Re-envisaging West Asia

Looking Beyond The Arab Uprisings

Editor

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Introduction

In 2011, protesters in the streets and squares of the Arab urban-scape united to demand an end to the absence of "bread, freedom and social justice." The eruption of protests throughout the Arab region made what seemed impossible transmogrify into the "ambitious possible."[1] The protesters' united presence removed from power Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Ali Abdalla Saleh in Yemen and, with the assistance of NATO, Muammar Qaddafi in Libya. Now, however, the ambitious possible once again appears impossible. The iron fists of authoritarian regimes in the region have once again seemingly crushed any hope of reform or revolution. For many, the Arab uprisings are at an end. Indeed, publications have already emerged on *After the Arab Spring*.[2]

A firm understanding of the Arab uprisings, however, remains elusive and without this comprehension it appears premature to declare their end. What are the Arab uprisings? We still do not know and what we do know remains limited. Scholars, among others, however, have produced a rich and vast literature trying to grapple with the vectors and composition of the Arab uprisings.[3] In attempting to comprehend the Arab uprisings, academics have focused on the transformation in media technologies and in particular social media and the rise of Facebook and Twitter.[4] A furious debate raged between

scholars as to the importance of social media in the uprising and produced a literature that emphasised the physical, as well as the virtual, spaces of the protest movement.[5]

The literature on the changes in communication technology principally focused on *how* people organized to produce some of the largest protests the world has ever witnessed. This debate only partially addressed the question of *why*. To answer why the Arab uprisings emerged many academics have focused on political economy with critical scholars keen to assert that the uprisings are a rejection of global neoliberal capitalism.[6] Academics have been attentive to the chants heard throughout the protests of "bread, freedom and social justice" and argue that it was the inability to live a dignified life that drove the peoples of the Arab world to protest.[7] In this paper, I want to build on this literature that cites the inability to live a dignified life as a central vector for the social protest movement and to think through the protest movement with the concept of absence.

Absence

Absence, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is a state or condition in which something expected or wanted is not present or does not exist.[8] The Arab uprisings were first and foremost about a response to absence and principally an absence of justice, politics, freedom, dignity and bread. In attempting to explain the Arab uprisings as an absence, however, the richness and complexity of the term 'absence' itself becomes visible. Absence, as is apparent in its dictionary definition, gravitates around, rather than resists, presence. This is particularly significant, in the context of the Arab uprisings in which citizens of the Arab world established a mass presence through protests in public space in defiance of real and perceived absences. To think through the complexities of absence, in order to gain a firmer understanding of the Arab uprisings, this paper utilizes the work of Mahmoud Darwish and the concepts and ideas pursued by Darwish in his seminal text *In the Presence of Absence (Fi Hadrat al-Ghiyab)*.

Absence is an important concept for Darwish and the way he thought about absence provides entry points into thinking about the Arab uprisings. For Darwish absence is not the opposite of presence. He attempts to push beyond polarities in his writing and this results,

for instance, in comprehensions of life that do not render it the opposite of death and beginnings that are not framed in oppositions to ends.

Embracing the three-dimensional thinking of Darwish enables us to gain an equally rich comprehension of what the Arab uprisings are. This further enables an understanding of the Arab uprisings as not a beginning of the struggle to achieve "bread, freedom and social justice" but an intensification of this battle. The Arab uprisings never really began and will never fully end.

The social protest movement that intensified in 2011 should be understood as part of a prolonged and episodic endeavour to establish the ability to live a dignified life. The struggles against confronting the, often brutal, reality of power is one that is constantly made and remade: "The path is the search for the right path."[9]

Absence and the Arab Uprisings

Absence is powerful and it reverberates through landscapes, bodies and memories. The veins of the Arab uprisings are filled with absence. Governments in the region are made distinctive by their absence of legitimacy; the presence of elections has not displaced the absence of a democratic process. The presence of the police, the judiciary, and large structures in the urban landscape devoted to the rule of law only accentuate their absence. The presence of vast wealth for a few illuminates the absence of bread for so many. Many asked: Why do they not revolt?[10]

The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in the small Tunisian hinterland city of Sidi Bouzid was driven by absence. On 17 December 2010, policewoman Fedia Hamdi and another municipal official confiscated Mohamed Bouazizi's fruit cart for selling goods without a permit and presented him with a substantial fine that he did not have the ability to pay. When Bouazizi attempted to retrieve his cart from the police station, he was turned away. Requesting the audience of the local governor, he was again denied. At 1 p.m. in front of the gate of the municipal building, in the middle of the street, Bouazizi doused himself in gasoline and struck a match, setting himself alight.

The protests that followed Bouazizi's protest suicide resulted in a chain of revolts that established the Arab uprisings. The absence that led to Bouazizi's self-immolation was an absence felt by many across the Arab region and was met by a presence, a presence that

filled the streets and squares of the Arab world. In Egypt, protests that erupted in the wake of Bouazizi's self-immolation were fuelled further by the images of another young man, Alexandrian Khaled Said's death, murdered by the police.

Amro Ali, a neighbour of Said in the Egyptian coastal city of Alexandria, noted how Khaled was being pursued by two police officers for the possession of cannabis. "Khaled shoved one of the officers back making some references to the law and his dignity," Ali wrote. "The spited officers grabbed Khaled from his long hair and the beating began, first in the Internet café and continued into the doorway of the adjacent building."[11] When Said's family visited Khaled's body in the morgue his brother took a photo of his corpse on his mobile phone and released it onto the Internet.

The image of Khaled Said shows a face broken up and reassembled into a cubist nightmare. Human Rights Watch noted, "Photos of Said's battered and deformed face published on the internet show a fractured skull, dislocated jaw, broken nose, and numerous other signs of trauma."[12] The government investigation into Said's death concluded that he died of asphyxiation after swallowing a packet of drugs. The absence of justice for the brutal murder of Said was further compounded by the continued presence of the police officers who murdered Said but were not relieved of their duties or questioned by prosecutors.[13] The absences of Khaled Said resonated with the Egyptian populous, as they chanted, "We are all Khaled Said."[14]

In Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain and across the region, protestors gathered and with them stories similar to the predicament of Bouazizi and Said rose to the surface. Protesters illuminated previously invisible geographies of torture and murder, the revolt made present the absence of the ability to live a dignified life.

Mahmoud Darwish on the Presence of Absence

Absence in Arabic is *ghiyab* and, as in English, means to not be present. In *In the Presence of Absence,* Mahmoud Darwish writes, "Paradise was born from the hell of absence"[15] and the "Past was born from the hell of absence."[16] The paradise and the past that Darwish refers to could be understood as the image of Palestine once it was ripped away in the *Nakba* ("the Catastrophe") of 1948. It was in 1948 when Israel was established and Israeli troops expelled

700,000 Palestinians producing the "hell of absence" for Palestinians. For the Israelis the paradise and past born from the hell of absence derives from the holocaust, one of contemporary history's most terrifying productions of absence.

Mahmoud Darwish was born in the village of Al-Birweh in Palestine in 1941 that was razed to the ground by Israeli forces in 1948. Following the forced exile of Palestinians by the Israelis in 1948, the Palestinian struggle has been focused on not being absent, to fill their absence from Palestine with a presence. Darwish writes, "They forced you from the field. As for your shadow, it neither followed you nor deceived you. It froze there and became a stone. Then it grew green like a sesame plant, green during the day and blue at night."[17] Darwish lived with his family in exile for many years and later returned to his homeland not as a Palestinian citizen, or an Israeli, but as a "present absentee."[18]

As a present absentee, it is no surprise that Darwish engaged deeply with the ideas of presence and absence and produced new ways in which to engage these concepts. Darwish wrote in *In the Presence of Absence* with the knowledge of his imminent death, and indeed, he died two years after completing the text. But Darwish also died *literally* more than once during his life. In 1984, Darwish suffered a heart attack and doctors noted that he was clinically dead for one and a half minutes before he was brought back to life.[19]

> You asked: Where was I then? You were told that death had kidnapped you for a minute and a half and that an electric shock had brought you back to life. You thought: Was death that beautiful and comforting? No, this is not death. It is another form of life. It is a healthy sleep, a sleep for utter pleasure. You realized what you had never realized before. Death does not pain the dead, it pains the living.[20]

In the text Darwish constantly references life and death, like presence and absence, in a manner that does not place them as opposites but in a more multidimensional frame, as he noted, "You avoided defining a thing by its opposite, because the opposite of wrong is not always right."[21] Instead Darwish explores concepts and ideas that gesture towards the nebulous terrain of absence. In exploring absence, Darwish delves into shadows, exile, longing, death, metaphor, pain, silence, imagination, imprisonment, nothingness, airports, myths and memory.

Darwish's journey through and within the idea of absence forcefully articulates the power of imagination. Without the imagination there is no absence, no homeland, no place, no poetry and no presence.

> The imagination soars, visible like clouds over hills with villages strapped to their sides as they cling to their genesis. ... The villages buried under the earth send their memories to the surviving villages, whose inhabitants make the pilgrimage each spring to patches where the grass sprouts from the past: we were born right here, at the edge of this well, just as mallow, wild chicory, and rue are born. And I was born here just as imagination is gradually born from everything else. So how will you nurse your imagination back to health and once again fly on your horse?[22]

In the context of the Arab uprisings Darwish articulates how the self-immolation of Bouazizi and the brutal police murder of Khaled Said generated the power that they did. It is the power of the imagination that can create an absence; an absence cannot exist without a presence. The absence of justice for Bouazizi and Said would not be visible without the protests that made present this absence. Death pains the living, scars are memories that never cease working and the future is the encroaching past.

Darwish was imprisoned at various times by the Israelis and he writes in *In the Presence of Absence* how poetry enabled him to reclaim his freedom, to make the invisible visible, the absent present. "Prison deprives one of the sight of a tree and the sea. Freedom is the imagination capable of recalling them both in prison, making the invisible visible."[23] For Darwish, absence is not powerlessness, the end or death.

> You, not I, are the loser. He who lived on depriving others of lights drowns in the darkness of his own shadow. You will never be free of me unless my freedom is generous to a fault. Then it would teach you peace and guide you home. You, not I, are afraid of what this cell is doing to me. Dreaming is my profession while yours is pointless eavesdropping on an unfriendly conversation between my freedom and me.[24]

What is it?

The Arab uprisings articulated that what exists is insufficient, the protests illuminated the absence of the region through chanting their

presence: Bread, Freedom and Social Justice. The Arab uprisings are an intensification of the simultaneous struggle in the illumination of absence and its removal. The Arab uprisings are the articulation of an imagination that the region need not exist as it currently is. The Arab uprisings are the idea and imagination that what exists is only partial and that another world is—the ambitious—possible. Imagination, however, is never singular and the competing ideas and struggles are always at work.

> The road rises and falls, undulates, zigzags, extends, and branches off into countless roads that meet back at the beginning. How many times must we start from the beginning? We survived much death. We defeated forgetfulness and you said to me: We survive, but do not triumph. I said to you: Survival is the prey's potential triumph over the hunter. Steadfastness is survival and survival is the beginning of existence.[25]

Absence provides one entry point into a greater understanding of the Arab uprisings. However, even this concept is limited and is not able to grasp the complexity of this ongoing social protest movement. Attempts to understand the Arab uprisings continue and questions as to the nature of this social protest movement remain: "What is it? Were we to know, our plans would have changed, for what we do not know exists and what we do know is limited and bound to change."[26]

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