



The Ultimate Revolution: Nonviolent Information Technologies

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We live in a world that is increasingly interconnected-- populations around the world are gaining access to education, information technologies and global media. Along with this interconnected world, there seems to be a rising awareness about the unbearable heaviness of human rights abuses, and as a result, a greater demand for democratization and civic participation.

However, in the post-colonial era, many countries - particularly in the Middle East - are caught between brutal military dictatorships and an outside international order organized around the principles of economic interests and strategic domination, rather than human rights and international law. Even with an international institution like the UN, who - along with a charter and declarations - passes specific resolutions to alleviate some of these problems, lacks the mandate and mechanisms to uphold rule of law at an international level. In fact, the UN Security Council, with its five-state veto power, is part of a world order that blocks the emergence of functional and implementable international law. This allows many states to act with impunity when committing colossal crimes against their civilian populations, while maintaining machineries of complex webs of horrific security institutions and practices.

Amidst such internal constraints and international structural challenges, what are a people caught up under a brutal dictatorship to do? Looking at the catastrophic consequences of the Arab Spring - including the resurgence of counter revolutions in Egypt, the rise of cultish radical armed groups like the Islamic State (ISIS), or the carnage taking place as a result of the armed confrontations to the Syrian regime - one sees the hefty price paid by ordinary citizens. With hundreds of thousands killed, tortured, imprisoned and exiled, much of the landscape in the Arab World has become an earthly inferno that is consuming human beings, resources and infrastructure. So much sacrifice and yet, there has been little gain. Instead, we are regressing and drowning further. These are combusive combinations that create despair, confusion and recipes for radicalization. How can transitions to democracy, greater freedoms and sustainable economic development occur without such horrific costs?

Can the revolution in information technologies mitigate the devastating consequences of armed revolutions? Can Revolution in technology revolutionize Revolution?

Those of us, who are concerned with human rights abuses, or interested in the prospect of democratization in repressive states, or even concerned with issues of global security, need to think of ways to make such reforms and revolutions more economical. It is the responsibility of those interested in such areas to strategize, in order to minimize the human costs.

#DiploHack - Leveraging technology to economize human suffering

On May 27, 28, 2015, more than 100 participants envisioned ways to use new technologies to help youth caught in conflict at [#HackingConflict](#), a [#DiploHack](#) challenge in Ottawa. Six teams of 12-15 people from diverse backgrounds participated in a co-creative and collaborative event that challenged them to approach conflict differently. The DiploHack symposium was organized to explore how youth and technology can disrupt conflict and empowers nonviolent activism amidst the maelstrom of war, with a focus on Syria and Ukraine. The teams explored a whole new direction that we all need to consider seriously, and make greater effort in understanding the challenges and the ways technology could be instrumental in this process of economizing suffering.

Nonviolent methods are the future path for sustainable transformation

This is not about dreamy idealism. This is about serious economic thinking. But in this case, it's not the economy of financial assets but the economy of blood, of children's lives and their homes and schools and hospitals. Nonviolent methods are the inevitable future path for such transitions - not only because they are more ethical, humanistic or beautiful, but because nonviolent methods are primarily the most economical and least costly ways of achieving serious and sustainable transformation--by reducing human cost and maximizing political gain. We cannot afford to not think in these terms anymore.

What would have happened, for example, if the Syrian Revolution remained within the Internet and never took to the street? This is a question that haunts me, as I was among those who witnessed the

virtual revolution that erupted among Syrians but with no signs of it on the streets in the early weeks of the Arab Spring in 2011. There was a deafening calm in the “Kingdom of Silence” during the aftermath of the other Arab Revolutions, but only in the streets. Inside the Wide World Web, Syrians were neither silent, nor calm. Much was underway and many discussions had already begun. Groups formed on Facebook, Skype meetings began taking place and listservs had already been piling from previous years.

During the last four years, Syrians have been engaging in extremely important national conversations about democracy, human rights, whether or not to arm, as well as dealing with difficult issues like sectarianism and extremism. The sad thing is that these extremely important conversations have been taking place while so much blood was trickling off the map of Syria and, in many ways, constraining these transformative conversations. Hundreds of Internet publications, newspapers, and radio channels were launched in the last few years, not to mention all the conferences, symposiums and workshops. Many civic institutions and movements have been forming as well.

It was the first time Syrians were finally able to - in half a century - engage in debate, discussion, disagreement or agreement about public issues in radically new and open ways. These were the real conversations. This was the real revolution in Syria. Is it not, therefore, sad that the Syrian revolution armed to bring down the Assad dictatorship before these online conversations took shape? Yes, there most probably would have been regime crackdown on cyber activists. But if we had stopped to consider the costs of the most brutal crushing of the “virtual” revolution - an online revolution that was in the process of transforming culture and fostering the creation of an alternative and viable civil society - and compared those costs to the losses we faced after the Syrian resistance armed, we would soon realize the gaps.

More importantly, thinking about the challenges and the costs of confronting physically brutal dictatorships would open new possibilities for a different way of thinking and strategizing; exactly similar to the kinds of projects produced at the DiploHack symposium where minds came together from various fields--putting together projects and campaigns--even in tight two-day brainstorming and strategizing sessions. Can we imagine the possibilities if virtual empowerment were to take shape in systematic and organized ways, and in areas where conflict seems inevitable, as is the case with many countries in the world today?

We tend to think that “change” has to happen “out there.” We think “virtual reality” began with information technologies. However, if we examine our human condition, we come to realize that human beings entered virtual reality the moment they became capable of speaking and transferring meaning and information through sounds; hence, influencing each other and creating reality. We are already in a virtual reality by the nature of language and human interaction. Perhaps “out there” is already “in here” within the domain of the “word” and hence the need to think of transformation at the level ideas before the exercise of physical coercion. Any “reality” that allows the exchange of words, ideas and imagination is the place where humans change their outer realities. The ultimate transformation and real revolution, therefore, is changing “minds”--this is always much less costly than killing “bodies.”