

Introduction

In early March 2011, a group of teenagers in the Syrian border town of Dar`a, fired up by the spirit of rebellion that they had seen sweeping across the Arab world, went out one night to paint graffiti on walls in the town. Prominent among the slogans they sprayed was the call that had been reverberating through the Arab world since the uprising in Tunisia in January: *'al-sha`b yurid isqat al-nizam'* [the people want the downfall of the regime]. If they were hoping that the citizens of Dar`a would wake up the next day to be amazed and secretly gratified by their daring, they were right. But they also discovered the danger of such an act and such words in a country that had been ruled under 'emergency laws' for more than forty years. The teenagers were rounded up by the political security police, incarcerated in its grim headquarters and subjected to the beatings and burnings that were part of the routine brutality of the force. When the boys' relatives came to try to find them, they were treated with contempt by the governor and his security officials who told them to forget about the boys and to go home.

This triggered a series of public protests in the town. The arrests, the rumours of torture and finally the contemptuous attitude of the officials were too much to bear. Joined by hundreds of others, the boys' relatives marched through Dar`a demonstrating their anger. Chants and slogans were shouted against the regime, posters of the president, Bashar al-Asad, were defaced, a statue of his father, Hafiz al-Asad, the late president, was toppled and destroyed, the ruling Ba`th party headquarters and the court building were torched, as were the offices of Syriatel, the telecoms company owned by Rami Makhoul, a first

cousin of the president. The Syrian security forces responded by firing into the crowds in an effort to drive them from the streets. A number of people were killed and dozens wounded but were denied access to the town's hospital. Instead, the citizens turned the al-'Umari mosque in the old town into a provisional medical station to treat casualties. This was then raided by the security forces, with further loss of life, including one of the doctors. In all, five people died violently in Dar'a that day.

However, this was just the beginning. In the weeks and months that followed, demonstrations and uprisings spread throughout Syria, met by an increasingly violent response from government security forces that cost the lives of thousands of Syrian citizens. What had begun with the semi-humorous slogan 'Your time is up, Doctor' (referring to Bashar al-Asad's training as an ophthalmologist) had become within a matter of weeks 'Butcher of the People! Traitor to Syria!'. In late April, giving an oration at one of the many funerals in Dar'a, a former Syrian MP, Riyadh Saif, proclaimed 'We are all martyrs-to-be for the sake of our rights, of our dignity and for the dignity of the entire nation and the Syrian people!'¹ Appropriately enough, the citizens of Dar'a renamed the square outside the al-'Umari mosque, the scene of such violence, 'Dignity Square' [*midan al-karama*].

This sequence of events not only captures a moment in the unfolding drama of Syria's politics, but also highlights some of the key features of a politics of resistance in action, helping to justify its closer study. Public demonstrations can easily be identified as dramatic signs of dissent and opposition. More than that, however, open protests, their causes and the course they take can shine a piercing light on key features of power itself. Whether in a democratic or in an authoritarian system, such as in Syria, power clothes itself for much of the time in the guise of normality, of routine, of a presence that need not be questioned because it is so much part of the 'natural' order of things. This is not necessarily part of some deep conspiracy. It may be the outcome of everyday conformity, enforced if necessary by the coercive arm of the state, but generally visible only in exceptional circumstances. It is habit that can make power so binding, since people tend to take it and their position within it so much for granted.

It is precisely such a relationship that, for instance, some anarchists of late-nineteenth-century Europe and America tried to rupture. They wanted to startle people out of their complacency through acts of violence that were meant to – and often did – provoke the state to reveal

its own capacity for violence, red in tooth and claw, using force to maintain fundamental inequalities.² Equally, Marxist revolutionaries have long tried to awaken the working class, to make its members see clearly the true nature of the oppressive system of exploitation that they may have been blinded to by the false gods of nationalism or liberal capitalism.³ As many have recognized, the hold of any system of power is directly related to the hold it can exercise on people's imagination. The circumstances that begin to create the possibility of self-consciousness, of offering people a chance to 'come out of themselves', are those that can also cause dramatic shifts in power, creating resistance among those who had until then gone along with their own subordination.⁴

In Syria, in 2011, this is what had begun to happen in Dar`a, but also in many other places across the country. The familiarity of the situation that other Syrians saw or were made aware of struck home forcefully, causing them to think again about much that they might have otherwise accepted. Whether this had been through habit, prudence or dissimulation must remain an open question. It is one that has been extensively explored in Lisa Wedeen's notion that for much of the time, when confronted by the bombast of the regime, Syrians act 'as if' they subscribed to its own account of itself and its authority.⁵ It was now, however, their opportunity to act in ways that turned conformity on its head. In doing so it was clear, through their choice of targets, both symbolic and actual, that the citizens of Dar`a – and of towns across Syria – had an intimate knowledge not only of the public state, but also of the 'shadow state' in Syria. Resistance in this sense followed the contours of power itself, marked by the very familiarity that had once appeared to breed conformity.

In the case of Dar`a, as elsewhere, this familiarity determined the targets that drew the anger of the demonstrators and also shaped their initial demands. These included not only the immediate release of the group of teenagers responsible for the graffiti, but also the release of all political prisoners, the repeal of the state of emergency laws that had been in force for nearly fifty years, a public enquiry into the deaths of the five who had been killed on the first day of protest, an end to corruption and the repeal of the law governing agricultural lands along the border which placed them effectively under the arbitrary control of the security forces. This mixture of local and national demands indicated that the townspeople knew full well how the two spheres were connected, and were aware of the networks of the 'shadow state' that linked the

Syrian security apparatus and the business enterprises owned by those close to the al-Asad clan. In this respect, the protests and the attacks on symbols of power were acts of resistance against the systems of inclusion and closure that had denied most of the population the chance to decide their own lives.

Here, as elsewhere, resistance thus follows and contests the lines of inclusion and exclusion that are integral to all systems of power. They may be conceded or they may be imposed, just as the criteria they use may be agreed or simply accepted – or they may come to be resented. A politics of resistance in this sense illuminates both the dividing lines of this relationship and the increasingly threadbare rationales used to justify their maintenance. It means more than simply opposition to particular policies, the usual stuff of contentious politics. This is a politics of contention on a more fundamental scale. It goes to the heart of a system of power over others, its principles and the ways that people experience it. All of these factors, including the implementation of policies that consistently disadvantage some, whilst privileging others, can feed into a politics of resistance that takes as its core issue the lines of discrimination themselves.

In the Syrian case, as in the events in Tunisia and Egypt that had inspired so many in Syria, the main divide was between those who were connected with the security and business networks at the summit of the state, and those – the vast majority of the citizenry – who were systematically excluded. It was they who had to suffer the prospects of unemployment and of job discrimination in favour of the children of the elite. As the subjects of unanswerable power, they had no recourse when the ‘emergency laws’ in all three countries were routinely invoked to maintain order and to give the security apparatus and their business associates immunity from any kind of public scrutiny. Given the origins of much of the ruling elite in Syria among the clans of the Jebel Alawi, it could also give a sectarian sharpness to denunciation of that elite. This had been very much in evidence during the Muslim Brotherhood-led uprisings of the late 1970s. It was also heard occasionally in some of the slogans of 2011 as the violence escalated, particularly in Latakia and Baniyas, cities with a history of sectarian tension. Nor was the regime itself slow to exploit this social divide. It wanted to portray the protests as driven by sectarian animosity in an effort to ‘denationalize’ the resistance and to create a climate of fear amongst Syria’s religious minorities.

Elsewhere in the region, as in Bahrain and in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, resistance has arisen to contest exclusion drawn

along sectarian, as well as ethnic lines. In these cases, a political order has been imposed on large numbers of people, ensuring their unequal access to resources, both material and institutional, on the basis of acknowledged and unacknowledged criteria of discrimination. Whether in the episodic uprisings and protest movements among the majority Shi'a of Bahrain, or among the Palestinians under Israeli military occupation, resistance has been more than simply a response to oppressive practices. It has become a way of engaging with, indicting and seeking to change whole systems of power and exclusion, demonstrating a capacity for independent action. By making clear what they were hoping to free themselves from, through many small gestures and acts of resistance, as well as by staging major demonstrations, the resistance movements dredged up and laid bare what have been called the 'capillary' forms of power.⁶

The focus on the politics of resistance in this book is also therefore a way of examining the genealogy of resistance and its potential. Although spectacular and highly visible acts of resistance – demonstrations, protests, riots, insurrections – draw attention to an unbearable situation, as they are intended to do, they do not come out of nowhere. On the contrary, they may be merely the most obvious expression of what happens at the moment when some catalytic event brings to the fore long-simmering resentments. Such an event resonates because the ground has been prepared through stories, poems, songs and a wide array of local acts of defiance and resistance, unseen by the authorities and by outside observers. One of the common themes repeated by participants in the dramatic events of 2011 across the Arab world was the spectacular impact on them and their friends of the evaporation of fear. One of the chants in the streets of Dar`a was 'There is no fear, there is no fear, after today there is no fear'.⁷

This was a sentiment echoed in countless ways from the streets of Tunis, to Cairo's Tahrir Square and to Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout. But the presence of fear – that is, the fear of what the consequences might be of open opposition to an oppressive system of power – is testimony to the fact that such opposition exists, that the exercise of power is resented and that people have ceased to believe that the existing order of things is the proper order of things. In this sense, fear is a symptom of hostility. It is also a perfectly understandable response to the violence of forces of military occupation, or of the national security state. More than that, it indicates that the so-called 'awe of the state' [*haibat al-dawla*] was nothing more than people's recognition that the state

could do them harm. This might still shake their faith in their own capacity to act effectively or safely, but it could not suppress the idea of resistance itself. As Khalil Mutran, poet of an earlier generation of nationalist resistance put it, having listed the forms of physical violence that oppressive forces can inflict on the body of the subject:

‘that is your [only] power –
 And in it is our protection from you. So thank you’.⁸

It could be argued therefore that a politics of resistance follows power in that it too is capillary in nature, branching out in many different ways. It takes not simply the obvious routes of physical resistance, but also follows the paths of the imagination where resistance to power is not only told but also valued – it forms part of the narratives of everyday life that give meaning to encounters with power. It is for this reason that the kinds of practices described as forms of ‘everyday resistance’ cannot be dismissed as of little relevance to larger, more visible resistance projects. Whether or not they are intended to contribute to such a larger project, their very existence, as the accepted everyday practices of the marginalized and excluded, can prepare the ground in ways that the authorities are unable to detect.⁹ Thus novels, plays, poems, films, the visual arts, as well as forms of expression that go beyond such conventions, cannot be dismissed as ‘merely’ cultural, of little relevance to the kinds of resistance seen in the streets of a country undergoing violent upheaval. On the contrary, the ruthless attention paid to the control of such matters by authorities everywhere, not only in the Middle East, testifies to their own fear of the power of the imagination in stimulating ideas of resistance and in providing it with a ready repertoire.

A study of resistance in all its phases and aspects is therefore also an important way of understanding the reservoirs of images and memories that people draw upon when acting politically. It brings into focus the models that they follow for both imagining and organizing resistance to despised or unwelcome domination. In the events of 2011 in the Middle East, the sight of popular uprisings carried out by people who in many ways – language, religion, youth, culture, music, histories, political subjection – were much like themselves, inspired people from country to country across the Arab world, as well as in Iran. Whether in the Yemeni capital Sana`a, or in the Jordanian capital Amman, or in the provincial cities of Syria or of Egypt or of Libya, the actions, slogans and chants transferred easily from one setting to another, since in some key respects they could be seen to be the same. This explains the resonating

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power of the calls for the fall of the regime, the songs where the words may have been altered to take in the name of a local hate figure, or indeed the ways of mobilizing to confront the security forces by occupying public space. Of course, events did not and could not play themselves out in the same way in each country, as the inhabitants of Libya, of Syria, of Bahrain and of Yemen have found to their cost. Nevertheless, what was significant in each of these countries was the way in which region-wide repertoires of resistance meshed with the local practices that had long formed common threads, however widely dispersed the workplaces, urban neighbourhoods, villages and provincial towns concerned.

Dramatic as the events of 2011 undoubtedly were, they were also large-scale performances of actions that had been taking place in different countries for a number of years. Thus, despite the immediacy and uncertainty of the factors that caused the demonstrations in Tunisia to have such a momentous effect, they would be difficult to understand without having some insight into the events of the 1980s when riots and demonstrations ripped through Tunisia's cities. Their force and coordination would also be difficult to grasp without some understanding of the effects of Tunisia's much-vaunted neo-liberal economic restructuring on the Tunisian workforce as a whole. Similarly, the capacity of Egyptian workers to organize for civil resistance in 2011 and to believe that it stood a chance of success came out of their struggles of the previous decade. It was then that they had organized themselves outside the reach of their official unions to protest the impact of the economic privatization programmes. Even those Egyptians who had tried openly to contest the dominant order but who had been thwarted, such as the Kifaya movement, or the '6 April' movement, could at least draw upon a repertoire of actions, symbolic and otherwise, that stood them in good stead with the beginning of national protests and demonstrations in January 2011.

In this sense, therefore, to study the politics of resistance is also to study a key component of political power in a field of contention. Understanding the main dynamics of contentious politics means paying attention to the vocabularies that create the basis of new solidarities, the performances that escape and challenge the everyday ordering of power. Even if there is no identifiable movement or cause, or little public sign of it, disenchantment with authority and direct and indirect subversion of power can thrive and, under certain circumstances, coalesce to challenge the material power of regime and state.¹⁰

In the Middle East in particular, where the focus has often been on the politics of the imperial adventures, the states, regimes and apparatuses of power that have given the landscape of the region some of its distinctive features, resistance has often been portrayed as episodic, rather than systemic. This study hopes to open out the field to examine a variety of political actors and actions that have resisted imposed forms of power. Thus it may take in but is not limited to specific political movements and organizations that have tried to claim exclusive possession of an ineffable quality that makes them the ‘essence of resistance’. The case of Hizbullah in Lebanon brings this out. Despite evidence to the contrary, it has tried to identify itself with ‘resistance’ as if this were a general property. In fact, appropriation of the term, with its many associations, is part of Hizbullah’s own myth of power in the game of Lebanese politics. However, resistance, like power itself, is a relation between political actors. That relation changes over time, shaped by the shifting context of political activity and by the seductions of power. Nowhere was this more in evidence than in a speech by the leader of Hizbullah, Hassan Nasrallah, in early December 2011 where he extolled the resistance of Hizbullah and even of the Syrian regime, but poured contempt on the widespread Syrian resistance to that regime.¹¹

It should be fairly clear by now how ‘resistance’ is to be understood in this book and thus the kinds of politics that will be examined under this heading. It will look at activities aimed at contesting and resisting systems of power that people in different places have found increasingly intolerable for a wide variety of reasons. In some settings, this may bring out very public forms of protest and resistance, intended to make those in power reconsider and change specific policies, or indeed the way they exercise power. Whether from the outset, as in Iraq following the U.S.-led invasion of 2003 or in Egypt in 2011, or gradually, as in Bahrain and Syria in the same year, organized resistance may also aim at the complete overthrow of the political regime that has brought the resistance into being through its behaviour.

The methods chosen to make resistance effective, both within a particular country and beyond, will also vary. Spectacular violence, armed uprisings, as well as mass popular demonstrations and the deliberate choice of nonviolent methods have all been much in evidence in the recent political history of the Middle East. They have constituted the fabric and texture of the politics of resistance, reflecting the responses of the particular regime they are challenging. Thus what began as a

popular demonstration demanding redress within the framework of the law in Libya in February 2011 became in a matter of days an armed insurrection that tore the country in two and invited foreign military intervention. Conversely, the determination of the assembled protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square chanting '*Silmiyya! Silmiyya!*' [peaceful, peaceful] to be neither moved nor provoked into responding violently to the attack launched upon them by thousands of riot police and enlisted 'supporters' of President Mubarak confronted the Egyptian armed forces with a very public choice that sealed the fate of the president.

Spectacular violence has also been part of the repertoire of resistance. It has been used to convey messages aimed at recognition of the determination that had led people to desperate acts. In Iraq since 2003, the massacres of Shi'i pilgrims, the destruction of sacred sites, the killings of villagers and members of the security forces and the much-publicized videos of beheadings have sent repeated gruesome signals of an intention to resist the new order that the U.S.-led invasion brought into being. In other places, such as Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, spectacular violence has been turned against the self through public acts of self-immolation, as signals of defiance and despair on the part of those made powerless by the system under which they live. And within branches of the Palestinian and Iraqi resistance movements, these two features have been combined by the suicide bombers who have killed and wounded hundreds, and in doing so have spectacularly annihilated themselves.

Whether the forms of resistance are violent, nonviolent or can be classified as acts of 'rightful resistance', and whether the intention is to reform existing structures of power or radically to reshape them, the qualities shared by much of the varied politics of resistance in this study are both intentional and demanding of public recognition.¹² In that sense, they follow the contours of domination itself. They are also in most instances acts of collective political organization in the sense that they express resistance to subordination by people who find themselves categorized in the same way. At one level, this can mean that citizens are treated as subjects, excluded from the privileges and power enjoyed by the governing elites. The attempt to win recognition of their dignity and thus their rights as citizens has been a central part of widespread resistance politics. This can also apply to those who find themselves disadvantaged and discriminated against as a special category, be they women in Morocco or Iran, Shi'a in Bahrain, Palestinians under Israeli military occupation, or Berbers in Algerian society. This in itself

can help to give a collective identity to a politics of resistance where no strong sense of cohesion existed before.

Collective action to redress sensed wrongs and to assert meaningful rights have been integral to the politics of resistance. Uprisings, demonstrations and protests aimed at the removal of the categorical exclusions and the social closure that denies such rights have been a visible, sometimes spectacular aspect of these politics. But this has often been preceded and underpinned by less visible forms of behaviour that may involve resistance to the implications of the wider ordering of power for the individual. Individually or collusively, people devise strategies to ensure that the impact of the exclusions is lessened where possible. Closer to the idea of 'everyday resistance', these forms of subversion create a counterculture of the subaltern. Here the imposed categories, with their association of contempt, are hollowed out and their material effects lessened. Whether this happens in the sphere of property (through pilfering, quiet encroachment and alternative economies) or of education (through alternative forms that escape the dictation of the state) or of culture, broadly defined (through reaffirmation of values that resist the mainstream), all these activities can feed into a politics of resistance.¹³ They may not in themselves either lead to or be intended to lead to the more public and spectacular forms of resistance that demand public recognition and aim to overturn the order of power. However, they may prepare the ground for such actions, and feed into the larger stream once other circumstances combine to define a more general and public politics of contention.

Cases such as these, where groups of people have been systematically excluded from the system of power that dominates them, illustrate one of the difficulties apparent in any study of resistance. This is the value-laden association of the term, both because of historical associations and because of the centrality in many traditions of political thought of the right to resist unjust and oppressive power. In the century or so of European imperial domination of the Middle East, resistance was seen as both a religious and a national duty. It took on the heroic associations of a struggle against alien forces that had unleashed disruptive violence on the peoples of the region. The same idea was taken up by many during and after the years of the Cold War. It was then that American power was seen as the ruthless carrier of a neo-colonialism that tried to dominate the peoples of the region because of the value of their oil or their part in the global strategic balance. For instance, the positive associations of the term resistance became integral to the struggle