

Testimony

Encounters on the Margin of Revolution

I realize, in detailing how I've been living the past few months - that whatever I write as an Arab expatriate in England will be as much about immigration and exile as much as it is about the revolution. Witnessing, albeit from a distance, the revolts in the Arab world has forced me,

Londoners appear as reserved and distant as ever. Don't they realize what just happened? Don't they care about it one bit? I tweet my frustration: "How could people on the London tube not be as excited as I am about Tunisia? I feel like such a foreigner."

as well as many of the Arabs living abroad, to question and reformulate the definition of my identity vis-à-vis not only the nationals of the west European country that I now live in, but also the many other Arab identities I am surrounded by. I trace below four encounters I had in the context of political upheaval in the Arab countries with the aim of conveying the texture of and variation in the relationships among Arabs in the UK and more importantly, between them and the British nationals as the Arab world attempts to reinvent itself.

Encounter One - Noah on London Bridge

January 14, 2011, around 6 pm GMT. Still at college trying to wrap up for the day before I have to meet a friend in about an hour. A fellow Palestinian sends me a message to the cell

phone: "He is out!" Tears roll down my face – joy, in its purest undisturbed forms. I rush to Facebook to verify the news; it was true! The Tunisians got rid of their dictator! I reach out through Tunisian and Arab news websites, Facebook and phone calls to Arab friends in the city.

As I head to the appointment with my friend, Londoners appear as reserved and distant as ever. Don't they realize what just happened? Don't they care about it one bit? I tweet my frustration: "How could people on the London tube not be as excited as I am about Tunisia? I feel like such a foreigner."

When I finally arrive, Noah is as oblivious to the breaking news as his compatriots. How could I explain to this Yorkshire lad how monumental this event was? Telling him that it was similar to the fall of the Berlin wall in Europe's recent history would not be a fair comparison. This was the outcome of years of action and the people's will and profound hope in contrast to what most of the world powers would have wished for. The wonderful Tunisians overthrew their regime on their own, in spite of those powers.

For Palestinians and Lebanese, rare were the moments that were as happy as this. Growing up in war time Lebanon and living through one Israeli attack on the country after another, any cause for celebration was overshadowed by the burdens of a public event. Happiness was not pure, celebration rarely unadulterated by some public agony. For once though, a public event was the cause of celebration, not the obstacle to it. This was probably only comparable to the day the Israeli army withdrew from the south of Lebanon on 25 May 2000. At the time, just like



Muzna Al-Masri

Muzna Al-Masri is a Palestinian/Lebanese researcher and activist. She is currently pursuing doctoral studies in the UK, exploring political clientelism, sectarian antagonism and football in Lebanon. She has worked and consulted on human rights, conflict, and development in countries across the Arab world.

now, I felt entitled to happiness, that I have a right to it. Most other times being happy felt like a selfish and inconsiderate act.

I can feel Noah's frustration with my babbling, so I ask him where to head to, but he thinks we should not decide on a place yet. I should first "walk out my enthusiasm" - as if I was suffering from some sort of malady that I needed to rid myself of. My sense of foreignness grows deeper.

Encounter Two - Between Three Worlds: Demonstrating in Support of Egypt

February 5, 2011. I cut two pieces of cardboard and staple A3 sheets on them. I want to make my own banner but have still not decided what I want to write. I slip the markers in my bag and head to the Egyptian embassy in west London

My attempts to connect with fellow Arabs over the past few months expose the simultaneous fragmentation and unity of the different Arab groups who inhabit this cosmopolitan city.

with a friend from the neighborhood. Unlike me, he is a local but has been campaigning for the Palestinian cause for many years. In fact it was a picture of him with Arafat that had led to our first conversation. We arrive early to a demonstration to the organization of which I had contributed - only to realize that for the moment, the organizers outnumbered the demonstrators. I write something about support for the Egyptian people in Arabic on one side of the banner, and an affirmation of how people can bring about democracy in English on the other side, as if I still am not decided what message I am trying to convey and to whom.

I worry that the crowd in front of the Egyptian embassy is too small, but I know that the Stop the War Coalition had called for a parallel

demonstration in front of the - appropriately - close US embassy and would be joining us soon. Young Egyptian men and women with beautiful eyes and tight t-shirts are loud and excited. The slogans and chants are mostly in Arabic, and often copied from Cairo's Tahrir square. Despite us receiving pieces of paper with the chants and their English translation, they bear little significance to the British friend who is accompanying me. In the crowd are most of my friends who live in the city, a mixture of Palestinian, Lebanese and other Arab students, artists and professionals. Together with an ex-colleague, a Syrian dissident who is no longer allowed to return to his home country, I speculate which Arab country will be leading the struggle for freedom next - he is obviously clear on which he prefers. Surrounding is as well is a relative minority of British people, mostly supporters of a multitude of socialist political groups who find in the Egyptian revolution proof that the "proletariat has finally risen" and rejoice the approaching inevitable end to capitalism.

I make way with friends to the demonstration organized by the Stop the War Coalition, beneath the wings of the US embassy's huge eagle. The mood there is different and the crowd more numerous, though predominately, I dare say, white, British, and middle aged. There is a podium for speakers from which many of the long time activists address the crowd one after the other - Tariq Ali, John Rees and a recorded message from Ken Livingston. Unlike the youth organizers of the Egyptian side of the demo, the messages here are clear and well thought. I feel a bit envious; this is how "our" demonstration should have been, though admittedly I do not conform to analysis that makes the links between Islamophobia on the one hand and the US and UK support for the Egyptian regime on the other. As I make way to leave the crowd that has now become an amalgamation of the young Egyptians and the British activists, my sense of loss is amplified as I come across another huge constituency on the northern side of the demonstration. Veiled

women and bearded men, some of whom are performing their prayers in the street. These were not only Egyptians but also other Muslim Londoners, most of them with roots in one of this kingdom's past colonies.

My attempts to connect with fellow Arabs over the past few months expose the simultaneous fragmentation and unity of the different Arab groups who inhabit this cosmopolitan city. Despite around a half a million Arabs living in the UK, the community appears divided across lines of class, national identity and context of immigration. The spaces and organizations that aim to bring them together are also limited.

I am not in the UK because of voluntary or forced exile. I am merely here as a student and

Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria among others are not foreign countries in some far away locations for me. They are effectively and affectively home, or at least part of it.

my connections to "home" have remained as strong as when I was still living there. Though I never came to the UK with the aim of building a future for myself here, a sense of dismay with the Arab countries had some role in pushing me away. Other Arabs who I have met here have been less fortunate as they were forced into exile by the tyranny of either politics or economics, and some of them with limited opportunities for continued connections with home. The revolutions brought with them the possibility of an end to their expatriation.

In the past year, I have taken part in many demonstrations in this city; protesting the Gaza Flotilla killings last summer, supporting the Egyptian, Tunisian, and Libyan revolutions, and marching against the planned budget cuts in the UK. I often felt alienated in these actions. I neither understood the local political scene nor identified with any of its components. I was yet another person among thousands in

a demonstration, but, had I been back home, these would have not been my causes or I would have chosen to engage in a different way. True, I was physically in that crowd in front of the embassy, but I could not hear my voice in the chants and slogans.

Encounter Three: A University Lecturer, My Future, and a Political which is Personal

Early March 2011. I should be completing my doctoral dissertation. One university lecturer, as she checks on how my writing is going, finds it unjustifiable that I am distracted by the events in the Arab countries: "Remember, what is happening is important, but it will not have a serious impact on your life. Finishing the however PhD will." I shrug, before a smile creeps into my face. What on earth is she talking about? Does she really think that holding a PhD will have more influence on my life than a change of regime in Egypt?

I wanted to tell her that Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria among others are not foreign countries in some far away locations for me. They are effectively and affectively home, or at least part of it. I have visited and worked in most of these countries and have friends in them. Through my work before coming to the UK and starting the PhD, I had the opportunity to visit the premises of the first Arab human rights organization in Tunisia and be surveilled by the country's intelligence services. I met activists from the 1990s Bahraini uprising – long forgotten now despite succeeding in turning the kingdom into a constitutional monarchy - who more than a decade later were still fighting against the past regime's criminal impunity. I had tea and smoked Hookahs with Yemeni socialists on the mountain cliffs of Tae'z, and danced with feminist Egyptians on boats cruising the Nile. None of the countries being reported on in the news were anonymous, neither were the demonstrators. I shared the cause and knew well how some were engaged in struggles for freedom and justice for decades, and not just today when they are making it into the UK media.

I also wanted to explain to her how personal politics has been in my and most of my compatriots lives. I am Palestinian, born and raised outside of my home country and away from my extended family to an exiled father because of politics. My childhood and all its memories were dictated by a civil war in the Lebanon I grew up in. It was the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut which inspired the first line of poetry that I wrote and the invasion's consequences that forced my family to move to Jordan a year later. My significant love relationships all started around such public events and even my day-to-day work patterns were circumscribed by corrupt Lebanese politics as I planned my days according to the country's daily electricity cuts and struggled with dysfunctional internet services.

I wanted her to understand how a change of regime in Egypt could change the face of the region if new representative governments stopped collaborating with the Israeli and US governments or with the multinational corporations which are reducing the people to penury. That maybe soon, Arab countries would no longer be occupied and impoverished. Maybe then I would have a chance to get a decent job back home. Maybe then, our new people-led governments would invest in higher education so I wouldn't need to be here for a doctoral degree.

If she had looked closer, she would have seen that the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt had already made more of an impact on my life than the four years I had spent in a British academic institution. Their marks were not only personal, I could also feel them in my own body which trod lighter, in my skin that had softened, and in my eyes now bright with aspiration.

Malcolm and "March for the Alternative"

March 26, 2011. The papers predicted that the demonstration would be the biggest London has witnessed since the anti-war movement brought half a million people onto the street protesting the war on Iraq eight years ago. The funding cuts planned by the UK coalition government


have been at the heart of public debate and the centre of political activism in the country for the past six months. The local struggle has been quite impressive to my foreign eyes, with its abundant grassroots action and cross-sectoral collaboration. Again, I join British friends on the day and this time I am in the company of a member of the Labor party who opposes the policies of the conservative led coalition government.

The mood is festive, but as we cross Westminster Bridge two men on the side of the bridge cast a solemn shadow on my day. They hold a poorly written banner saying that the intervention in Libya is about the oil and not the people. The UK government had begun bombing targets in Libya a few days ago, under the claim of supporting the revolution

The Conservatives have already started tightening their grip on the immigration law and are pushing me away despite their international politics making life elsewhere impossible.

and the United Nation's cover. A lot of British friends around me do not see a problem in that. "What are we supposed to do," my Labor party companion says, "are we supposed to sit back as Gaddafi massacres his people?" He says that in all sincerity and sense of obligation to the "people of the world," though he is fast to reflect on and mock his tone when I ask him who exactly the word "we" that he uses includes.

Malcolm is "smart as a whip," according to his friends, and very knowledgeable and political, which is all the more reason for me to be surprised by his position and willingness to adopt clichés repeated by the establishment and the media. I try to explain what I regards as the basics, despite knowing that my arguments sound redundant: Is the UK government's real motivation behind the intervention protecting



civilians or securing the oil? Have not past claims of support for human rights in countries such as Iraq actually made the situation of civilians worse? Were there not many cases where the UK government not only refrained from intervening, but in fact supported the oppression of civilians? I, for one, was only too aware of such a case. I was in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, when the UK and US governments blocked a security council call for an Israeli cease fire, despite knowing that just as many civilians were endangered then as in Libya.

But all of this is tedious and boring. Why am I here? What am I doing in this country? I am marching with friends against the UK's austerity plan, despite knowing that one way

the cuts in expenditure will be minimized could be by bombing yet another country close to home. The Conservatives have already started tightening their grip on the immigration law and are pushing me away despite their international politics making life elsewhere impossible. I am a foreigner, an alien, both on paper and in the possibilities and aspirations I could have here. I am going back, to the Arabic speaking side of the Mediterranean. There, at least is now hope for change and there, I can hear my voice in the demos.