The Impact of the Arab Spring on Islamist Strategies

Ioana E. Matesan
Syracuse University, imatesan@wesleyan.edu

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The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt created a contagion effect that inspired a series of uprisings by sending two signals: first, that even entrenched authoritarian regimes are vulnerable; and second, that nonviolent tactics can be effective in bringing about dramatic political changes. Subsequent developments, especially in Libya and Syria, convoluted these messages. Nonetheless, the political openings and the electoral victory of Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia continue to send the signal to many Islamist opposition groups that nonviolent means and participation in politics can be effective ways to produce political change. The chance of gaining power through electoral means can give Islamists strong incentives to join in the demands for democratic institutions and change their stance towards political participation. The appeal of nonviolent tactics, however, is undermined when external threats surpass domestic considerations. When the primary concern of the public is about outside threats and the main enemy is external rather than a domestic despot, the impact of the Arab Spring on views regarding the efficacy of nonviolent tactics is diminished. Similarly, when an Islamic group is primarily concerned with the "far enemy," the incentives for moderation offered by political participation are undermined.

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Introduction

The speed with which protests spread and regimes crumbled across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 surprised many scholars and forced them to reflect on why their theories hadn't predicted the Arab Spring.

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This trend is all too reminiscent of the scholarly debates after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, when the rapid turn of events surpassed theoretical expectations. However, in the early 1990s, the international community was euphoric at the prospect of a "democratic domino effect" and believed that the fall of communism signaled the dawn of a new era for international security. While there was initially much enthusiasm about an Arab wave of democratization, policymakers and scholars remain much less certain about the impact of the Arab Spring on regional and international security. This article seeks to tackle this issue by examining the impact of the Arab Spring on the strategies of Islamist groups that have employed violent tactics to pursue their goals. The article argues that the political openings and the electoral victory of Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia continue to send the signal to Islamist opposition groups that nonviolent means and participation in politics can be more effective than violent insurrection. However, when the primary concern is about outside threats and the main enemy is external rather than a domestic despot, the impact of the Arab Spring on views regarding the efficacy of nonviolent tactics is diminished.

The first section of the article briefly examines the dynamics of contagion effects and why the protests spread so rapidly across the Middle East and North Africa. Understanding the mechanisms of the revolutionary cascade is important because it signals that nonviolent tactics have wide public appeal across the region. The second section examines the case of Egypt in order to explore how the political changes in the region have made nonviolent strategies particularly appealing to Islamist groups. The third section reflects upon the limitations of this contagion effect, considering the impact of the Arab Spring in the Palestinian Territories and drawing some comparisons to other cases.

Then and Now: Dominoes, Cascades and the Spread of Nonviolent Resistance

Before the events of 2011, many political scientists who studied the Middle East and North Africa tended to believe in the durability of authoritarianism in the region.[1] It comes as no surprise, then, that area specialists are now asking where they went wrong.[2] At the Middle East Studies Association annual convention in 2011, one of the best-attended panels forced scholars to rethink their theories and question what had became almost conventional thinking (the panel was entitled "The Stability of the Authoritarian Arab Regime?"). Still, such an element of surprise is not a new phenomenon for academics. Only two decades ago, scholars studying Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were asking almost identical ques-

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tions. In 1991, Timur Kuran suggested that revolutions are inherently difficult to predict because of the interaction of social and psychological factors.[3] His explanation of how protests escalate lies in the argument that individuals participating in protests can set off a chain reaction that can generate a revolutionary bandwagon by making people believe that removing a regime is a possibility.

This argument is still highly relevant today, as we seek to understand the rapid spread of demonstrations across the Middle East. Drawing on insights from Patel, Bunce, and Wolchick,[4] Eva Bellin suggests that two logics are at work in the contagion effect that we have witnessed in the Arab Spring: the logic of deliberate diffusion, which refers to the conscious sharing of tactics by activists; and the logic of the demonstration effect, which suggests that successful precedents can set off waves of optimism and euphoria that become more powerful than rational considerations about risks and benefits.[5] In addition to this emotional dimension, however, Bellin recognizes that the sense of impunity played a crucial role, and that demonstrations spread drastically once people in Tunisia realized that the army would not shoot.[6]

Building on these arguments, Bellin's theories suggest that events in Tunisia set off a chain reaction in the region by sending two signals: first, that even entrenched authoritarian regimes are vulnerable and sensitive to public pressures; and second, that nonviolent tactics can be effective in bringing about dramatic political changes. Revolutions ultimately occur because of specific local grievances. Nonetheless, the ignition can be sparked by events outside of the country when they send the signal that public pressure is indeed effective and when they raise public suspicion about the resilience of the regime.

Simply seeing people protesting is not enough. Before the January 2011 events in Tunisia, there had been significant, prolonged protests in Greece that received international media attention, yet they didn't spark any revolutionary cascades. The protests in Iran in 2009, which were crushed by the regime, also didn't spark any regional revolutions. Egypt experienced regular demonstrations staged by groups such as the Kefaya movement or the workers in Mahala well before the events in Tunisia, yet these mobilizations did not explode into a revolutionary movement. Tunisia ignited the revolutionary spark when it sent the signal that the military can be on the side of the people and that regimes can be toppled. Looking at the sequence of events, the protests in Tunisia started in December 2010 and escalated into January 2011, but Egypt did not emulate these demonstrations until after Tunisian President Ben Ali fled the country. In fact, only three days after the Tunisian President was ousted, on January

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17, an Egyptian man set himself on fire near the parliament building in Cairo,[7] and activists started planning a "day of anger."[8] Similarly, events in Egypt did not immediately spark sustained protests in other countries until it became clear that the Egyptian army was not taking Mubarak's side and that the president had resigned. Thus, the revolutionary zeal in Tunisia and Egypt became contagious when it sent the signal that nonviolent demonstrations can be effective and that regimes are more vulnerable than people perceived them to be. From this perspective, then, the initial message that Tunisia and Egypt sent to other government opposition movements across the region was that nonviolent resistance can be more effective and less costly than often assumed or perceived, especially when the military does not support a regime unconditionally.[9]

Scholars have identified several mechanisms through which nonviolent resistance becomes effective. Nonviolent action can produce revolutionary political change by undermining the power, resources, and legitimacy of the state.[10] Stephan and Chenoweth argue that nonviolent tactics enhance the domestic and international legitimacy of their protagonists and encourage broad-based participation. This level of mobilization also implies increased pressure on the regime and makes violent suppression more costly and more likely to backfire.[11] The repression of unarmed civilians, unlike the repression of armed insurrections, can increase commitment to the struggle, lead to divisions with the political elites and security forces, and raise international pressures against the regime.[12] In their large-N analysis that compares the effectiveness of violent and nonviolent resistance worldwide, Stephan and Chenoweth find that nonviolent strategies have been successful 53 percent of the time, compared to the 26 percent success rate of violent strategies.[13]

Within the context of the Arab Spring, since the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, the brutal repression in Libya and Syria raised doubts about the effectiveness of nonviolent tactics. The setbacks in the rest of the region demonstrate that, in spite of the contagion effect on the side of activists and masses pushing for democratization, outcomes are determined not just by the strength of the pro-democratic forces. The turn of events is also shaped by the stance of the military, the extent to which political actors who seek to maintain the status quo push back, and the willingness of the revolt to fight the powers that be. As Kriesberg points out, one of the dangers of a wave of protests of the type witnessed during the Arab Spring is that the messages being diffused can be misguided; activists might overestimate their impact or have overly ambitious goals, whereas governments might underestimate the backlash to violent suppression.[14]

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Countries like Libya, Syria, and Bahrain have proven that regimes in the Middle East vary greatly in terms of their security apparatus, repressive capabilities, external support, and actors who have a stake in the status quo. Bellin suggests that what has been crucial in determining the outcomes of the demonstrations has been the military's will to stand by the regime or to defect. Consistent with Bellin's main arguments, this decision is determined by the dynamics of social mobilization and by the structural character of the military. When the opposition is unified and representative of the entire nation, and when it pursues nonviolent tactics, it becomes much more difficult for the military to justify violent repression. However, the will to shoot also depends on the character of the military: when the armed forces are organized along patrimonial lines and perceive their interests as linked to the survival of the regime, they will be much more likely to repress the population. According to Bellin, this has been the case with Bahrain, where most military units are predominately Sunni, thus needing the patrimony of the Sunni-dominated government to survive; these units are bolstered by both mercenaries from abroad and deployed Saudi troops.[15] Syria is another example: the majority of government and military forces belong to the Alawite clan—a minority in the largely Sunni population—and it was mostly Alawi units repressing the population.[16]

Independent of what factors account for the divergent outcomes in the region, an important question is whether the lasting message of the Arab Spring is that opposition groups are more inspired by nonviolent resistance or by violent models. This article proposes that one of the powerful signals sent in the region by these events is that nonviolent resistance can be more effective than violent insurgency for Islamist opposition groups. The next section develops this argument by examining developments in Egypt since the January 25 revolution and focusing on the case of *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*, an Islamist group in Egypt.

Political Openings and Incentives for Nonviolence

The large masses converging on Tahrir Square on January 25 surprised everyone, including the Egyptian security apparatus. Although reports indicate that police responded with live ammunition and that militants in the Sinai attacked police and international oil pipelines, the January 25 movement remained nonviolent.[17]

By the summer of 2011, disillusionment with the lack of political reforms set in, leading to a new wave of protests and clashes with the police. Yet, in spite of marginal calls to escalate protests, the majority of groups

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involved in the demonstrations continued to call for nonviolent resistance, as well as civil disobedience and a rejection of violent tactics. For instance, on July 12 nineteen political parties and coalitions issued a joined statement calling for revolutionaries to reject violent acts and use only peaceful methods such as strikes, hunger strikes, and civil disobedience tactics in order to ensure the victory of the revolution and not allow the "enemies of the revolution" to promote violence and turn sympathetic citizens against change.[18]

Throughout these developments, Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*, and the Salafist groups present in Tahrir Square explicitly disassociated themselves from violence and focused on forming political parties and participating in elections. The Muslim Brotherhood's rejection of violence and interest in participating in free elections under the banner of the Freedom and Justice Party was predictable. In its early days, the Brotherhood was associated with some violent incidents, and its founder, Hassan al-Banna, was initially hesitant to form a political party out of the belief that party competition divided the *ummah*.[19] However, the group has since evolved into a nonviolent movement, fielding candidates in elections, forming alliances with other parties, and developing an increasingly democratic and pluralist political platform over the years, despite continued intimidation and repression by the regime.[20]

The rigged November 2010 People's Assembly elections in Egypt marked a major political setback for the Muslim Brotherhood. The group lost all its seats in the parliament and 1,000 of its members were arrested.[21] Left with no access to the political system, the Brotherhood had strong incentives to join the January revolution and support the call for democratization and free elections. The 2011 election indeed paid off for the Muslim Brotherhood. The group headed the Democratic Alliance for Egypt, which won 47.2 percent of the seats in the People's Assembly.[22]

Among the Islamists running for office, the Freedom and Justice Party represents the centrist stream. The more conservative Islamists have united under the banner of the Islamist block, which comprises *Al-Nour*, *Al-Asala*, and the Building and Development Party (*Al-Binaa Wal-Tanmiyya*). The Islamic block gained 24.7 percent of the seats in the recent elections. The establishment of the Building and Development Party is a particularly interesting development in post-revolutionary Egypt. The party was established as the political wing of *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* by Tareq Al-Zumar, who until recently was serving a long sentence for participating in the assassination of Anwar Sadat.[23]

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The Building and Development Party presents itself as an Islamist party that takes Islam as the frame of reference, supports implementing shar'ia laws, and believes in democracy.[24] While the party rejects the separation of religion and politics, its leaders pledge not to use violence in dealing with any situation or with the state, and to abide by the Egyptian law and constitution.[25] The party claims that it is ready to deal with non-Islamic parties with different beliefs from across the political spectrum, and that it welcomes Copts to join their ranks.[26] At the same time, however, the group rejects the notion of Egypt ever having a Coptic president, arguing that asking for a Muslim president to rule a Muslim country is no different than England demanding its ruler to be Christian.[27]

A cynic might suspect that having party membership open to Christians is more of a tactical move than a genuine sign of pluralism, especially given the fact that the group's petition to form a party was initially rejected because its platform was based on religion, which is prohibited by law. In the end, the group's appeal was upheld based on the fact that Article 2 of the constitution does state that Islamic shar'ia law is the main source of legislation, and based on the fact that membership is open to any religion.[28] Whether the Building and Development Party is more or less conservative on Coptic or women's rights, the fact that it seeks to participate in politics and vows to reject violence and abide by the Egyptian law is of great significance, especially given the history of *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*.

Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya: From Violence to Deradicalization

Before its renunciation of violence in 1997, *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* was one of the most violent Islamist groups in Egypt, accounting for the majority of terrorist attacks during the 1980s and early 1990s. The group first emerged as a major radical actor when it united with the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and participated in Sadat's assassination on October 6, 1981. As a result of this attack, many of the *Jama'a*'s members and leaders were arrested. These developments incapacitated the group and deterred it from staging any major acts of violence during the mid-1980s. However, the *Jama'a* resumed its assaults in the late 1980s, after the government closed down mosques, banned propagandizing, and arrested large numbers of Islamists in the summer of 1987.[29] Between 1989 and 1995, the group focused on attempting to assassinate prominent Egyptian figures. This included the assassination of secularist writer Farag Foda (in 1992), and several unsuccessful attempts on the lives of the Interior Minister (in 1989 and 1990), the Information Minister (in 1993), Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz (in 1994), and President Mubarak (in 1995). Starting in the mid-1990s, the group began a violent campaign against foreign

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tourists, which heightened in 1996 and 1997, culminating in the November 17, 1997, Luxor attack, where fifty-seven foreign tourists and ten Egyptians were killed.[30]

What motivated this violence? Inspired by the writings of Sayyid Qutb, *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* justified the killing of public figures and fellow countrymen on the grounds that they were infidels (*takfir*). Politicians were infidels because they accepted secular law, and fellow countrymen could lose their status as Muslims if their writings or behavior were seen as breaking the Islamic code of conduct.[31] Thus, the *Jama'a* conceived of itself as "commanding good and forbidding wrong" (*hisba*) in order to bring Egyptian society as close as possible to *Jama'a*'s interpretation of an Islamic society.[32] Politics was condemned as being *Jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic), and participation in parliamentary politics was rejected on the grounds that it would imply an acceptance of secularism and of the right to legislate without Allah.[33]

The group's main goal was to establish an Islamic society and re-establish the caliphate. The group regarded the Brotherhood's focus on preaching (*da'wa*) as a means to do this as too soft and law-abiding.[34] Both *al-Jama'a* and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad accused the Brotherhood of becoming a domesticated movement destined to remain weak as long as it participated in politics.[35] In their view, what was needed was a vanguard to take over state power and radically change society, as this was seen as the only viable way to establish a truly Islamic state.[36]

Given the founding ideology of *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* and its violent past, the current commitments of its leaders to respect the law and participate in politics through the formation of a political party become even more significant. It must be noted, however, that the ideological change of the *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* did not come about *because* of the political openings after the January 25 revolution; rather, the prospects of free election provided the *Jama'a* with an opportunity to act on its new beliefs.

Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya started changing its radical discourse in 1997, when the imprisoned leaders issued a declaration of nonviolence. After two years of internal debate, the external and internal leadership issued a joint communiqué that fully endorsed the nonviolent initiative. By the end of 2008, *al-Jama'a* had published twenty-six books and numerous booklets developing and explaining its ideological revisions and new doctrine, and offering a "coherent intellectual and theological position."[37]

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The new organizational doctrine emphasized that attempts to uphold high standards of morality should not come at the expense of Muslim lives and the push for shar'ia law should not compromise the peace or the prosperity of the *ummah*.[38] The group recognized that fighting split the *ummah*, harmed the interests of society, and did not achieve the goals it set out to achieve. This meant that it became an action without meaning that would be legally forbidden.[39] Thus, the notion of *takfir* was abandoned because it led to discord within the community, and the jurisprudence of jihad was replaced with the jurisprudence of utility versus injury.[40] Furthermore, the group also accepted that declaring war or applying penalties can only be performed by a ruler and not by any other group or individual.[41] The concept of *hisba* was redefined along nonviolent lines, and the group reinterpreted it as an obligation to rectify wrongdoings through peaceful methods such as preaching.[42] Within this new framework, political participation was accepted as a legitimate tool for attempting to achieve key Islamic objectives such as implementing shar'ia laws and Islamicizing society.

The group has justified these ideological revisions on the basis of learning and maturing, suggesting that the radical views were based on a simplistic reading of religious texts and a poor understanding of the realities of religion, society, and politics.[43] Rashwan argues that this is perfectly plausible, especially since these ideological revisions displayed much more refined theological arguments compared to the early writings, which had demonstrated that the leadership did not have a good grasp of the different Islamic schools of philosophy and primarily relied on some hard-line interpretations.[44] This argument about theological learning as a mechanism of deradicalization also has a psychological dimension, as the leaders of the organizations matured from zealous youth to "tempered middle-aged people."[45]

Some scholars regard the deradicalization of *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* as a form of military defeat that was spurred by the repression and decapitation of the group. Ashour suggests that intense and sustained repression led the group to rethink the cost of violent confrontations and the theological legitimacy behind its violence.[46] He argues that deradicalization occurs when such intense and sustained repression is combined with selective incentives and a charismatic leadership that is respected and has a strong influence over its followers, and when the group is socialized into nonviolent norms.[47]

One can argue that the main lesson learned and the impetus for ideological revisions were not primarily about theology or about the cost of violence, but about the effectiveness of violent tactics as compared to the

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effectiveness of nonviolent tactics. Indeed a recurring theme in the ideological revisions is the argument that violence is not cost-effective: jihad is forbidden if it is likely to fail, and its practice needs to be evaluated based on harm and utility. After years of violent campaigns, which took an increasing toll on Muslims, the *Jama'a* failed to achieve its goal of establishing an Islamic state, and the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood achieved far more success in both Islamicizing society and gaining access to the political process through elections. Equally important was the fact that public opinion became increasingly critical of the radical cause. As Al-Sayyid remarks, the *Jama'a* had a choice "between armed resistance without prospect for success in the short and medium term and use of a political process that affords a good opportunity of victory in the medium or long term."[48]

The present political openings in Egypt in the aftermath of the January 25 revolution and the ability of the *Jama'a* to establish a political party, participate in an Islamic alliance, and win seats in the People's Assembly have arguably given the group significantly more influence and legitimacy than the years of violent campaigns. Thus, one of the strongest signals sent by the Arab Spring to Islamist opposition movements in the region, especially in light of Islamist political gains in both Egypt and Tunisia, is that nonviolent political participation is a more effective tactic than violent insurgency. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the recent electoral results in Egypt, it would indeed be very difficult for a group to argue that given political openings, political participation is too soft and ineffective a tactic, and that a violent takeover of the regime is necessary. In other words, the Arab Spring and the electoral victory of Islamists can serve to discredit radical voices and to give credence to prodemocratic forces and to nonviolent Islamist groups that are willing to play by the rules and pursue their goals through electoral means. As Elman points out, once Islamists participate in the political system, electoral rules that provide incentives to appeal to the median voter can continue the trend of discrediting radical voices.[49]

The signal about the effectiveness of nonviolent tactics is likely to reverberate across the region, especially since the history of the *Jama'a* indicates that even radical hard-line groups are adaptable and open to learning. They learn not only from their own experience, but also from the experience of other Islamist groups inside and outside the country. This being said, it is equally important not to fall pray to teleological arguments and to recognize under what circumstances the appeal of nonviolent resistance would be limited.

Cautious Optimism: Internal versus External Threats

The Missing Revolution in the Palestinian Territories

The Palestinian Territories provide an interesting case for reflecting on the limitations of the democratic and nonviolent contagion effect set off by the Arab Spring. As protests spread across the Middle East and North Africa, Palestinians also began organizing in March of 2011, but these demonstrations did not escalate into a full-blown revolution and society-wide mobilization.

According to Salem, sixty new groups of Palestinian youth have started mobilizing through Facebook and Twitter since March 2011.[50] What is interesting about the Palestinian mobilization efforts is that their messages have been different than the predominant messages in protests across the region, which have all been generally focused on replacing authoritarian rulers and democratizing the political system. In Egypt, for example, the main message has been clear and simple from day one: the people want Mubarak out.[51] In the Palestinian Territories, on the other hand, the March 15 movement started out by calling for national unity and an end to the Fatah-Hamas split, after which it started calling for an end to the occupation and the right of return for refugees.[52] Thus, the Palestinian demonstrations focused on healing rifts rather than removing a regime, and they also combined domestic and external concerns, along with demands for both domestic and foreign actors.

On one hand, it seems obvious that Palestinians would be making demands that are relevant to their most salient problems, since demonstrations typically reflect specific local grievances. On the other hand, however, when a revolutionary message has multiple dimensions and seeks several goals and targets different actors, it is far less likely to mobilize a unified national front, and it is far less likely to be successful.

The slogans of the Palestinian protesters as well as public opinion polls show that the unified call for democratization and removal of the regime did not resonate in the Palestinian Territories, because the primary concerns of the Palestinian public are the lack of state and the occupation. For the public, the primary enemy is not the regime per se, but rather the lack of a unified regime and the presence of an external enemy, Israel. Public opinion polls from 2011 show that Palestinians considered the creation of a state, rather than democratization, the most important goal for their country.[53]

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In this context, the public resonance of nonviolent tactics is more limited. When it comes to domestic reforms, the Palestinian public is indeed pushing for an abandonment of violence and factionalism and calling for national reconciliation. This demand was met with some success, as both Hamas and Fatah started working towards a unity government in the aftermath of the demonstrations. However, given the fact that the public seems primarily concerned about the occupation, the lessons from Tunisia and Egypt are hardly applicable. Indeed, in examining public opinion, only a slight shift was observable in opposition to armed attacks against Israeli civilians after March 2011; there was not a drastic transformation of attitudes towards the utility or legitimacy of violence against Israel.[54] When asked about the potential effectiveness of peaceful demonstrations, about 60 percent of Gazans and just under 50 percent of West Bankers thought that these tactics could speed up the end of the occupation, but less than 30 percent of West Bankers and around 45 percent of Gazans thought that a peaceful revolt could bring the occupation to an end.[55] Such numbers are important, but not enough to mobilize the entire society. In other words, while Tunisia and Egypt inspired Palestinians to get out on the streets, the most important signals that led to a contagion effect elsewhere in the region (that authoritarian regimes are vulnerable and can be toppled through nonviolent resistance) were not as resonant for the Palestinian public.

The two major political actors traditionally mobilizing the Palestinian population currently each represent "the regime" in West Bank and Gaza accordingly. While the public is concerned about the occupation and regards Israel as the major threat, Hamas and Fatah are primarily concerned about each other. As Bloom points out, the strategies of the major political actors in the Palestinian Territories are primarily determined by the dynamics of the competition among them and the continuous attempt to "outbid" each other.[56]

In light of the Arab Spring, Hamas and Fatah might try to outbid each other through nonviolent tactics in order to be able to work towards a unity government and send the message to the international community that they are aligned with the nonviolent spirit of the Arab Spring. Indeed, Hamas has declared that the "non-violent approach is part of a strategy for our present situation to draw world sympathy to our cause."[57] Yet, speaking in Tehran, Haniyeh also declared that the group is not willing to permanently renounce armed resistance against Israel.[58] For smaller groups, such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, violent tactics and spoiling strategies might be the most effective option to undermine Hamas's rule in Gaza and Fatah's discourse.

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In the Palestinian context, we can thus identify three conditions that have prevented the revolutionary zeal of the Arab Spring from cascading into widespread prodemocratic mobilization. First, the Palestinian public is relatively more concerned about external threats than their neighbors in the region. Second, Palestinians have multiple concerns that extend well beyond the lack of democratic governance, and their grievances are targeted at both domestic and foreign actors. Third, the absence of rule of law and of effective state institutions provides Palestinian political actors with incentives to compete against each other through any means, including violence.

The Broader Relevance of External Threats

The issue of external versus internal threats and priorities is relevant when considering not just public sentiments, but also the calculations of the pro–status quo forces and the considerations of Islamist opposition groups. Some scholars have suggested, for example, that a major concern that is emerging in the Gulf region is the rise of Shia power and growing Iranian influence, which are affecting the responses to demonstrations and, ultimately, the course of the Arab Spring.[59] This could explain not just the decision of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to send troops to suppress demonstrations in Bahrain, but also the decision of the Bahraini military to defend the monarchy and suppress demonstrations. As Barany points out, the Bahraini military is not a national army but rather "a fighting force of Sunni Muslims who are charged with protecting a Sunni ruling family and Sunni political and business elites in a country that majority-Shia Iran has officially claimed as a province since 1957, and where about three of every four or five people are Shia."[60]

External factors can also affect the considerations of Islamist groups. Outside of the Middle East and North Africa, the prospects of democratization and political participation did not moderate internationally-oriented militant groups such as the Indonesian *Jama'a Islamiyya*, who in the aftermath of democratization embarked on a series of violent terrorist attacks. Since the 1990s, the group has shifted its focus from domestic issues and imposing shar'ia law to targeting the "far enemy," and it has developed a multinational constituency and established bases of support outside of the country.[61] Given this broadening of priorities and constituency, repression could not fully decapitate the group, and democratization did not offer the international constituency enough incentives to abandon violent tactics.

Similar dynamics can also play out in the Middle East for groups that are part of global jihadist networks and are primarily focused on the far enemy rather than on implementing domestic shar'ia laws and Islamicizing a national audience. Broad internationalist goals such as establishing a caliphate, however, are difficult if not impossible to reach. Therefore, as groups with more limited and domestic-oriented goals make progress in reforming society and local or national laws to reflect Islamic principles, even internationally oriented groups can learn and adapt accordingly. If such learning occurs, the scales can tip in the favor of nonviolent resistance in the long run.

Conclusion

The initial victories in Tunisia and Egypt sent a strong and important signal that nonviolent tactics *can* be effective and bring about political change. As demonstrations spread across the region, their success has been mixed, reinforcing the fact that outcomes are determined not just by the number and power of protesters but also by the strength and resolve of the regime and pro–status quo forces. Even in light of setbacks, however, the recent electoral wins of Islamist parties continue to send a strong signal that nonviolent Islamist strategies can be more effective than violent insurgencies. In considering the future of the Arab Spring and of democratization in the region, it is important to keep in mind not just domestic considerations but also external threats and regional dynamics.

About the Author

Ioana Emy Matesan is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science at Syracuse University. She received her BA in Political Science and Economics from Monmouth College and her MA in Political Science from Arizona State University. Her research interests focus on international security, political violence, Islamist movements, and Middle East politics. At Syracuse University she has been involved in a variety of research initiatives focused on conflict and international security, including the Spoilers of Peace Project (in the Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration), the Global Black Spots Research Project (in the Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs), and the Project on Post-Conflict Justice and Islam (in the Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism). Her research has appeared in *Nations and Nationalism* and *The National Strategy Forum Review*. She is a recipient of the Hassan Yabroudi Award for best graduate paper in Middle Eastern Stud-

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ies at Syracuse University and the Hardt Graduate Fellowship in Religion, Conflict, and Peace Studies from the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict at Arizona State University.

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