
Middle East Research and Information Project

What Is Activism?

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In early 2011, the world watched as millions of people took to the streets across the Arab world to demand the fall of regimes, or at least substantial political reforms. As the weeks and then months unfolded, the broadcast media adopted split screens to show simultaneous live footage of crowds in multiple countries. Some regimes were toppled and many were seriously shaken, but no regime in the region was left untouched. The high visibility of the uprisings, together with massive street protests on nearly every continent, led *Time* to name “the protester” as the 2011 Person of the Year.

While virtually no one anticipated the precise timing of the uprisings, close observers of the Middle East were surprised less by the fact of street protests than by the scale of the mobilizations. Demonstrations have been commonplace across the region for decades. Protesters continue to turn out today even as regimes are again repressing all manner of political dissent. While many commentators and scholars declare the uprisings to have ended, millions of citizens across the region continue to agitate for major change, including via street protests. But because the throngs that assembled in 2011 created such a global spectacle, those massive mobilizations have become an unreasonable standard by which to judge the political significance of protests.

Indeed, protest remains a central means of demanding political change—and one whose use may even be increasing. In 2016 alone, Tunisia and Algeria—the former the cradle of the Arab uprisings and the latter supposedly unaffected by them—each saw more than 10,000 protests. [1] (# 1) Other countries in the region have witnessed hundreds and thousands of protests as well; a demonstration per day is not unusual. Even as large-scale gatherings have diminished, the staggering numbers of protests across the Middle East show that public assemblies remain an important tool for activists and fellow citizens to express dissent and demand political changes, large and small.

The apparent retreat of the multitudes is disappointing for many activists, but for them the uprisings are nonetheless not over. Even in places like Bahrain—where a huge non-sectarian mobilization in 2011 was brutally crushed—protesters continue to come out, most recently marking the sixth anniversary of the February 14, 2011 uprising and torching a city hall during January 2017 rallies against the execution of three fellow citizens. Ignoring such ongoing resistance, scholars and analysts who assert the end or failure of the uprisings unwittingly lend credibility to the claims of autocrats that all is quiet—even as vocal activists prove the rulers wrong. The re-entrenchment of authoritarianism is indisputable, but this fact makes the resolve of activists and protesters across the region all the more remarkable. More localized and smaller protests have emerged in place of the dramatic marches and central square occupations of the uprisings, suggesting that a longer-term analytic framework might serve better not only for understanding the impact of the uprisings but also for broadening the awareness of contentious politics in the region. Protests, after all, are far from the only means of expressing resistance and dissent. Political activist energies have been channeled into a wider range of outlets, in large part due to necessity. In the process, activists have fostered new alliances and new strategies of resistance and dissent.

Adopting a longer timeline to assess the impact of the uprisings also brings into sharp relief the precariousness of the perches on which these reformed regimes sit. Jordan’s monarch ‘Abdallah II weathered a storm of protest from 2011 to 2013, but members of his supposedly loyal base openly express the view that he is the country’s “last king.” In Egypt, ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi emerged from the 2013 coup against elected President Muhammad Mursi as the new strongman, and then secured executive office himself. But struggles inside Sisi’s regime, hinted at by mixed signals emanating from on high, suggest that his grip on power is tenuous. Even the present dispensation in Tunisia—which Western governments and scholars alike have rushed to label a successful case of democratic transition—is a bit shaky. Some of the country’s political factions are moving to strengthen their own positions of power within the coalition government framework, justifying that consolidation as needed to safeguard the passage to stable democracy. Critics of the transition process, meanwhile, contend that the democratic commitments of Tunisia’s ruling coalition remain thin.

Activism and Protest

The political history of the modern Middle East is one characterized by diverse and continuous opposition to rulers both domestic and foreign. As these powers have sought to impose various visions of political order, local peoples have consistently pushed back with their own ideas about how they should be governed and by whom. Many ways in which individuals and groups contest those claiming power are characterized as forms of activism (in Arabic, *nishat*), but that term has diverse meanings both across the region and over time. Indeed, scholarly analyses and categories of activism often bear little resemblance to what local people understand as activism—if they use that term at all. In the Arab world, *nishat* is often little more than a catch-all description of efforts to affect or resist various techniques and institutions of political power. In other instances, the meaning of *nishat* is far more specific.

In some of the word’s iterations, an activist (*nashit*) is someone closely associated with the leftist political parties that were most active from the 1950s to the 1970s. In other cases, *nishat* refers to forms of political resistance explicitly juxtaposed to party politics (*hizbiyya*), social movements (*harakat*) and civil society organizations (*mu’assasat al-mujtama’ al-madani*). That is, *nishat* is understood as a non-institutionalized form of resistance.

Even the concept of movements (*harakat*) can sometimes refer to long-term efforts to effect change and at other times to more localized groups (*hirak*), such as those that joined protests during the 2011 uprisings. Activism can entail organizing a demonstration or stirring up opposition to a specific policy, and at other times activism is what social movements do, such as molding public opinion over decades or providing social services. And sometimes activists are viewed as *mu’arada* (opposition), while at other times *mu’arada* refers more specifically to legal political parties in the opposition bloc of a parliament.

Because the vocabulary of activism varies so considerably across time and space, analysts of various forms of contention, mobilization and resistance must seek to understand what the actors on the ground are aiming to achieve. The goal is not to fix the meanings of those terms, but to appreciate the politics that the lexicons of activists reveal. Such an ethnographic approach gives voice to the actors themselves and priority to what they understand to be the reality of their political struggles. It must also be attentive to changes in the meanings of words over time.

Activists and power holders attempt to ascribe different connotations to the terms they use, sometimes seeking to appropriate a term and saturate it with new meaning. In Tunisia under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, for example, *muzaharat* (demonstrations) and *idrabat* (strikes) were words that carried anti-state and even terrorist valences, as phenomena said to be threatening to law and order. Indeed, at that time all forms of contentious politics were politicized and often criminalized. The uprising created an opportunity to recapture the rights-based impetus of protests and strikes, giving each term a more positive connotation. But those who seek to undermine the revolutionary moment or to reject demands for justice and substantial economic redistribution now use the terms *muzaharat* and *idrabat* in ways that convey anti-

nationalist meanings: Anyone who protests or strikes necessarily opposes Tunisia's peaceful political transition—at least that is the meaning some political actors hope to convey.

In Egypt prior to the January revolution, the April 6 activists called themselves a movement (Harakat Shabab 6 Ibril), while those in Tahrir Square during the uprising self-identified as *thuwwar* (people who are rising up). With Hosni Mubarak's ouster, the army-led "transition" began to portray anyone still engaged in street protests as *baltagiyya* (thugs), as a means of calling into question not only their loyalty to the nation but also their commitment to the revolution itself. [2] (# 2) Before and during the revolution, the term *baltagiyya* was used to describe non-uniformed pro-regime "muscle" who beat and bullied protesters on behalf of the state. The regime sought to use the linguistic shift to turn the very stuff of the revolution—citizens expressing dissent in the streets—into a criminalized activity that threatened the good citizens who had packed Tahrir Square in January 2011. In 2013, those who mobilized against Mursi described themselves as a *tamarrud* (rebellion). Important sites of activist struggle against Sisi's regime have been based in various independent, advocacy-oriented *marakiz* (centers), [3] (# 3) *mubadarat* (initiatives) and new youth and left *ahzab* (parties). The analytic takeaway is that activism against the regime takes many forms and comes from many directions.

Equally complex is the full range of terms for what activists do. In addition to the varieties of activism as manifested in social movements, civil society groups and political parties, the work of activists is at times understood as the organizing of specific forms of protest—another term used in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways. The normative underpinnings of these terms vary considerably, but some meanings are relatively consistent. One common means of expressing dissent is via *muzaharat* (demonstrations), usually lasting a few hours and featuring chants and placards that demand changes to specific policies. Less commonly, such gatherings are called *ihitajat* (protests, outcries). Workers often engage in *i'tisamat* (sit-ins) and *idrabat* (strikes), terms that occasionally but not always are used interchangeably. Demonstrations that move are *masirat* (marches). In Algeria, localized micro-riots are called *protesta*, a word of Spanish origin rather than Arabic or French.

Political struggles in Iran exhibit similar contestations over the language of protest and mobilization. Activists and politicians both appropriate and repurpose terms in order to imbue their causes with legitimacy. Given that the Islamic Republic was born of a mass revolution, Iran's political elites use certain words (if uneasily) that evoke the power of popular mobilization (in Persian, *basij*) or coalitional front (*nehzat*, *jebhe*) while scrupulously avoiding other terms more commonly used by opposition activists for social movement (*jonbesh*), demonstration (*tazahorat*) or strike (*e'tesab*). Both the authorities and their challengers adopt language in order to convey specific meanings, so those choices provide a window into the stakes and senses of vernacular on-the-ground activism.

Doing Activism

Just as there is a politics behind the vocabulary of activism, so there are multiple strategies, forms and techniques of resistance. Here again attention to variation across time and space yields interesting insights. Many activists seek to distance themselves not only from the regime, but also from opposition political parties. All parties, these critics argue, are part of the regime because they play by the regime's rules, and thus any real resistance must take place elsewhere. Some activists mock those who eschew grassroots organization in favor of mobilization on social media. Others are skeptical of institutionalized activism, either via non-governmental organizations or other forms of civil society. They argue that institutionalized opposition is beholden to foreign donors as well as the bureaucratic demands of running an office in ways that trade the uncertain horizon of radical opposition for the routine politics of relative stability and security.

Activists often consider the tradeoff between immediate activities and long-term agendas. Unlike outside observers, activists on the ground know intuitively that social movements are never unified. Movements are always coalitions that require ongoing work to maintain. Some social movements are relatively cohesive and more skillfully advance a consistent message. But many others are fragmented, riven by divisions over strategy and vision. Broader mobilizations—like those that birthed the 2011 uprisings—are better understood as assemblages of diverse people and groups that in an exceptional moment come to apprehend a common goal, such as the overthrow of a regime. During the more common non-revolutionary moments, however, activists try to claim persuasively—to opponents and fence sitters alike—that their movement is organic, effortless and growing. Doing so is part of the work of activism itself.

In this sense, many activists spend much of their time as catalysts rather than architects. They corral existing organizations, curious individuals and informal groups. They patch together events, convince others of shared aims, and circulate knowledge about opportunities and tactics. Some are lifelong activists, but many of those who now organize and join street protests were bystanders to political activism until the uprisings. Some emerged as front-line militants, and others simply could not stay out of the upheaval around them. Some never envisioned themselves as activists, but found themselves engaged during the uprisings, and have never been the same.

At the same time, seasoned activists from older generations express concern that the new generation is limiting mobilizational tactics to protests without a coherent plan or organization to effect real change. Such a critique was also launched against the Occupy protesters across the United States in 2011. Once the police forcibly cleared spaces of occupation, the movement seemingly dissolved. Because Occupy failed to develop a mechanism for maintaining connections or building a long-term movement, critics assert, and because it lacked a unifying ideology, it accomplished little or nothing. But the refusal to adopt more established forms of activism—that is, the purposeful avoidance of a framing and unifying program—is also a form of ideology.

Scholars of the Middle East—like scholars of contentious politics in general—often fall back on frameworks that posit politics in terms of state power vs. social resistance. That dichotomy appears in many analyses as the key cleavage that drives events forward. But such a position is too close to the public affirmations of authoritarian state leaders and dissident activists alike—the shared assumption that all protest politics is directed at the state. Activists engage in multiple struggles: They work to expand the boundaries of their own cause, seeking to draw in others and make them see the world in new ways. Scholarly categories often fail to capture what activists understand—not all acts against the state are acts of resistance, and not all acts supporting the state signal acquiescence. Indeed, not all activism is even directed at the state. Activists of every ilk seek to shape their political environment in large and small ways, altering the field of politics even if through only minor shifts in the meaning of particular actions.

Capillary Activism, Consolidated Repression

Whither activism in the Middle East? The idea that re-entrenched authoritarian regimes have effectively quashed activism is simplistic. Activism since the uprisings and particularly during the period of authoritarian re-entrenchment has taken multiple forms—as it always has. One pattern that appears to be emerging is a shift away from large-scale movements and broad demands for regime reform and toward focused claims about particular policies and reforms. Regimes, meanwhile, continue to deploy anti-terrorist legislation to crack down on dissent, a trend that picked up after Congress passed the PATRIOT Act in October 2001. In particular ongoing peril are journalists, human rights activists and intellectuals (with and without university affiliations). Their work has long been the work of political activism, even when framed in other terms. But such harsh regime tactics also indicate that activists continue to frighten those in power. Smaller protests and other forms of resistance are increasing rather than decreasing.

Rather than an age of ensconced autocracy, the current period might better be characterized as one marked by the global rise of populist nationalism—with Egypt's Sisi and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan now joined by other hyper-masculinist and patriarchal rulers, including President Donald Trump. This state of affairs has led many ordinary citizens—including many who never viewed themselves as activists or protesters—to join the activist ranks, even if they continue to shun certain labels. More than 4 million in the US alone [4] (# 4) turned out

for the global Women's March on February 21, 2017, in opposition to Trump and his retrograde (if confused) nationalist agenda.

Whether activism is situated in a global perspective or viewed at a national or regional level, it is on the rise. In the Middle East, the repression of protesters since the early days of the 2011 uprisings may have driven many citizens back to their homes and computers. Undoubtedly, some question whether they were better off before the uprisings, particularly in places like Libya, Yemen and Syria, but also in Egypt. The popular embrace of protest has faded in many places since the 2011-2012 period. As citizens face failing economies, increased repression and uncertain futures, many are thinking twice about whether contentious politics are the best avenue for realizing political change. At worst, some have given up entirely on the possibility of better political futures, hoping instead for some semblance of stability or normalcy, even if that means a return to the bad old days.

But others unquestionably have found their voice and do not intend to return to silence. Just as the outcome of the uprisings cannot be evaluated in the short run, so the notion of a unified outcome—of success or failure at the macro-level—cannot capture the impact of the uprisings on politics across the region. As activism continues in a diversity of forms and meanings—even as many citizens retreat from public engagement—the lessening of mass mobilization and popular support for it in no way equals an end to political resistance.

Endnotes

[1] The Tunisia data was collected by Le Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux and supplied to us by Laryssa Chomiak. On Algeria, see the article by Robert P. Parks in this issue.

[2] Paul Amar, *The Security Archipelago: Human-Security States, Sexuality Politics and the End of Neoliberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 200-225.

[3] Advocacy centers often deal with issues such as human rights, women's rights and freedom of the press; some are independent research centers.

[4] Jeremy Pressman, "Crowd Estimates 1.21.2017," [available here](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/u/1/d/1xa0ilQyKz8x9Yc_rfhtmSOJQ2EGqeUVjvV4A8LsIaxY/htmlview?sle=true#gid=0) (https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/u/1/d/1xa0ilQyKz8x9Yc_rfhtmSOJQ2EGqeUVjvV4A8LsIaxY/htmlview?sle=true#gid=0).

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