

Chapter 9. Then Comes Fall: Activism, The Arab Spring, and the Necessity of Unruly Borders

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470,000 dead—an approximate total of individuals killed in the Syrian uprising.

– “*World Report 2017*,” *Human Rights Watch*

11,000 people—an approximate total of the torture victims in Syria as of 2014.

– “*Syria Accused of Torture*,” *BBC News*

What are the proper connections among an individual’s tortured body, the barbarous acts perpetrated upon a civilian population, and the seeming logic of academic writing?¹ How do we understand our responsibility as academics to develop ways of speaking that, in conjunction with activism, can blunt barbarity and produce an expansion of fundamental human rights? Or is the very question a sign of disciplinary arrogance?

For the past three years I have been fortunate to work with Middle Eastern and

1. This chapter originally appeared as “Then Comes Fall: Activism, the Arab Spring, and the Necessity of Unruly Borders,” by S. Parks et al. in *Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Politics*, edited by J. Alexander, S. Jarrat, and N. Welch, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018, pp. 282–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv75d8pr.19>. Copyright University of Pittsburgh Press. Reprinted with permission.

North African (MENA) activists and educators advocating for an expansive vision of democratic rights that include not only the right to vote but also a right to gender, religious, and economic equity. Beginning within U.S.-based disciplinary scholarship in community publishing, this work produced a collection of essays entitled *Revolution by Love: Emerging Arab Youth Voices* (RBL) that focused on these individuals' involvement in the Arab Spring.² This collection offered personal testimony founded upon a sense of national identity and was premised on a rhetoric of hope. Today, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, such rhetoric seems inadequate to the current moment. Consequently, a new rhetoric is now required that not only recognizes the complicated period of the post—Arab Spring, with its failures to broaden the number of stable independent democratic nations in the region but also validates the emergent anticolonial border struggles of formerly oppressed identities.

To make this argument, I begin with the production of *RBL*, then move to the work of a human rights defender in Assad's Syria, and finally conclude with the work of a coalition of Syrian activists (of which I am a member) that has created Syrians for Truth and Justice (<https://stj-sy.org/en/>). In doing so, the essay moves from an examination of human rights arguments linked to an essentialized vision of national identity, to a Westernized framing of political rights, and then ultimately to a post-nationalist rhetorical framing of the human right to self-determination. It is this last definition, I believe, that places academics in solidarity with those struggling for a geographically and culturally informed definition of international borders. Although the actual practices of such a rhetoric are necessarily difficult, I would argue it is the unruly nature of such work that speaks to its vital importance.

Finally, the work discussed in this essay is the result of the collective efforts of those listed as authors as well as many other individuals. To mark this collaboration, we have chosen to list those who have direct editorial and organizational experience in the projects discussed as authors. Dala Ghandour, Emna Ben Yedder Tamarziste, and Mohammed Masbah worked on *RBL* and, along with myself, approved the section on that project. Bassam Alahmad worked on STJ and, along with myself, approved the section on that project. All conclusions drawn from these projects in the "Revolution by Bodies" section, however, should be attributed only to me.

Revolution By Love

In the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring, I had the opportunity to work with MENA educators and activists who were trying to understand the events that had just occurred. Many of them had spent years doing the slow grassroots work of building collectivities designed to produce an oppositional force against undemocratic and oppressive political regimes. They were now in the United States, at Syracuse University, to learn how to expand their work toward building civil societies that could cement the progress that had seemingly been made.

2. For scholarship in community publishing, see Steve Parks, "Sinners Welcome."

Progress, however, is a tricky word. As the participants moved through the program, an uneasy sense of dissonance occurred between the attempts to provide civil society models premised upon US frameworks and the actual historical meaning of the United States in their countries. As a result, the participants were looking for an alternative space to articulate their collective vision. With the support of their university sponsors, I was contacted in my role as founder/ editor of New City Community Press (newcitycommunitypress.com) to help them organize and publish their thoughts. The result was *RBL*.

Rather than rehearse the intricate history of that publication, the goal here is to read *RBL* as an attempt to create a rhetorical space in which to understand the work of democratic political reform in the MENA region within context of a U.S. global hegemony. What did these participants imagine to be the rhetorical moves necessary to gain support from the West for democratic reform while also acknowledging the United States' own complicated (and complicit) role in the region? And what unintended consequences might their imagined rhetorical stance, when taken on by hegemonic global powers, have produced in justifying state actions against these very goals?

Within this context it is important to begin by looking at how the United States is invoked in *RBL*. For instance, in the introduction, the editors note:

Simply put, this story reveals how young Arab women and men from the Middle East and North Africa, who come from very diverse backgrounds, regions, continents, share the same passion for their countries, the same audacity of hope, for a better tomorrow, the same dream of making their country proud of them. All of the writers who were committed to this project were deeply convinced that *one should not ask what their country can do for them, but rather what could they offer their countries*. In a world where barriers are constantly being erased, where virtual communication turns the world to a global village, what is this strange bond that ties this Arab youth to politics and public affairs? (*RBL* 1; emphasis added)

Later this argument continues: “[Our collective stories] could even give the reader a more nuanced understanding of the people who are behind this so-called phenomenon of the 21st century: The Arab Spring. This mysterious, catchy, used and reused phrase, in every current political analysis of the MENA was made by *the people, for the people*” (*RBL* 3, emphasis added). In effect, the Arab Spring is recast within terms that rhetorically resonate within the context of the United States. There is the invocation of a globally inflected multiculturalism free from consideration of economic or neocolonial contexts— “very diverse backgrounds, regions and continents, [that] share the same passion for their countries.” There is Obama’s “audacity of hope.” There is Kennedy’s “ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” And finally, there is Lincoln’s Gettysburg’s

Address— “of the people, by the people, for the people”—invoked as a means to understand the framework by which young activists took to the streets.

Indeed, *RBL* is replete with instances where each of these hoped-for values is invoked by the collection’s authors. Dala Ghandour discusses Beirut as a city that has historically been blessed with diverse cultures and heritages. Raghda Abushahla speaks to how Palestinian women tend to the graves of British soldiers from World War I. Each imagines a common understanding of humanity that can move across contentious religious, political, and international divisions despite the actual historical facts on the ground. Individuals also demonstrate the commitment to being personally engaged in working for political change. Mirelle Karam Halim discusses her work in sponsoring workshops for young Egyptians on democracy. Shadin Hamaideh highlights the sacrifices that men and women made in protesting for greater freedoms for all Arabs. Finally, Mohammed Masbah, along with all the writers, speaks of the need for collective action to foster more representative governments.

Interestingly, in light of the invocation of Lincoln, the writers do not speak of their actions as fostering a civil war against the government; none consistently invokes previous political activism based in other paradigms, such as anticolonial struggles. Almost without exception there is a commitment to their country as a framework that seems to transcend the colonial history that produced its political borders. In this way, an essentialized national identity where borders are seen as natural and not the result of Western colonial powers is invoked as a means to produce the possibility of a collective political movement for change.

And it is a national movement seemingly premised on the possibilities of new technology.³ Throughout all the essays, there is a sense that social media played a fundamental role in the Arab Spring. Here it is useful to return once again to the introduction of *RBL*, specifically the following sentence: “In a world where barriers are constantly being erased, where *virtual communication* turns the world to a global village, what is this strange bond that ties this Arab youth to politics and public affairs?” (1, emphasis added). This belief in new technology is perhaps best represented by Ibrahim Shebani’s involvement in the Libyan protests. His narrative begins with a Facebook message calling for an uprising, which leads to a series of cell phone calls to connect with friends, followed by additional Facebook posts featuring clips of political protestors—all of which are designed to bring the non-virtual bodies of Libyans to Benghazi to protest the arrest of the Busleem massacre lawyer in front of the security directory.⁴ (Here Shebani also notes Gadhafi’s use of digital cameras to videotape protestors.) The piece ends with Shebani, along with others, bringing a satellite dish to the site so as to broadcast images of the protests

3. For a particularly pro-social media account of the Arab Spring in Egypt, see Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0*.

4. In 1996 over twelve hundred political prisoners were executed on the same day, within several hours, inside the Busleem prison (Chulov and Smith; Franklin).

internationally, an effort he admits was already being somewhat achieved by cell phones. The piece ends with the following: “That was my mission of the day. People were happy to see the satellite. Finally, the world would witness our happiness, our liberation. I felt so proud to be part of this small mission” (*RBL* 29). Technology, coupled with mass protests by individuals, had won the day.

Taking these rhetorical strategies collectively, and at some risk of a loss of nuance, I want to highlight what I believe to be a symptomatic rhetorical argument surrounding the Arab Spring that was occurring in the U.S. context. Succinctly stated it might go something like the following: Informed by models of U.S. democracy, MENA activists used social media to bring together hundreds of thousands of individuals, creating a mass movement that ultimately toppled dictators and put the region on a (perhaps temporary) path to democracy. I would argue that such a rhetoric works to affirm cherished beliefs about the United States, technology, and democracy. Within this rhetoric, the borders in which these nationalist struggles occurred are taken out of the colonialist context in which many were created. That is, the rhetoric naturalizes a colonialist history while it simultaneously overlays a U.S.-informed Western model of democracy on the region as a whole.

This is not to argue that *RBL* simply existed within such a rhetorical framework, that *RBL* only invoked but did not critique such a vision. Indeed, within the collection itself, the authors consciously manipulate the rhetoric for maximum impact on the reader. In the essay, “The Pearl of the Gulf,” for example, Amal Mater begins by framing Bahrain in terms similar to those found in the other essays in the book:

The pearl of the gulf is what Bahrain used to be called. Not only because it is a beautiful small island on the Arabian Gulf that used to depend on the pearl industry, but also because its people were well known for their kindness, openness, pureness like a shining pearl. Bahrain was always known for its tolerance and openness to other cultures and religions, and comparing to other neighboring countries, was advanced in terms of education, civil society and women’s rights. It was well known throughout history that Bahrainis regardless of sect or religion were living in harmony and socializing with each other with mixed marriages, friendships, and neighborhoods. (*RBL* 11)

Mater then traces those values back through Bahrain’s history—from Delmon, Tylus, and Awal, through being a British protectorate, to independence and the establishment of the Al Khalifa as the ruling family. It was soon after the new constitution was put into effect, she argues, that the ruling family of Al Khalifa in 1973 suspended the parliament in response to protests, instituted the States Security Law, and began the process of ruling through extra parliamentary procedures. Stating that Bahrain was “the first Gulf country that responded to the wave of democracy movements,” Mater then details how the rhetorical

construction of a social movement—one that was not “looking for democracy only for a better life in terms of jobs and economy, but also in terms of liberty and dignity” was confronted by national, regional, and international military violence, a violence that would sacrifice human rights aspirations on the altar of *realpolitik* (*RBL* 13).

Almost immediately after recounting Bahrain’s identity, settling her narrative within the comfortable rhetorical framework of the book’s introduction, Mater describes her work as an ophthalmologist at the only public hospital in the country. In response to the Arab Spring protests, she argues, the government responded violently, “killing over 80, injuring, detaining hundreds, and dismissing thousands from their jobs” (*RBL* 13). Moreover, in concert with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a force created to protect Gulf states from “outside” invasions, the hospital was surrounded, troops then invaded and killed some protestors, and tortured others. Mater’s husband, a member of parliament, was arrested and detained for months in an unknown location (Holmes). In attempting to understand the cause for such a brutal crackdown, for the introduction of the GCC, Mater notes the following: “Sadly, the Bahraini regime is supported not only by the GCC monarchies, but also largely by its ally, the United States. Bahrain is a strategic non-NATO ally for the United States, hosting the US fifth fleet” (*RBL* 17).

She further comments: “Unfortunately, democracy and human rights don’t seem to come first in the foreign policy of the United States. What we see on the ground is that the stability is what really matters. As long as this regime guarantees the interests of the United States in security and oil, any change is considered worrisome” (*RBL* 17). She ends her piece with the hope that the citizens of the United States will compel the government to act differently—invoking U.S. citizens and U.S. nonprofit organizations as having a truer sense of democracy and human rights: “In contrast to our frustration with the US government, the Arab spring was an eye-opening experience to the wonderful dynamic American civil society. We were amazed by the huge support we got from the American democracy and human rights organizations” (*RBL* 18).

Within that context of a hegemonic U.S. presence, Raghda Abushahla details her family’s history in Palestine. Beginning with her mother’s birth prior to the creation of Israel, Abushahla moves through a history of violence enacted on her family (and by association to Palestinians), “the 1948 War (Al-Nakba), the 1967 Six Days War, and the Operation Cast Lead on Gaza, the Intifada, the recurring Israeli invasions, the internal clashes and on and on” (*RBL* 104). Her family’s story then gets translated into her father’s and her own struggles to gain a passport, framed as legal recognition by the international community of their very existence, as they were shuttled between Egypt and Libya. With such an emphasis, Abushahla details the political instability of a Palestinian identity in a U.S. dominated context—juxtaposing the family struggles with the use of U.S. military power to punish Libya for the Lockerbie bombings, U.S. support of Egypt, and U.S. silence over the systemic oppression of Palestinians on the West Bank and

Gaza by Israel. She writes: “Gazans are marked as terrorists and imprisoned in the Gaza enclave for so many years with severe shortages of money, electricity, fuel, and other essential life commodities. Nevertheless, a small percent of the Gaza population is in possession of weapons or rockets. The vast majority of the population were middle class people who suffered years of hardships and now live in poor conditions and aspire to survive” (*RBL* 90).

Ultimately, the *RBL* collection demonstrates that the earlier, somewhat idealistic rhetorical version of the Arab Spring does not fully account for deeper economic and geopolitical forces that are buffeting and damaging the possibilities that these democratic movements might be fully realized. The GCC, Israel, and the United States form a triad of forces clamping down on grassroots movements for democratic reform that move beyond limited constitutional revisions and that might challenge geopolitical alliances. There is seemingly no version of political reform that might entail the Fifth U.S. fleet leaving Bahrain. Nor, does it appear, is there any version of reform that might move the geopolitical discussion of Israel toward an examination of that country’s own human rights record or colonialist status. Indeed, it seems to be exactly at moments where such a possibility occurs that the formerly democratic bodies of protestors are marked as “unruly” and need to be made “proper,” disciplined by these larger geopolitical forces that want to reduce the protestors’ actions in meaning and actual possibility to the softened rhetorical narrative that brings together U.S. visions of democracy and the power of technology.

In this sense, the rhetorical argument invoked in *RBL* represents the aspirations of those involved in political change and in its dark underbelly. For it is at the same moment when the writers invoke an essentialist national identity, a Westernized vision of democracy, and a faith in technology to tip the balance of global power that the writers also demonstrate how this same rhetoric, when deployed by Western powers minus the simultaneous critique of that very rhetorical stance, justified the international actions that led to the goals of the Arab Spring (again admitting a lack of nuance) being swept up into and limited by larger geopolitical forces.

In saying this, I am not discounting the power of this rhetorical model as an organizing structure at a given historical moment or diminishing the important work of individuals done within this framework—many of whom continue to work actually and rhetorically for more democratic societies. Rather, I am suggesting the need for U.S.-based academics to recognize the historical specificity and limitations of any rhetoric that invokes an idealized view of “Western values” as a means to form alliances with MENA-based activists. Given the historical legacy that such a view inhabits (and how it is currently being enacted), it is not clear such a framework would be effective in supporting the work of activists in fostering fundamental democratic political change in the current moment. As is clear to everyone, the political terrain has only become more complicated in the interim between the publication of *RBL* and today.

Revolution By Arms

Syria is not featured in *RBL*. The individuals from Syria who traveled to Syracuse chose not to participate in the book. With their families currently being held by the government and with government forces attacking their neighborhoods, they believed the act of publishing stories of resistance and democratic activism would put their families in danger of being arrested. For, although in the United States it seems that, in community publications, “disempowered voices” have become a trope almost devoid of political significance, for these Syrian individuals, “going public,” having any association with Western organizations and rhetorics, would have real and dangerous consequences (a fact to be demonstrated below).

The Syrian “Arab Spring” protests began in March 2011. At first, the protests were in alignment with many of the demands seen across the region: increased democratic rights, systemic political reform, an end to emergency powers, and a crackdown on corruption. In the beginning there were also a few calls for the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad. Initially, the protests were peaceful both in intent and in government response. Then beginning March 18, the Syrian troops began to fire upon the crowds, such as in Daraa, and protestors began publicly to ask for Assad to resign. Assad soon claimed that the protests were sparked by outside agitators and hostile governments, but such arguments had little impact on the anti-Assad protestors who continued to grow in numbers, even as the violence increased. By the end of May, over one thousand civilians had been killed.⁵

During this same period, Syrian officers defected and created the Free Syrian Army, and in Turkey the Syrian National Council was formed. While consistently shifting policies in an effort to find “moderate allies,” the United States has essentially aligned with the Free Syrian Army, a force that has been unable to overthrow Assad and, increasingly has been equally concerned with the rise of ISIS, which had been preceded by the emergence of numerous Islamic and Jihadist groups. In addition, the region of northern Syria controlled by Kurds declared itself the “Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria,” while the Kurdish-controlled region of Iraq has named itself the Kurdish Regional Government. Slowly, then, the national borders of Syria and Iraq—drawn by the France and United Kingdom governments at the end of World War I as part of the Sykes-Picot Agreement—are being reframed in terms outside the “existent nation” nationalism that marked a primary component of the Arab Spring. New borders and new nationalities seem increasingly likely.

It is within this context that organizations such as the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression emerged. The center was established in 2004 but became more active in 2011. As framed in its mission statement, the center was a “non-profit, independent” organization that was “not linked to any political,

5. For an extended study of the civil war, see Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria*.

religious, partisan or economic side, [either] inside and outside Syria.”⁶ Its primary purpose was to use professional journalistic standards to report on the events in Syria. In articulating a framework for the center’s mission, the organization invoked John Stuart Mill, the Magna Carta, the French Declaration of Human Rights, and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Like *RBL*, the center frames itself solidly within a Western framework of democracy and the belief in the political right to free speech within properly functioning nation-states.⁷

6. The center revised its mission statement and goals in response to the ongoing Syrian conflict as well as the discussed actions by Assad against their organizations. The text cited here is from their original mission statement. Their current organization framing is available at www.scm.bz/en/. Given that the earlier text is no longer available, I cite it at length in the article and accompanying footnotes.

7. Indeed, their organizational goals echo this belief in the need for free expression and a commitment to an international vision of human rights:

Disseminate the culture and consciousness of freedom of opinion and expression and belief and respect for the opinions of others and diversity and tolerance within the Syrian society and in collaboration with government agencies and civil society organizations.

Raise the normal theoretical and practical level for the media and journalists and workers in the field of freedom of expression and through seminars and workshops and training process and the publication of studies and research on freedom of opinion and expression sessions, encourage creative initiatives in this area and provide legal support to reporters.

Review of legislation and local laws and regulations and to provide scientific proposals to align them with international standards on freedom of opinion and expression and human rights and to contribute in theory to build a state of law and institutions, civil society and democratic.

Publishing and dissemination of new cultural values within Syrian society, such as the abolition of discrimination against women and children’s rights and environmental education and consumer protection and taking into account the special needs and psychiatric patients’ rights and people living with AIDS and housing rights and minority rights and the right to development and personal freedoms and abolition the death penalty.

Adhere to international standards of a set of laws and charters and conventions and international declarations and international conventions on freedom of opinion and expression and human rights in order to bring about a fundamental change in cultural infrastructure and cultural and intellectual formation and social within the Syrian society and foundation to find a material cognitive learning [that] is consistent with the principles of freedom of opinion and expression and the International Bill of Human Rights and notes the social inequalities and cultural that characterize the Syrian components of society and trying to bridge the gap by focusing on the aspects of convergence and build on them and monitor changes and influences that contribute to the creation of a social dynamic and the analysis of its implications for the understanding of transitions in the course of civil society in Syria.

Discrimination in the relationship between states and societies between the level of governments and political interests that relations control and decisions and between peoples’ level, which all share the humanitarian concern and highlight the positive effects of the interaction between people and intermingling among civilizations for the benefit of all mankind and to help support the dialogue of cultures.

Given the critique of the romantic view of some of the rhetoric in *Revolution by Love*, it would be easy to understand the center's goals as being unaware of the ramifications of invoking such ways of speaking in the context of the actions of global powers, such as the United States and Great Britain, who might co-opt such rhetoric. (This seems particularly the case when both countries' support of human rights in Syria has been troubled at best.) Yet the history of the center reminds us that the danger of such rhetoric lies not just in its co-optation of ends other than intended but also in the fact of its perceived alignment with Western powers.⁸ Indeed, the center in Syria was violently shut down by the government for being "aligned" (rhetorically) with Western powers. Ultimately, the center had to relocate to Turkey—a country that today seems a complicated location to enact the principles of a "free press."

Indeed, individuals in this center, along with many other such journalists, were tortured by the Syrian government for seeming to align with rhetoric associated with Western powers and enacting the principles of a free press. Here it might be useful to listen to the voice of one human rights defender and activist employed by the center, who with his colleagues was arrested for being perceived as an "outside agitator" because of their use of Westernized arguments concerning human rights in their reporting:

When they picked up all of us, I was working with others who were publishing about what is happening in Syria especially the number of people who demonstrated or the number of cities or places which had demonstrations. We were putting the information on our Facebook page, sending it to media centers, to channels, to everyone to say "This is exactly what happened."

We were representing ourselves as internal opposition, doing it for our country. We were telling the people that we are not like the other people outside of Syria, who have a relationship with the West. Our narrative to the regime said we would not cooperate with people outside of Syria because the government considered all channels, all countries except Iran and Russia, enemies. So you cannot talk with the human rights commissions. You cannot talk to anyone. So we said, "We care about internal issues. We are from Syria. We stayed here. We didn't travel. But that we need some kind of reforms."

We were working in the middle of Damascus. They stormed our office. There were about thirty people, snipers, with guns. They

8. The *RBL* authors were aware of the consequences of seeming to be aligned with the United States, even as they invoked elements of its history in the book. Many feared they would be branded as spies upon their return.

motioned to us with their Kalishnikovs. At first, I didn't think they meant to come to our office because we were working publicly. We were not doing any kind of arms. I thought they had come to the wrong place. Then they did kind of a drama, a theater. They acted like there was a real investigation. They asked a lot of questions. They saw our computers. They tried to discover something about us: "What are you doing here? Why are you publishing the news?" Then they brought a big bus and took all of us.

Once on the bus, in each second, we were thinking thousands of things at the same time. But when we saw there was a bridge, and it was the bridge on the only road towards the Air Force detention center, we discovered where they are taking all of us. We just . . . we didn't talk. We just looked towards each other's eyes. This Air Force branch is very famous. It is worst branch around Syria. All of us were just saying, "Oh my god." I cannot describe it. It was very difficult.

After they took us off the bus, they took our mobiles, keys, wallets, all things. They put something to blind our eyes and took us to a room on the base. By coincidence or not, our room was behind the investigation room. While there, we saw how they hung the people from the ceiling by their hands with distance between their feet and the ground, which is very very awful. One of our friends, in our room, they do it to him, hanging in our room for more than 24 hours. They chose him because he was a doctor. They said you are supporting terrorist people, giving them medical aid and support.

They interrogated us the first day, then, I don't know, maybe three or four days later. But they just repeat the same questions. When it was my time to go into the room, they asked me to take all my clothes off, then they closed the door. Our work was a little bit famous in Syria, so we were exceptional people to the investigator. He tried to present himself as an intellectual, knowing everything. He tried to make it kind of a discussion, like "Yes I understand the situation." He tried to be our equal but he was not. He was very stupid. He started asking us questions. "Why are you doing something like this? You are doing something against your country. From where are you getting the money?" You know many many questions. He argued the protests were not occurring because of anything the government was doing. His narrative was about all of our enemies,

that everyone is against us because we are fighting Israel, the United States, because we are strong. You know, these kinds of very stupid things. . . .

After 28 days, we did kind of a hunger strike. We said, “You have to release us or transfer us to the Judge.” And we told them, “See we are like activists. We know exactly how we can get our voice out. We can tell all people around the world what happened here.” We did hunger strike for five days. They asked us to stop our hunger strike but we didn’t. Then they transferred us to another security branch, which when compared with the Air Force branch, the Air Force was kind of a five star hotel.

When we arrived there, they did not ask us anything. They just started to beating us without any kind of question. They were just beating us with sticks, with electricity, with cables. Every night. We couldn’t see anything. We were just like hearing our voices. I don’t know how long each day they beat us because we are like so tired. They repeated that for six days.⁹ They said, “We will teach you about doing hunger strikes in our places. You are not allowed to do something like this because other prisoners will see you and learn from you.” After that, they didn’t beat us every day, just every two to three days. They would come and choose some people, but it was not systematic.

In this branch, after 33 days, I don’t know how or why, but they came and said my name and the names of two others. They said come with us and took us back to the Air Force branch and gave us our mobiles, wallets and money. Then they took us to the military police station. We stayed for one night and then they transferred us to the central prison. It was much better. There was like a doctor. There was food. There were new clothes. I was there 20 days. After they transferred us to the military base, then the prison, we thought will be released, the three of us, because in Syria if you are transferred from the secret detention center, that means you will be released.

Still, they didn’t leave me go totally. They transferred us to the military court. The judge asked us, “If I release you will, will you remain in Damascus and attend the court again to face

9. Lest we imagine the United States is not capable of similar actions, see the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *The Senate Intelligence Committee Report on Torture: Committee Study of the Central intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program*.

charges.” I signed the paper saying I would attend, but after they did something like this, I prepared myself and left the country.

My hopes for the future? Maybe we can distinguish between what we wish and what we think. I wish Syria to be unified, to return to the same cohesion between all Syrians, but with a new political structure. But objectively, we are in a real civil war, a very brutal civil war. We are doing our best as activists, who demonstrated from the first day, to do our best to like stop this kind of killing, the human rights violations, and teach people about how can they live life together. But unfortunately the sound of guns, the sound of barrel bombs, of ISIS, is louder than our sound. We are weak. We are very weak. We wish to be loud, to be more strong. We wish to be more strong by having more people on our side. But, unfortunately, no, because unfortunately they are strong instead.

I think it is important for people to know that there are a million Syrians that want to lead a normal life like them. They are not killing or beheading. They can do a lot of focusing on this issue supporting Syrian people, activists, especially supporting peaceful activities and non-conflict resolutions. (Parks, “Interview”)

The human rights defender’s narrative shares many characteristics with those by the authors in *Revolution by Love*. There is a faith in social media to expose the truth of a situation and garner international support. There is also a faith that activism can act as a moral force to produce necessary political change. There is a belief that the citizens in the country share a common value to live in a nonviolent world and lead normal lives.

What is not part of the narrative is a faith in the possibility of Syria continuing on within its established borders. Today, reluctantly and with remorse, this individual has diminished hope for a unified restored Syria under the control of a democratically elected government. Indeed, with colonial borders being redrawn, with Syria becoming a battleground for Western global power struggles, and in a position where activists are “weak,” “very weak,” the individual has articulated the need for a new vision of “states” to be produced that seemingly rely less on Western(ized) visions of a political order of nation-states in service of the West. Instead of propping up such a network of nation-states, a new rhetorical and political model should work to tame the violence, eliminate the barbarous acts of too many of the principal actors, recognize the legitimate claims of unrecognized populations for governmental and territorial status, and restore a semblance of hope to the region and those who live there. This may or may not result in a “nation-state” named Syria. Most importantly, at this political juncture, this nuanced rhetoric of human rights must be developed so as to navigate a narrow

political space between strategic use of Western visions of democratic and human rights while simultaneously muting the ability of global powers to use this same rhetoric to enforce political and economic solutions on the MENA region. As all of the above has demonstrated, it is a rhetoric that must be connected to bodies that can physically challenge the facts on the ground.

Revolution By Bodies

The above discussion provides two powerful lessons about activism in the current moment: Bodies have returned to the public square. Bodies are surrounded by and enact rhetoric. In the above stories, individuals and collectives positioned themselves not only as part of the public sphere but also as physical entities taking up public space. The bodies were initially drawn together by emergent and traditional activist tools: Cell phones and Facebook; workshops and training sessions; non-governmental agencies and political parties. These individual bodies formed a common “political body” through a rhetoric that framed their actions as well as the counteractions of their opponents. Ultimately, these emergent political bodies demonstrated how a U.S.- and Western-based rhetoric of democracy can both enable protests and generate oppression: the unruly body tortured in the name of nationalist and geopolitical interests. And so, the question emerges: Where is the space, and what is the work, of an unruly rhetoric, of unruly bodies, at the current moment?

In answering these questions, I would argue that an unruly rhetoric cannot draw upon an uncritical sense of U.S. democracy, a rhetoric both invoked and then critiqued in *RBL*. For such a rhetoric is necessarily premised upon the United States’ colonialist history in the region—a colonialism that is both geographic and economic. It is a rhetoric, regardless of its perhaps more expansive historical vision, that is now also premised upon the economic and military needs of the United States. It is deployed to justify an essentially imperialist dream premised upon an open market ideology that allows the exploitation of natural resources and of human beings. Such a rhetoric seems to me capable of supporting dictators or democracies with equal enthusiasm from Western powers, often with UN support (either overt or covert).

It is within this context that a post-*RBL* project has emerged. Working with Bassam Alahmad as well as three other Syrian activists, we are developing Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), a nonprofit that records the torture experiences of Syrians, some similar, some far worse than the above story. The documentation, however, will cast a much wider net than just nation-state actors. In addition to the Syrian regime, STJ will also record the atrocities of the Free Syrian Army, the PYD (Kurdish Forces), and Daesh/ISIS, among other military and militia forces. As an organization, STJ will not endorse a naïve vision of a “multicultural free space” but embed itself in a reality where minorities are singled out and where religious background or gender identity becomes cause for persecution. Supporting

this work will be a network of citizen journalists in Syria who are documenting the current human rights abuses by all of the above actors.

Unlike the personal narratives of *Revolution by Love*, these stories will serve multiple purposes. A journalistic version of the testimonies and stories will be provided on the STJ website. This information will also be collected and categorized for potential use by nation-states, NGOs, and international human rights organizations and courts as evidence in attempts to seek justice for victims. STJ, that is, will work to integrate its findings into actual UN International Court actions. This same information will, we hope, be used to support a series of gatherings (or workshops) among Syrians both within and outside the country to begin a dialogue on the future of the terrain named “Syria,” but which exists now only as a battlefield for global power struggles. These workshops will ask what a future society might look like, what values it might inhabit, what it might understand as its “borders.”

Ultimately, I believe the United Nations should not become the assumed framework through which a collective future is imagined—particularly as new political structures such as the Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria continually emerge from within the borders of Syria/Iraq/Turkey.¹⁰ For while it is strategic to call upon the U.N. International Court to punish perpetrators of human rights abuses, there also must be a strategy that will support the creation of new forms of political collectives that perhaps transcend current understandings of “nation-states” and their relationship to current hegemonic powers. This is particularly the case if new borders, new “nations,” are to be constituted, which can move the Arab Spring activism from its initial hope and current conflicts to a newly restructured world order.

Here the work of Michael Lowy’s framing of nationalism is useful to consider. Rather than seeing nationalist claims based upon an essentialized sense of soil or blood (as at times invoked in *RBL*), claims to national status, he argues, can be premised on the right of historic communities to self-determination (79). Under this logic, self-identified political collectives could claim a right to a legal status that could stand in contradistinction to the needs of the global powers, often enacted by the United Nations, or regional powers such as Israel. That is, the individuals and collectives that have inhabited “Syria” would be seen as having a right to imagine their own collective future outside of existing claims by third parties and international systems of governance. In casting a rhetoric for the current moment, one that pushes against human rights abuses and toward a future marked by new forms of “borders,” then, this seemingly contradictory rhetoric of working within and against the current nation/international political structure must be developed.

10. Here it should be noted that this new model does not imply that new governance structures within the existing borders of Syria are impossible, nor that recognition of historic communities within its borders cannot be negotiated or recognized under the correct politically negotiated system.

For ultimately, this new rhetoric works to move beyond international, national, and regional bodies, toward a deep engagement with the formation and reformation of communities within the context of their right of self-determination. This rhetoric recognizes an ever-forming sense of continuity and identity by communities, which necessarily means the consideration of new forms of political organization, neither nation nor United Nations, but bodies and coalescing political bodies forming under an expansive vision of human rights liberated from “nation-state border” restrictions. In many ways, the attempt, in such a project, is to achieve a revolution that yet has no model because it imagines an international definition of human rights that moves the discussion of rights within existing nations to the populations whose identity has suffered most under previous attempts at national unity or colonialist nation building. It is a vision of regionalism (invoking Spivak’s articulation of this concept) that works to articulate new subjectivities representing a diversity of identities under different democratic governmental/political regionalist structures—structures that do not have to align with U.S. interests to maintain power, structures that do not need the U.N. “sanction” to be seen as legitimate entities.¹¹ In recognizing the destruction of (neo)colonial borders, this rhetoric calls for a new political landscape to emerge.

It is, perhaps, a rhetorical reach to frame the STJ project in such a bold fashion. In reality, the project is the work of five individuals, operating within an international context replete with cross-border and intra-border violence, the ongoing persecution and political exile of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, and acting within the global rivalry among the United States, Russia, and Iran. But sometimes, the power of rhetoric (however small its instantiation) lies in its ability to point bodies toward a utopian future that transcends the brutality of the present moment.

And in such work might be the beginnings of a truly unruly rhetoric.

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11. See Gaytri Spivak and Judith Butler, *Who Sings the Nation-State?*

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