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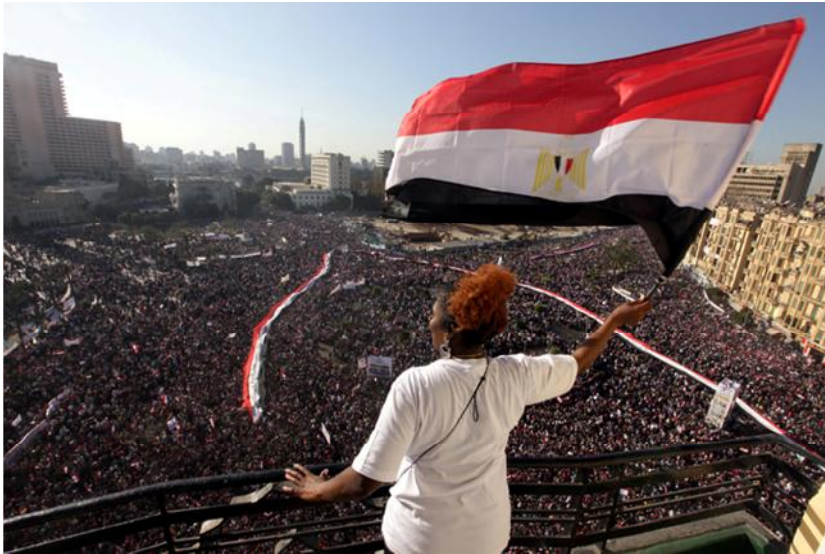| www.afgazad.com		afgazad@gmail.com
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From 9/11 to 2/11: How Egypt's revolution became the world's

The revolutionaries of the Arab world pioneered strategies of activism that influenced the movements around the globe.

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As Egyptians celebrated the ousting of Mubarak in February 2011, its revolution had become the world's [EPA]

Istanbul, Turkey - These are dates that bookend one's life. On September 11, 2001, a world

order seemed to collapse with the Twin Towers. Whether you were 13 or 33, nothing would be the same. Battle lines were drawn; the United States would retaliate and everyone, Americans as well as Arabs, was forced to choose sides. All the sins of the United States - decades of support for dictatorships, occupation, coups, a global economic system that depended in good measure on the continued oppression of the peoples of the Muslim world - had become irrelevant, regardless of their role in producing al-Qaeda's terrible blowback.

The tenor of responses among mainstream Arab commentators could be summed up by the main argument of the first *Arab Human Development Report*, published in 2002. The report was celebrated in the Western media by the same voices that would cheerlead the US invasion of Iraq the next year because it was written by "Arabs themselves" and because it focused its attention almost exclusively on the internal problems plaguing the Arab world, while avoiding almost any discussion of the historical or current role of the West in creating and sustaining them.

The Arab authors of the Arab Human Development Report essentially exonerated the West from responsibility for the problems of the Arab world, turning their attention to "Islamic pressure" as a chief cause of the region's problems. Of course, such an analysis was filled with gaps that lessened the effectiveness of its analysis or proposed solutions, such as cutting military expenditures while increasing spending on education.

First meetings of two 'second superpowers'

Around the same time that the anti-corporate globalisation movement was becoming a major force against neoliberalism in the West, the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada in the occupied Palestinian territories mobilised a new generation of Arabs, who, thanks to non-state controlled Arab media, were exposed almost daily to the Palestinian struggle against occupation. It's not for nothing that the young activists who organised the initial Tahrir protests in 2011 could be seen wearing "End the Occupation" t-shirts, as many of them first become politically conscious and mobilised by the second intifada, opposition to which even "friendly" Arab governments such as Egypt's could not suppress.

While the new generation of Arab activists was at least in part inspired by the surrounding alter-globalisation movement, before September 11 and the threat of a US invasion of Iraq, the Western and often hard-left anti-corporate globalisation movement essentially ignored the Middle East and larger Muslim world, despite the regions' crucial role in the emergence of globalisation. And so there was little understanding of the deeper structural dynamics underlying repressions and authoritarianism in the Arab/Muslim world, whether among countries aligned or opposed to the United States.

Because of this, leading sections of the anti-corporate globalisation movement, which had become more militant in the wake of increasing state violence against protesters (particularly at the Genoa G8 meeting in July 2001), moved further towards a simplistic anti-US imperialism rhetoric which, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, was ill-equipped to offer a serious alternative discourse to the "democracy through war" rhetoric of the Bush Administration. It was therefore unable to join a critique of US empire with a denunciation of the brutality of Saddam Hussein's rule and the structural problems highlighted by the Arab Human Development Report.

Similarly in the Arab world, as the US invasion of Iraq loomed on the horizon, it was still an older generation of usually hard-left, Nasserist or traditional Islamist activists who led the emerging protest movement against it, as epitomised by the "Cairo Conference Against US Hegemony and War on Iraq and in solidarity with Palestine", first held in Cairo in 2002, and several more times in the ensuing years. While the conferences included many civil society and human rights activists who would play crucial roles in the 2010-2011 revolutionary protests, this first iteration of a global peace and justice movement developed an anti-war discourse that put too little focus on Saddam Hussein's crimes, as well as the violence of the post-invasion Iraqi resistance, in favor of a singular focus on US-imperialism.

In a mirror image of Bush's rhetoric, standing with Iraq meant standing with the country's brutal government and after the invasion "the legitimate Iraqi resistance", which was considered the "sole representative of the Iraqi people". One meeting in Beirut saw Western and Arab activists celebrate the Iraqi resistance even as members of the international peace movement were being held hostage and threatened with decapitation by insurgents, whose own brutality was increasing matching the US-launched violence in the number of victims it produced across Iraq.

Beginnings of a new consciousness

While travelling across the now-global peace and justice movement in the early to mid 2000s could often be an exercise in ideological futility, it was also clear that a younger generation of activists, both in the West and in the Arab world, was increasingly asserting itself and forging a more nuanced discourse. These activists could simultaneously hold the US and European governments to account for their history of imperialism and colonial rule, and support for repressive governments across the region, and devote increasing attention to developing a critique, and a method of resistance against what many activists would come to describe as their "internal occupation" by corrupt, authoritarian and often brutal regimes.

The energy of Tahrir proved far more agile and creative than the forces of repression [GALLO/GETTY]

By the time of the fourth Cairo conference in 2006, participants were focusing more energy on calling for a "new Arab movement for change" that would include much greater coordination and a focus on protecting civil societies against government repression. It's not a coincidence that this

move occurred in the wake of the emergence of new forms of internet-friendly grass roots movements such as **Kefaya**, which would provide an incubator for developing the strategies and discourses that would ultimately launch the January 25 revolution.

Not surprisingly, the mid-2000s was the period when internet usage in the Arab world began to expand significantly, while the seeming institutionalisation of the US occupation in Iraq and lack of any movement towards democratisation in most Arab countries necessitated the emerging generation of activists to focus their attention on how to resist their own governments and the seemingly impenetrable systems of rule which protected them.

At the same time, the success of movements against authoritarian regimes in Serbia and countries of the former Soviet Union (inspired by the Zapatistas and other first generation anti-neoliberal movements of resistance in Latin America and Europe), and a growing appreciation of the creative strategies of largely non-violent but militant resistance they deployed, also provided inspiration for activists in their mid-to-late 20s, who were increasingly entering civil society as leaders of grassroots, internet-supported pro-democracy and human rights movements across the region.

Finally, and equally important, it took until the mid-to-late 2000s for the economic consequences of neoliberalism in the Arab world - which was being pursued with greater vigour by governments such as those in Tunisia and Egypt - to build a critical mass of immiseration among a large enough segment of the working class to produce serious worker revolts in industrial cities such as Mahallah, Egypt, in 2006 and 2008 and in Gafsa, Tunisia, in 2008. Desperation across the increasingly marginalised industrial hinterlands such as Sidi Bouzid, where the Arab Spring was sparked, also increased.

It was in this situation that militant labour activists, who had a long institutional memory of anti-government and anti-neoliberal resistance, joined with the cyber-generation of civil society activists to form movements such as April 6, and together would provide the nucleus of the "movement of movements" that would form the revolutionary coalition of late 2010 and 2011.

Labour activism was helped by the global financial crisis that erupted full-scale in 2008. This crisis gave renewed legitimacy to the anti-neoliberal movements in the United States and Europe - at the same time that its powerfully negative impact in the Arab world spurred civil society and labour movements to take more direct action against their governments, especially in Tunisia and Egypt. Young Arabs and young Americans for the first time could feel a common generational sense of forboding and lack of possibilities for the future, and through the internet could form a truly world wide web of disgruntlement, anger and increasingly urgency and solidarity.

History changes course

In the wake of the ousting of Ben Ali and Mubarak, Western governments and organisations have touted their role in helping to "train" the activists behind the revolutions. The reality was quite different. This generation of activists did not need the West to teach it how to use Facebook or Twitter or build more effective civil society structures. But it was able to use Western NGOs (both independent and government-sponsored) to help strenghten and support the local as well as

pan-Arab networks of civil society, who so famously coalesced together in late 2010 with the outbreak of the Tunisian revolution. They were not the necessary condition for revolution, but they certainly helped enable it.

Ultimately, however, far from owing their success in any significant measure to Western tutelage or support, the soon-to-be revolutionaries in the Arab world were, in the second half of the past decade, pioneering strategies and styles of activism that, however influenced by the previous decade of protests globally, added new dimensions that would prove crucial to the initial success of the Arab Spring revolts.

It was this global network, with young Arabs in the lead (themselves inspired, it should be pointed out, by young Iranians the year before) which scored its largest victory on February 11, 2011, when Hosni Mubarak fled Cairo for what he thought would be the safety of Sharm El Sheikh. In the violent, yet heady, 18 days of protests that led up to his departure all the new techniques and discourse of protest coalesced in an unprecedented way - from Facebook to nationwide strikes, mass marches to violent attacks against government buildings, sit-ins to near civil war.

Protesters used every tool in an arsenal forged during the previous decade that included the best practices, insights and inspiration of a global panoply of thinkers, movements and cultural creatives, most of whom had dreamed of that day even as they never imagined it could happen so soon, and in such a joyous manner as it did.

And so, standing in Tahrir Square amid hundreds of thousands of people cheering and crying at the fall of Egypt's last Pharaoh, Egypt's revolution had become, in a very real sense, the world's. In a real sense, with Mubarak's departure the demons of September 11 were finally exorcised across the region, unleashing a wave of hopeful protest that shows little signs of abating any time soon.

Even if a steep price in blood is still being paid from Port Said to Homs, the energy of Tahrir and its sister squares across the Arab world, and now with the Occupy movements globally, have proved so far more agile and creative than the forces of repression and the status quo. At least today, we can be hopeful that they will ultimately produce dignity, justice and freedom, not merely for the peoples of the Arab world, but for the world as a whole.