opinions of the current reality and alternative visions of the future. Such pluralism affirms and establishes democracy, which strengthens the civil society and leads to dynamic citizenship.

This theology must consider *solidarity* as the basis of coexistence. Pluralism does not mean fragmentation. The theology that sees solidarity as a tool for common struggle and coexistence can contribute to the realization of dynamic citizenship. Solidarity must be based on the doctrine of creation, in which all humans have an equal right to exist and to thrive. Equality and justice come before solidarity. Religious doctrines are selective by nature and tend to exclude those who are different. A theology that can establish a concept of solidarity and go beyond the limitation of doctrine will contribute to the

notion of unity and diversity that is essential for civil society and democracy. Solidarity as a theological concept will also contribute to the socialization of the Church and encourage religious institutions to become an active part of civil society.

Institutionalization is a necessary component in developing a theology that contributes to dynamic citizenship. The absence of the concept of social sin characterizes an individualistic approach to society. This notion is clear in the current Coptic theology that separates the Kingdom of God from the earth. However, a theology that promotes institutionalization as a theological concept will encourage the church to have an institutional role that is independent of the state and contribute to building bridges between the church and society. Institutionalization will bring the church to the heart of civil society and help it to overcome the isolation and alienation that it often faces in Arab society. It will also establish the role of the church as an institution, limit the role of the individual to some extent, and encourage democracy. Institutionalization will affirm the role of God's people as a community committed to equality, justice, and full involvement. These are the essences of dynamic citizenship.

In order to establish common ground between both religions while still respecting their differences, we must encourage theological discussion between Muslims and Christians about concepts such as God, creation, the environment, salvation, and eternal life. We must also encourage dialogue within the Christian community to build an internal network between different denominations and strengthen the Christian presence. It is important that Christians in Egypt do not isolate themselves in Christian circles only, but search for moderate Muslims with whom they can build a coalition. Thus, they can work together to achieve secularization that separates religion from politics while still respecting religion, creating a common ground for a civil state and encouraging civil society.

Rev. Andrea Zaki, Ph.D. is the Director General of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services in Cairo, Egypt.

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Suggested Resources

Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Fred Lawson, *Demystifying Syria* (London: Saqi Books, 2010)

Michael Young, *The Ghosts of Martyrs Square: An Eyewitness Account of Lebanon's Life Struggle* (Simon and Schuster, 2010)

David Hirst, *Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East* (Nation Books, 2011)

Samir Kassir, *Beirut* (University of California Press, 2010)

Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton, 2009)

Saree Makdisi, *Palestine Inside Out: An Everyday Occupation* (Norton 2010)

Ilan Pappé, *The Forgotten Palestinians: A History of the Palestinians in Israel* (Yale 2011)

Mazin Qumsiyeh *Popular Resistance in Palestine: A History of Hope and Empowerment* (Pluto Press, 2011)

Sari Nusseibeh, *What is a Palestinian State Worth?* (Harvard University Press, 2011)

Izzeldin Abuelaish, *I Shall Not Hate: A Gaza Doctor's Journey on the Road to Hope and Dignity* (Walker and Company, 2011)

(continued on page 9)

The choice of nonviolence allows people from all segments of society to participate in the process of change.

A letter to young revolutionaries

by Fadi Abi Allam

It was time for revolution. When corruption replaces transparency; when dictatorship replaces democracy; when poverty replaces development and prosperity; when ignorance replaces science and knowledge; when favoritism replaces equal opportunity and when fanaticism and intolerance replace tolerance. It was time: and we had young people who created this freedom.

Your revolution, dear young people, succeeded in restoring confidence in the ability of our people to create change. Be assured, Tunisian youth and Egyptian youth; that your message reached the Arab youth and people around the world and is still moving to reach the authoritarian rulers in the Arab world.

Your revolution has dropped the legality of tyrannical systems. It is not only bound to Tunisia and Egypt but the revolution succeeded from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf, even if it has not been completed or not yet started in many countries of this region.

We reaffirm the value of tolerance. Through this value, I see you as my partner in my country of citizenship, with commitment to the common good of our society. Together, with equal rights and obligations, we share the rule of law, the civil state that respects human beings. The country is coming back to its owners. The country is ours and we are the country. The country is land, people and institutions. Our old rulers who bargained on the land, neglected the institutions and excluded and enslaved the people, we will no longer protect you.

The first winner in the glorious Arab revolution is the choice of nonviolence, which has been underestimated for decades by people at all levels. It is a humanitarian choice which derives from a civilized system that takes tolerance as a value to control our goals and our behavior in life. As much as it respects the human dignity, it does not delay in recovering rights, especially if they were violated. Peace is never established on the destruction of rights but on the revival of rights.

Nonviolence is a message to the languid ones, the silent ones and the submissive ones to act to regain their rights, and it is for those who use weapons to put their weapons aside. No, our people have never been fans of death, but they are nations who love free dignified life. The choice of nonviolence allows people from all segments of society to participate in the process of change. It does not limit such participation to a certain group or require financial support or military support, or foreign intervention. The question today is about the reality of the Arab revolution and those who stand behind it: peasants and industrialists, traders, journalists, humanitarians and other honest citizens, and the enthusiasm of the young people which constitute the main impetus.

Congratulations to you Tunisian youth and Egyptian youth. You wanted life and fate responded and there was the victory. The Tunisian poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi, once said, "If one day people wanted life, fate has to respond."

Dear young people, we know very well that for years you wanted life, but today it has changed. You have dared and created this fate. Do not let the fire of the revolution stop or be extinguished in your hearts. It is never enough to say "the people want to overthrow the regime," but also the people want to establish the best system based on respecting human rights, and after the establishment of this system, let our chant or motto to be: "the people want to apply the rules." This was never just a military coup or revolution to change the ruler, but a cultural change with the people becoming the ruler. Let us be youthful and vivid throughout all the stages of change. With your revolutions, you heroes, we are going to change the course of history and the face the world. Blessings to you all, long live the Arab youth and long live Lebanon.

Fadi Abi Allam is the President of the Permanent Peace Movement, based in Beirut, Lebanon.

Building a culture of peace: Imam Sadr Foundation and Southern children

by Mohamad Bassam

South Lebanon has witnessed instability since the 1970s. Unlike other Lebanese regions, villages of the South did not take part in grave internal conflicts during the Lebanese civil war, which occurred from 1975–1990, or experience forced migration based on religious identity. On the contrary, the South was known for its social mobility and growing integration within the Lebanese State during its golden times in the 1960s. Its natural resources include significant water resources, agricultural land conducive to planting unique crops and cultural sites that attract expatriates and tourists. The human resources include youth with various skills and wealthy expatriates that maintain connections with the region and are ready to re-invest in their motherland whenever feasible.

However, the South has also known a great number of military attacks. This left profound damages, especially at the human and social levels, a fact that hindered development over the past four decades. Added to economic instability, these wars have made life hard for the majority of the population of South Lebanon.

The July 2006 war aggravated an already difficult situation, which was already experiencing a full spectrum of needs, including recurrent crisis and traumas. To protect people from violence, or treat them from the complications of violence is the therapeutic approach. The upbringing of children to a culture of peace is the future-oriented strategy to prevent conflicts. This article focuses on the experience of the Imam Sadr Foundation (ISF) with specific groups of children in South Lebanon. Since its establishment 50 years ago, ISF has provided services to tens of thousands of beneficiaries, each of whom has endured violence at some point in time. In fact, many were subject to one or more types of violence such as in the media, in the home, at school, on the street, bombings, murder and forced displacement.

ISF is a non-governmental association that focuses on improving access of the poor to their basic rights in social, health and educational services and a key partner of the Mennonite Central Committee in Southern Lebanon. It leads efforts to promote tolerance and interaction between communities and religions in Lebanon and the Middle East. A close community involvement has allowed the Foundation to thoroughly analyze the socio-economic conditions where it operates. Local, regional and international contacts have been developed to facilitate the exchange of experience and expertise and to provide opportunities for the Foundation to contribute in international discussions on relief and development.

The Foundation's primary activity is to provide care to girl-orphans, who are received at the age of five and supported until university graduation. These beneficiaries are ensured food, health, cultural and social provisions, including possibly marriage and job arrangements. These obligations required establishing a set of associated facilities, such as transportation, refectories, dispensaries and vocational training centers.

ISF's core purpose is to consolidate the culture of openness, dialogue and conciliation in Lebanon, and is well positioned to tackle peacebuilding issues. Having built many initiatives with other NGOs to bridge between different groups, the Foundation knows very well the stakes of peacebuilding for Lebanon.

Mohamad Bassam is the Director of Research and Development for the Imam Sadr Foundation, based in Tyre, Lebanon.

Suggested Resources (continued)

Jeff Halper, *An Israeli in Palestine: Resisting Dispossession, Redeeming Israel* (Pluto Press, 2008)

Philip Robins, *A History of Jordan* (Cambridge University Press, 2004)

Avi Shlaim, *Lion of Jordan: The Life of King Hussein in War and Peace* (Knopf 2008)

Yoav Alon, *The Making of Jordan: Tribes, Colonialism, and the Modern State* (I.B. Tauris, 2009)

Tarek Osman, *Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to Mubarak* (Yale University Press, 2011)

Alaa al Aswany, *On the State of Egypt: What Made the Revolution Inevitable* (Vintage 2011)

David Sims, *Understanding Cairo: The Logic of a City out of Control* (American University of Cairo Press, 2011)

Rabab al Mahdi and Philip Marfleet, eds., *Egypt: The Moment of Change* (Zed Books, 2009)

Karma Khalil, *Messages from Tahrir: Signs from Egypt's Revolution* (AUC Press, 2011)

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The upbringing of children to a culture of peace is the future-oriented strategy to prevent conflicts.

The Role of Syrian Women in Peace

by Mahat Farah el-Khoury

The peace I am talking about here is not a peace without justice, a peace of submission imposed on people while the aggressors continue to perpetrate their crimes. I call for a peace which is just for all sides.

In Syria, women have taken huge steps forward.

I am from Damascus, the ancient capital of the world. The city is situated at the heart of a region, which was the cradle of the three monotheistic religions, and which contains a unique mosaic of different religious communities. Damascus, where Saul was miraculously converted to Christianity, and from which he, as St. Paul, undertook its defense and propagation. Damascus, the garden of Islam. It is in this city that I live. My house is surrounded by mosques and churches. In the morning, I am awakened by the call of the muezzin from many minarets, followed by the sound of bells and singing from the churches.

In the Old City of Damascus, the ancient architecture shows how neighbors live together in peace and harmony. Narrow streets, with the houses close together, wall against wall. Vines and fruit trees grow in the courtyards, spreading over the walls and onto the terraces of the adjoining houses. Nobody demands payment for the fruit. Both households profit from it.

In my country faith is an integral part of its history, of its past, its present, its everyday life, and I hope, of its future. In Syria, women have taken huge steps forward. Between the period when newborn girls were buried alive because they were not wanted, and the present day, when women sit in the National Assembly and carry out the function of government ministers and ambassadors; Syrian women have indeed taken huge steps forward. Between the period when women were relegated to the harem, and the period of their emancipation, when they achieved their rights and their economic independence, when they were able to have a share in the responsibilities of power, development, and the evolution of the nation, many centuries elapsed.

Women, then, are respected, loved, and appreciated. They play a significant role within the family, and therefore, within society. Their influence depends, to a large extent, on the social class they are from. There is a considerable difference in this respect between the educated, cultivated woman moving in intellectual circles, and the illiterate woman living in an uncultivated milieu; between the woman who lives in the country and the city-dweller.

Women's role in the family and in development generally has been acknowledged at the highest levels. In an address given by the late President Hafez al-Assad, on the occasion of International Women's Day, he said: "It is essential for us to mention with love and respect, that great section of our people, one half of our nation, our women. There is no nation where women deserve to be celebrated more this year than in our country, for women have played an essential role in all the stages of our history, in all the stages of our struggle against colonialism and for progress."

Syrian women, whether illiterate or educated, whether producers or consumers, whether concerned simply with their households or with public affairs, are no different from women in any other part of the world. Like them, Syrian women love those who are close to them, their parents, their brothers, their children, their neighbors, and their fellow citizens, and reject the idea of giving them up as a sacrifice to war. They know that social progress can only be achieved through peace. This sentiment is especially strong in women who have given birth to children and brought them up so that the human race might be perpetuated, and not so that it might be destroyed.

The majority of charitable institutions in Syria—to help the poor, the sick, the handicapped, refugees, orphans—are largely, staffed by women. This offers clear evidence of women's sentiments: a love of humans and of peace, and a profound desire that justice reign among all human beings. Some of the organizations I have mentioned are run by the state, some are private, and others are attached to various Christian or Muslim communities. They all work for the good of the whole society. The ladies who work with these organizations try to raise funds for their work from all citizens, regardless of race, religion, community, or social grouping.

Syrian women are devoted to the notion of peace. You must understand that this work for peace about which I am speaking is in a somewhat broader, more general sense than how people from the west might use the phrase 'working for peace.' But believe me; Syrian women do work for peace in their own quiet, very significant way.

I call upon you, as people, to work ceaselessly toward the ends of peace. The peace I am talking about here is not a peace without justice, a peace of submission imposed on people while the aggressors continue to perpetrate their crimes. I call for a peace which is just for all sides, that honors the fervent wish of all mothers to have their children live life safely and in well-being.

On behalf of all the women who love peace in Syria, in the Middle East, I ask for your prayers and participation in working more fervently for lasting and just peace in the Middle East, and everywhere.

Mahat Farah el-Khoury is a writer and church leader committed to inter-faith understanding in Damascus, Syria.

The Arab Spring and the search for human dignity

by Ramsey George

What drives someone to douse himself in gasoline and strike a match? What amount of poverty, desperation and oppression would push one to the edge where dying is the best/only option? For those living in absolute poverty, in squalid conditions with little or no chance of eking out a respectable living for themselves and their family, what else is there to live for?

In a now famous city, Sidi Bouzid, located in central Tunisia, there was a kind of violence not mentioned by media outlets. It's a kind of violence that isn't in your face and doesn't attract media attention, a more subtle violence that eats away at your soul and your self-respect. This kind of violence festers under the surface until it reaches an explosive point.

For Tunisia, that point was December 17th, when a young man realized he had nothing to live for. Struggle after struggle, rejection after rejection, and disrespect after disrespect led him to setting himself on fire. The moment had arrived and within hours the news of his death was the catalyst required to stand up to Ben Ali's regime. Less than a month later, on January 14th, the Tunisians liberated themselves from their corrupt and vicious dictator.

"There's no dignity. We are dead." Mohamed Bouazizi and the millions of others around the world suffering from poverty and desolation are expected to carry on without hope of achieving any sort of respectable life, working unskilled and physically demanding jobs when they can find work.

Bouazizi and his act of self-immolation started a movement in the Arab world that led others in the region to take up the march of respect and the march for dignity.

The Arab Spring, as it became known, wasn't a Facebook or Twitter revolution. It was neither an Islamist movement nor a movement for Western-style democracy, but a movement for liberation from corrupt dictators and the powers that support them. In an attempt to regain their dignity, people united, marched on the streets and overthrew corrupt rulers.

The word *karama*, which in Arabic means dignity, was an echoing through the streets of the Arab world as the frustration came to a head. In interviews, on posters and in the collective discourse of the popular movements the word *karama* was repeated. For those with a sharp eye and an ability to look beyond the shallow media coverage it became clear that the moment had arrived in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain to throw off the shackles of oppression and disrespect, and instead to build a better place for their families. Others living under repressive regimes began organizing as well.

Many thought that it could never happen in Tunisia, and when it did, we said that it could never happen in Egypt. When Egypt started we said the same about each successive country, but nothing was going to stop the movement for dignity.

In Deraa, Syria, inspired by the protests sweeping the region, a group of school children wrote messages against the regime on city walls. Security forces swept in and arrested the children, holding them in detention. When the children's families went to the governor's office to ask for the release of their children, the general turned them away.

After this incident, the protests grew in Syria and developed into a full-blown movement

The word *karama*, which in Arabic means dignity, was an echoing through the streets of the Arab world as the frustration came to a head.

While internet and digital media played an important role in supporting activists, it will play an even more important role in transitional environments like Tunisia and Egypt.

It is never enough to say “the people want to overthrow the regime,” but also the people want to establish the best system based on respecting human rights.

against the regime. Again, as we saw in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, the people united against an oppressive regime that was systematically divorcing people from dignity through a network of security services and restrictive laws.

In Jordan there has been no Bouazizi moment or event like the children of Deraa arrests to inspire the oppositional movements in the Kingdom. King Abdullah has moved quickly to respond to limited protests that broke out on the streets of the capital. Slowly the protests grew and the opposition became more organized. As protests grew in intensity and spread to more cities in Jordan, the government was dissolved, a new prime minister and cabinet were appointed, and decisions made to lower prices and offer more financial support to families.

Jordan, unlike the Gulf countries, isn't able to offer money in order to keep the people off the streets; however, limited measures and offers were made to keep things under control. On March 24–25 the protests turned violent as an opposition group organized a sit-in at Interior Circle in central Amman. Groups of men who loudly declared their loyalty to the throne announced that any protests were a threat to the throne and should not happen. They moved in with sticks and rocks and dispersed the sit-in. The police and security forces watched the protest quickly descend into chaos, and finally stepped in to regain control of the situation.

The situation is unique in Jordan, as it is in every other country. With a large number of Palestinians, the issue quickly becomes divided among perceived loyalties and origins and any attempt to unite opposition groups is quickly hijacked and divided. Being Israel's neighbor to the East and an important partner in maintaining the security and occupation of Palestinian lands, Jordan is a strategic partner for the United States and other Western countries.

Despite the violence on March 25 in Amman, Jordan hasn't seen wide public protests like those in Tunisia, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain or Yemen. The King rules with absolute authority, yet the poverty and desperation are not anywhere near the same levels that drove millions of Arabs into the streets. The King and his government have been careful not to allow for the same sparks that set off revolutions around the region.

The role of media

Much has been said about the role of new media in the political upheaval, going so far as to call them Facebook Revolutions or Twitter Revolutions. This is incorrect and does not give due credit to the workers' unions, the organizers or those who were injured or lost their lives during the sudden and dramatic change.

That being said, new media—Facebook, Twitter, email, blogs, etc.—have played an important role in helping activists to organize and spread information to the masses. Just as during the Islamic revolution in Iran, new media tools played an important and decisive role. During the Iranian revolution, the new media tools were the fax machine, Xerox machine and cassette tapes. The fax machine allowed information to spread to lots of people at great distances, the Xerox machine allowed more people to access the information, and cassette tapes were used to smuggle propaganda into the country and cheaply distribute it to the masses.

The news of Bouazizi spread quickly through mobile and internet technologies, which allowed the already organized opposition groups to engage their networks. As more and more ordinary citizens joined the movement and were motivated to face armed security forces, the movement that started with a spark, spread through digital technologies and ended in the streets of Tunisia's capital Tunis.

While internet and digital media played an important role in supporting activists, it will play an even more important role in transitional environments like Tunisia and Egypt.

The question remains how these dramatic political and social shifts will impact daily life for Egyptians, Tunisians and citizens around the Arab world. The transition from dictatorships to freer societies will require diligence and patience, but also monitoring, transparency and the active efforts of those who were involved in overthrowing the governments in the first place.

While the quest for dignity started with Bouazizi in Tunisia, the journey will be long and hard. More hard work only begins now.

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