



Canada and the Middle East: Supporting the Emergence of a New Story

*These comments were prepared by **Nathan C. Funk**, Associate Professor in Peace and Conflict Studies at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, for a round table discussion held in Ottawa on June 2, 2011 on the current changes taking place in the Middle East and North Africa. They accompany the round table report available at www.peacebuild.ca*

1. Affirmation

When viewed in historical context, events unfolding in the Arab world today are profoundly significant and hopeful. Despite political turbulence in a number of national settings and the likelihood that deep changes in social structures and political cultures will only come with persistent striving, this remains a moment of great possibility – a moment for affirming what has been accomplished, and for looking to the future with openness to fresh possibilities. Barriers of fear have been broken, capacities for nonviolent action have been discovered, and **a new regional narrative has begun to emerge**: a narrative of empowerment, dignity, and hope. For many, it is a story of “re-entering history” after years and years of despair, marginalization, and perceived decline. While Canadians can at best play only minor roles in this new story, the current juncture provides **an excellent occasion for Canadian governmental and non-governmental institutions to reassess and renew their relationships** with Middle Eastern and North African counterparts, with the intention of supporting democratic transitions, strengthening the capacities of local civil society institutions, and enabling research efforts that help to make the new story a reality.

2. Using Available Road Maps

The obstacles, of course, are formidable, and many of them have been diagnosed with great clarity in the five volumes of the **Arab Human Development Report Project**. This project, marginalized by events that closely followed its launch in the year 2000, offers important insights for those who would aspire to “move upstream” in relation to the security issues that so frequently dominate governmental policies, within and beyond the region. “Moving upstream” means going beyond reactive policies that focus overwhelmingly on the “supply side” of terrorism, and formulating a coherent and systematic response to the “demand factors” that drive people toward despair and political violence – factors such as disrespect for human rights and freedoms, disempowerment of civil society actors, deficits in education and knowledge production, the persistence of poverty and misgovernance, and the failure to utilize the full range of available human resources, including those of women. In their

prescriptions for confronting these challenges, the Arab Human Development Reports offer a compelling road map for transformative change, and should not be ignored.¹

3. Canadian Interests

There can be little argument that a more peaceful, less impoverished, and more democratic Middle East is in the Canadian interest. Those who take the long view will recognize that this is an instance when Canadian values and interests inform and complement each other. Moreover, even those inclined to romanticize the “stability” of an “old Middle East” administered by authoritarian leaders – leaders who were often pliant in their relations with the West – have to acknowledge that there is a new game in town. The status quo in the past has been clearly revealed to be both unstable and undesirable, largely because its maintenance exacted too great a cost in terms of human rights abuses, and left too many people both economically and politically unemployed. Security must now be reconstructed on the basis of principles that respect the will of the people and provide them with opportunities to apply their skills and talents in processes of participatory governance that enable them to experience political employment and empowerment, as citizens rather than as subjects.

3. Careful Listening and Relationship Building

That said, ideas about how Canadian interests and values relate to ongoing events in the Arab World need to be refined by carefully listening to protagonists of change and building relationships that are not limited to one-off projects. This means developing a “real feel” for complex situations, respecting the ways people define their own needs, and resisting the temptation to impose a polarizing, “Are you with us or against us?” grid on all regional actors. It also means trying as much as possible to assume an “elicitive” or a “midwife” stance in relation to non-governmental and governmental partners. We need to allow Middle Eastern and North African partners to help shape the agenda for a creative partnership, in ways that reflect their felt needs, genuine priorities, and pressing concerns.

4. Using Local Resources

Part of the challenge of democratic transition in the Arab world is building a bridge between tradition and modernity, between valued heritage and present realities. In this regard it is important to take cues from the appropriate technology movement, and from insights of the visionary Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, who insisted that traditional forms and values can be flexible and adaptable, offering a seedbed and source of inspiration for creative social practice.² While there is no need to impose arbitrary “local content” rules on Canadian development assistance or democracy support programs, there is a need to recognize and affirm the cultural context of sustainable change efforts. Adapting and helping to update local resources can be an important means of supporting empowerment and “change that sticks.”

¹ For access to the Arab Human Development Reports and to other relevant United Nations Development Programme materials, see <http://arabstates.undp.org/subpage.php?spid=37&sscid=149>.

² For an overview of Hassan Fathy’s philosophy and architectural practice, see James Steele, *An Architecture for People: The Complete Works of Hassan Fathy* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1997).

One of the most significant breakthroughs of the Arab Spring thus far is that it provides a **locally generated model for citizen protest and people power**. Although we know that some of the tools that enabled Tunisian and Egyptian activists to resist oppression were drawn from foreign sources (including Gene Sharp's writings on nonviolent struggle³ and strategic advice from Serbian democracy campaigners⁴), their applications of these tools have been locally innovative and contextually specific. Ideas borrowed from abroad have been integrated with local knowledge gleaned from long experiences of struggle, from the colonial independence movements to today's remarkable campaigns against authoritarian rule. Change agents have worked within frameworks derived from their own national stories, activating cultural values and symbols to mobilize social networks and foster dynamic solidarity in the face of repression.

Although successful efforts to grapple with **transitional justice issues** are becoming more and more crucial as old regimes and new opposition movements enter into wide-ranging negotiations about the past, present, and future of their societies, respect for context will be necessary if lessons are to be drawn from the experiences of other nations. Clearly, much can be learned from the study of truth and reconciliation commissions the world over, and potentially from the more non-retributive approaches to transitional justice taken in South Africa and Chile. At the same time, truth, justice, and reconciliation have to be practiced in specific Arab contexts, and must resonate with deep cultural and indeed religious values. There is much scope for discussion of Islamic criteria for reparation and forgiveness, and of possible political applications of traditional sayings such as, "*Al-afu min shiyam al-kiram*" (roughly, "Forgiveness is one of the traits of the noble-minded").

5. Proposals for Research and Training Projects

While affirming the need for local solutions to local problems, IDRC and many other Canadian governmental and non-governmental institutions – including universities – can and should reach out to partners in the Middle East and North Africa, seeking to identify collaborative projects to expedite transition and help meet pressing challenges. There is a broad scope for potential research and training initiatives, and I would like to share just a few ideas and suggestions.

- a) **Transitional justice:** There is a need for critical, comparative studies of transitional justice as practiced (or not practiced) in diverse Arab settings, such as Lebanon, Algeria, Iraq, and Morocco. What has gone wrong, and what has gone right? What issues have been suppressed, or left unaddressed? To what extent have more authentically national narratives of past political traumas emerged, supplanting the more one-sided and partisan narratives of particular groups? What can be learned from other nations, from traditional Arab-Islamic reconciliation processes, and so forth? Can new "rituals of reconciliation," drawing on the values and

³ Many of Sharp's most widely disseminated writings are available at the Albert Einstein Institution website: <http://www.aeinstein.org/>.

⁴ Tina Rosenberg, "Revolution U: What Egypt Learned from the Students Who Overthrew Milosevic," *Foreign Policy*, February 16, 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/02/16/revolution_u.

symbolism of historical practices such as *sulh*, be devised to meet current needs for truth, justice, mercy, and social peace?⁵

- b) **Intercommunal relations:** There is much more to current flare-ups of tension between Muslims and Christians in Egypt than meets the eye or makes the newspaper headlines. The same could be said of sectarian tensions in Bahrain or Syria. The causes are complex, and owe at least as much to social, economic, and intergroup dynamics as they do to doctrinal differences. Careful studies of the sources and processes of intercommunal polarization may prove helpful in illuminating constructive steps, particularly if supplemented with training initiatives that bring local religious and civil society practitioners together with practitioners of religious and grassroots peacebuilding from other contexts.⁶ Enhanced approaches to long-term dialogue as well as crisis response might be developed in ways that build upon existing mechanisms.
- c) **Civic curriculum:** There is no doubt a great deal of work will need to be done to develop curricular materials that encourage active citizenship and respond to changing realities. International partnerships and/or resources may prove useful in evaluating existing curricula and revising them to meet current expectations and challenges.
- d) **NGO management and collaboration:** What are the salient felt needs within the NGO sectors in various Middle Eastern and North African countries? What can be done to encourage collaboration, discourage factionalism, bridge religious-secular divides, enhance communication capacity, and so on? There is much scope for research and consultation.
- e) **Law enforcement professionalism:** The transition to accountable, transparent, citizen-centered policing will not be easy. Can Canadian interlocutors play a role in this area, and in broader efforts to reform judicial systems?
- f) **Support for NGOs operating in adverse circumstances:** There are various relevant themes: How are NGOs coping with various repressive environments? How can they improve human rights documentation efforts? Can regional support networks help or relationships with extra-regional NGOs, perhaps in areas that have recently experienced transitions to fuller democracy? What are some of the most promising “new civic spaces” emerging in current environments?
- g) **Poverty alleviation:** What are some of the most promising cottage industries? Which sectors of the economy have experienced the greatest disruption? What can be done to advance community development, or support the development of more robust eco- and/or world heritage tourism?
- h) **Arab Spring stories and visions:** Along with the many other crucial questions in need of attention, there is also a continuing need to maximize opportunities for protagonists of the Arab Spring to tell their stories, explore their similar as well as divergent aspirations, and re-experience their newfound empowerment. Research programs and documentaries exploring dynamics and objectives of change – especially peaceful change – can help activists affirm

⁵ George E. Irani and Nathan C. Funk, “Rituals of Reconciliation: Arab-Islamic Perspectives,” Kroc Institute Occasional Paper #19, Notre Dame University, August 2000; available online at <http://uwaterloo.academia.edu/NathanFunk/Papers>. See also Nathan C. Funk and Abdul Aziz Said, *Islam and Peacemaking in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009).

⁶ See, for example, David Little, ed., *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

themselves, learn from one another, share their courage, foster national as well as regional dialogue, and extend the current period of renewal and rededication.

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