1 THE ART OF PRESENCE

THE ARAB SPRING NOTWITHSTANDING, powerful views, whether regional or international, suggest that the Middle East has fallen into disarray. We continue to read how the personal income of Arabs is among the lowest in the world, despite their massive oil revenues. With declining productivity, poor scientific research, decreasing school enrollment, and high illiteracy, and with health conditions lagging behind comparable nations, Arab countries seem to be "richer than they are developed."[1] The unfortunate state of social development in the region is coupled with poor political governance. Authoritarian regimes ranging from Iran, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco to the sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf and chiefly Saudi Arabia (incidentally, most with close ties to the West) have continued to frustrate demands for democracy and the rule of law, prompting (religious) opposition movements that espouse equally undemocratic, exclusive, and often violent measures. These conditions have at times caused much fear in the West about the international destabilizing ramifications of this seemingly social and political turmoil.

Thus, never before has the region witnessed such a cry for change as it did in the late 2000s. The idea that "everywhere the world has changed except for the Middle East" assumed a renewed prominence, with different domestic and international constituencies expressing different expectations as to how to instigate change in this region. Small (Marxist and militant Islamist) circles hope for a revolutionary transformation through a sudden upsurge of popular energy to overturn the unjust structures of power and usher in development and democracy. If the Iranian Revolution, not so long ago, could sweep aside a long-standing monarchy in less than two years, why couldn't such movement

be forged in the region today? This indeed did happen. The Arab world witnessed a most momentous wave of revolutions in 2011. Yet, as usual, these revolutions came as a surprise. It is doubtful that revolutions can ever be planned.[2] Even though revolutionaries do engage in plotting and preparing, revolutions do not necessarily result from prior schemes. Rather, they often follow their own intriguing logic, subject to a highly complex mix of structural, international, coincidental, and psychological factors. We often analyze revolutions in retrospect, rarely engaging in ones that are expected or desired, for revolutions are never predictable.[3] On the other hand, most people do not particularly wish to be involved in violent revolutionary movements. People often express doubt about engaging in revolution, whose outcome they cannot foresee. They often prefer to remain "free riders," wanting others to carry out revolutions on their behalf. Furthermore, are revolutions necessarily desirable? Those who have experienced them usually identify violent revolutions with massive disruption, destruction, violence, and uncertainty. After all, nothing guarantees that a just social order will result from a revolutionary change unless revolutions turn into a prolonged process of social struggle to achieve original goals. Finally, even assuming that revolutions are desirable and can be planned, what are people under authoritarian rule to do in the meantime?

Given these constraints and the uncertain futures of revolutions, an alternative view would postulate that change should be instigated by committing states to undertaking sustained social and political reforms. Such a nonviolent strategy of reform requires powerful social forces—social movements (of workers, the poor, women, youth, students, and broader democracy movements) or genuine political parties—to challenge political authorities and hegemonize their claims. Indeed, many activists and NGOs in the Middle East have already engaged in forging movements to alter the current state of affairs. However, while this may serve as a genuinely endogenous strategy for change, effective movements need political opportunities to grow and operate. It is hoped that postrevolutionary states in Egypt, Tunisia, or Yemen may offer such opportunity. However, indications already point to certain intolerance by these new regimes, most of which are likely to assume electoral democracy of an illiberal type. How are social and political movements to keep up when authoritarian polity exhibits a great intolerance toward organized activism, when the repression of civil-society organizations has been a hallmark of most Middle Eastern states? In addition, what is the subaltern to do when the states, even if respecting electoral democracy (as in Turkey or Indone-

sia), fall short of providing an effective mechanism to respond to economic deprivation, social exclusion, gender imbalance, or violation of individual rights?

It should not, therefore, come as a surprise that until recently growing segments of people, frustrated by the political stalemate, lamented that although most people in the Middle East suffered under the status quo, they remained repressed, atomized, and passive. Popular activism, if any, went little beyond occasional, albeit angry, protests, with most of them directed by Islamists against the West and Israel, and less against their own repressive states to commit to a democratic order. Since there was slight or no agency to challenge the ossified status quo, the argument went, change should come from outside, by way of economic, political, and even military pressure. Even the *Arab Human Development Report*, arguably the most significant manifesto for change in the Arab Middle East, was inclined to seek a "realistic solution" of a "western-supported project of gradual and moderate reform aiming at liberalization."[4] Still, the perception that the Middle East remained "unchangeable" had far greater resonance outside the region, notably in the West and among policy circles, the mainstream media, and many think tanks. Indeed, a strong "exceptionalist" outlook informed the whole edifice of the "democracy promotion industry" in the West, which pushed for instigating change through outside powers and did not exclude the use of force.[5]

The idea of Middle Eastern exceptionalism is not new. Indeed, for a long time now, change in Middle Eastern societies has been approached with a largely western Orientalist outlook whose history goes back to the eighteenth century, if not earlier.[6] Mainstream Orientalism tends to depict the Muslim Middle East as a monolithic, fundamentally static, and thus "peculiar" entity. By focusing on a narrow notion of (a rather static) culture—one that is virtually equated with the religion of Islam—Middle Eastern societies have been characterized more in terms of historical continuity than in terms of change. In this perspective, change, albeit uncommon, may indeed occur, but primarily via individual elites, military men, or wars and external powers. The George W. Bush administration's doctrine of "regime change," exemplified in, for instance, the occupation of Iraq and the continuous inclination to wage a war against Iran, represents how, in such a perspective, change is to be realized in the region. Consequently, internal sources of political transformation, such as group interests, social movements, and political economies, are largely overlooked.

The Arab Spring shook the foundations of such perspectives somewhat, although without terminating them. These perspectives continue to prevail, particularly in the mainstream media, getting a boost from the ascendancy of religious parties in the postrevolution general elections in the region. But a historical outlook gives a different picture. In fact, the Middle East has been home to many insurrectionary episodes, nationwide revolutions, and social movements (such as Islamism), and great strides for change. Beyond these, certain distinct and unconventional forms of agency and activism have emerged in the region that do not get adequate attention, because they do not fit into our prevailing categories and conceptual imaginations. By elaborating on and highlighting these latter forms, or what I call "social nonmovements," I wish also to raise a number of theoretical and methodological questions as to how to look at the notions of agency and change in the Muslim Middle East today. Indeed, conditioned by the exceptionalist outlook, many observers tend to exclude the study of the Middle East from the prevailing social science perspectives. For instance, many narratives of Islamism treat it simply in terms of religious revivalism, or as an expression of primordial loyalties, or irrational group actions, or something peculiar and unique, a phenomenon that cannot be analyzed by the conventional social science categories. In fact, Islamism had been largely excluded from the mode of inquiry developed by social movement theorists in the West until recently, when a handful of scholars have attempted to bring Islamic activism into the realm of "social movement theory."[7] This is certainly a welcome development. However, these scholars tend largely to "borrow" from, rather than critically and productively engage with and thus contribute to, social movement theories. Indeed, it remains a question how far the prevailing social movement theory is able to account for the complexities of socioreligious movements in contemporary Muslim societies, in particular when these perspectives are rooted in particular genealogies, in the highly differentiated and politically open Western societies, where social movements often develop into highly structured and largely homogeneous entities—possibilities that are limited in the non-Western world. Charles Tilly is correct in alerting us to be mindful of the historical specificity of "social movements"—political performances that emerged in Western Europe and North America after 1750. In this historical experience, what came to be known as "social movements" combined three elements: an organized and sustained claim making on target authorities; a repertoire of performances, including associations, public meetings, media statements, and street marches;

and finally, "public representations of the cause's worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment."[8] Deployed separately, these elements would not make "social movements," but some different political actions. Given that the dominant social movement theories draw on Western experience, to what extent can they help us understand the process of solidarity building or the collectivities of disjointed yet parallel practices of noncollective actors in the non-Western politically closed and technologically limited settings?[9]

In contrast to the "exceptionalist" tendency, there are those often "local" scholars in the Middle East who tend uncritically to deploy conventional models and concepts to the social realities of their societies, without acknowledging sufficiently that these models hold different historical genealogies, and may thus offer little help to explain the intricate texture and dynamics of change and resistance in this part of the world. For instance, considering "slums" in light of the conventional perspectives of urban sociology, the informal communities in the Middle East (i.e., *ashwaiyyat*) are erroneously taken to be the breeding ground for violence, crime, anomie, extremism, and, consequently, radical Islam. There is little in such narratives that sees these communities as a significant locus of struggle for (urban) citizenship and transformation in urban configuration. Scant attention is given to how the urban disenfranchised, through their quiet and unassuming daily struggles, refigure new life and communities for themselves and different urban realities on the ground in Middle Eastern cities. The prevailing scholarship ignores the fact that these urban subalterns redefine the meaning of urban management and de facto participate in determining its destiny; and they do so not through formal institutional channels, from which they are largely excluded, but through direct actions in the very zones of exclusion. To give a different example, in early 2000 Iranian analysts looking uncritically at Muslim women's activism through the prism of social movement theory—developed primarily in the United States—concluded that there was no such a thing as a women's movement in Iran, because certain features of Iranian women's activities did not resemble the principal "model." It is perhaps in this spirit that Olivier Roy warns against the kind of comparison that takes "one of the elements of comparison as norm" while never questioning the "original configuration."[10] A fruitful approach would demand an analytical innovation that not only rejects both Middle Eastern "exceptionalism" and uncritical application of conventional social science concepts but also thinks and introduces fresh perspectives to observe, a novel vocabulary to speak, and new analytical tools

to make sense of specific regional realities. It is in this frame of mind that I examine both contentious politics and social "nonmovements" as key vehicles to produce meaningful change in the Middle East.

CONTENTIOUS POLITICS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

A number of remarkable social and political transformations in the region have resulted from organized contentious endeavors of various forms, ranging from endemic protest actions, to durable social movements, to major revolutionary mobilizations. The constitutional revolution of 1905–6 heralded the end of Qajar despotism and the beginning of the era of constitutionalism in Iran. The Egyptian Revolution of 1952, led by free officers, and the Iraqi Revolution of 1958 terminated long-standing monarchies and British colonial rule, augmenting republicanism and socialistic economies. In a major social and political upheaval, the Algerians overthrew French colonial rule in 1962 and established a republic.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 galvanized millions of Iranians in a movement that toppled the monarchy and ushered in a new era, not only in Iran, but in many nations of the Muslim world. Some twenty-five years earlier, a nationalist and secular democratic movement led by Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh had established constitutionalism, until it was crushed by a coup engineered by the CIA and the British secret service in 1953, which reinstated the dictatorship of the Shah. In 1985 in Sudan, a nonviolent uprising by a coalition of students, workers, and professional unions (National Alliance for National Salvation) forced President Jaafar Numeiri's authoritarian populist regime (born of a military coup) to step down in favor of a national transitional government, paving the way for free elections and democratic governance. The first Palestinian intifada (1987–93) was one of the most grassroots-based mobilizations in the Middle East of the past century. Triggered by a fatal accident caused by an Israeli truck driver, and against the backdrop of years of occupation, the uprising included almost the entire Palestinian population, in particular women and children, who resorted to nonviolent methods of resistance to the occupation, such as civil disobedience, strikes, demonstrations, withholding taxes, and product boycotts. Led mainly by the local (versus exiled) leaders, the movement built on popular committees (e.g., women's, voluntary work, and medical relief) to sustain itself, while serving as an embryonic institution of a future independent Palestinian state.[11] More recently, the "Cedar Revolution," a grassroots movement of some

1.5 million Lebanese from all walks of life demanding meaningful sovereignty, democracy, and an end to foreign meddling, resulted in the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005. This movement came to symbolize a model of peaceful mobilization from below that could cause momentous change in the region. At almost the same time, a nascent democracy movement in Egypt, with Kifaya at its core, mobilized thousands of middle-class professionals, students, teachers, judges, and journalists who called for a release of political prisoners and an end to emergency law, torture, and Husni Mubarak's presidency. In a fresh perspective, this movement chose to work with "popular forces," rather than with traditional opposition parties, bringing the campaign into the streets instead of broadcasting it from headquarters, and focused on domestic issues rather than international demands. As a postnational and postideological movement, Kifaya embraced activists from diverse ideological orientations and gender, religious, and social groups. This novel mobilization managed, after years of Islamist hegemony, nationalism, and authoritarian rule, to break the taboo of unlawful street marches, and to augment a new postnationalist, secular, and nonsectarian (democratic) politics in Egypt. It galvanized international support and compelled the Egyptian government to amend the constitution to allow for competitive presidential elections. More spectacularly, the nonviolent Green wave mobilized millions of Iranians against the Ahmadinejad's hard-line government (accused of fraud in the presidential elections of June 12, 2009) pushing for democratic reform. The Green movement was to become a prelude to the spectacular Arab uprisings of 2011, reminiscent of the revolutionary waves of 1848 and 1989 in Europe. The monumental revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya toppled longstanding dictators; and those in Syria, Bahrain, Morocco, Jordan, and Algeria shook the foundation of autocratic regimes or compelled political reforms (see Chapter 13).

Movements like the Green wave, Kifaya, and especially the Arab revolutions emerged against the background of, and indeed as alternatives to, the more formidable Islamist trends in the Muslim Middle East, which grew on the ruins of secular Arab socialism—a mix of Pan-Arabism and (non-Marxist) socialism, which wielded notable impact on political ideas and social developmental arenas in the 1950s and 1960s but declined after the Arab defeat in the Six Day War with Israel. Islamist movements posed perhaps the most serious challenge to secular authoritarian regimes in the region, even though their vision of political order remained largely exclusivist and authoritarian. They

expressed the voice of the mainly middle-class high achievers—products of Arab socialist programs—who in the 1980s felt marginalized by the dominant economic and political processes in their societies, and who saw no recourse in the fading socialist project and growing neoliberal modernity, thus charting their dream of justice and power in religious politics. The influence of Middle Eastern Islamism has gone beyond the home countries; by forging transnational networks, it has impacted global politics on an unprecedented scale. Yet the failure of Islamism to herald a democratic and inclusive order has given rise to far-reaching nascent movements, what I have called "post-Islamism," that can reshape the political map of the region if they succeed. Neither anti-Islamic nor secular, but spearheaded by pious Muslims, post-Islamism attempts to undo Islamism as a political project by fusing faith and freedom, a secular democratic state and a religious society. It wants to marry Islam with individual choice and liberties, with democracy and modernity, to generate what some have called an "alternative modernity." Emerging first in the Islamist Iran of the late 1990s (and expressed in Mohammad Khatami's reform government of 1997–2005), post-Islamism has gained expression in a number of political movements and parties in the Muslim world, including Egypt's Al-Wasat, the Moroccan Justice and Development Party, the ruling Turkish Justice and Development Party (AK Party), and the Tunisian al-Nahda. This trend is likely to continue to grow as an alternative to undemocratic Islamist movements.[12]

Parallel to the current post-Islamist turn, Islam continues to serve as a crucial mobilizing ideology and social movement frame. But as this book demonstrates, Islam is not only a subject of political contention, but also its object. In other words, while religious militants continue to deploy Islam as an ideological frame to push for exclusive moral and sociopolitical order, secular Muslims, human rights activists, and, especially, middle-class women have campaigned against a reading of Islam that underwrites patriarchy and justifies their subjugation. Indeed, the history of women's struggle in the Middle East has been intimately tied to a battle against conservative readings of Islam. Throughout the twentieth century, segments of Middle Eastern women were mobilized against conservative moral and political authorities, to push for gender equality in marriage, family, and the economy, and to assert their social role and ability to act as public players.[13] While the earlier forms of women's activism, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focused primarily on charity work, the 1940s saw women collectively engaged in

anticolonial struggles, while protesting against polygamy and advocating female education. Women's campaigns were galvanized in associational activism, which in this period flourished in Egypt, Tunis, Morocco, Lebanon, Sudan, and Iraq.[14] In the meantime, the nationalist and leftist political parties and movements wished to strengthen women's rights; yet issues relating to gender equality took a backseat to political priorities, in particular the broader objective of national liberation. It was largely in the postcolonial era, when women's presence in education, public life, politics, and the economy had been considerably enhanced, that women's organizations dedicated their attention primarily to gender rights. Yet the tide of conservative Islamism and Salafi trends since the 1980s has posed a new challenge to efforts to decrease the gender gap in Middle Eastern societies.[15] Many women are now in the throes of a battle that aims to retain what the earlier generations had gained over years of struggle. The desire to play an active part in society and the economy and to assert a degree of individuality remains a significant women's claim.

If, historically, women used charity associations to assert their public role and other gender claims, in recent years, the professional middle classes (teachers, lawyers, pharmacists, engineers, and doctors) have deployed their fairly independent syndicates both to defend their professional claims and to carry out political work, since traditional party politics remained generally corrupt and ineffective. Thus, it is not uncommon to find professional syndicates to serve nationalist or Islamist politics—a phenomenon quite distinct from labor unions. Unlike the professional syndicates, the conventional trade unions remain engaged chiefly with economic and social concerns. Despite corporatism and governmental pressures, trade unions in the Middle East have spearheaded defending workers' rights and their traditional social contract. While Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Turkey have enjoyed more or less pluralist and relatively independent unions, in the ex-populist countries of the region, such as Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Tunisia, and Syria, unions remained in the grip of corporatism. But even such corporatist unions have been used by the public-sector workers to fight against redundancies, price increases, and traditional benefits. The cadres and the rank and file from the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) broke rank from the regime and played a key role in the revolution. Similarly, the widespread workers' strikes in support of the revolution in Egypt severely undermined the resiliency of the Mubarak regime. Clearly, unionism covers only a small percentage of

working people, organized in the formal and public sectors. Where trade unions have failed to serve the interests of the majority of working poor, workers have often resorted to illegal strikes or mass street protests.[16] Thus, the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program (ERSAP) has, since the 1980s, coincided with a number of cost-of-living protests in many cities of the region, protests with little or no religious coloring. Indeed, the 2006, 2007, and March–April 2008 spate of mass workers' strikes in Egypt's public and private sectors, in particular among the textile workers of Mahalla al-Kubra, was described as the most effective organized activism in the nation's history since World War II, with almost no Islamist influence.[17]

It is clear that contentious collective action has played a key role in the political trajectories of the Middle Eastern nations. These collectives represent fairly organized, self-conscious, and relatively sustained mobilizations with identifiable leadership and often a particular (nationalist or socialist) ideology or discourse. However, this type of organized activism does not develop just anywhere and anytime. It requires a political opportunity—when the political authorities and the mechanisms of control are undermined by, for instance, a political or an economic crisis, international pressure, or infighting within the ruling elites. For example, the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon resulted from the slaying of Prime Minister Hariri, which offered a political and psychological opportunity to forge a broad anti-Syrian movement. Alternatively, an opportunity may arise when a sympathetic government or a faction within the government comes to power (e.g., as a result of an election), which then diminishes risk of repression and facilitates collective and organized mobilization; this was the case during the reform government under President Khatami in Iran (1997–2005). Otherwise, in ordinary conditions, the authoritarian regimes in the region have expressed little tolerance toward sustained collective dissent. The Freedom House reported in 2003 that while only five states in the Middle East and North Africa region allowed some limited political rights and civil liberties, the remaining twelve states allowed none.[18] In Iran in 2007 alone, thousands of activists—journalists, teachers, students, women, and members of labor, civil, and cultural organizations—were arrested and faced court charges or were dismissed from their positions.[19] Dozens of dailies and weeklies, and hundreds of NGOs, were shut down. An Amnesty International report on Egypt cited police violence against peaceful protestors calling for political reform, the arrest of hundreds of Muslim Brothers members, and the detention, without trial, of thousands of others suspected of supporting

banned Islamic groups. Torture and ill-treatment in detention continued to be systematic.[20] Restriction of political expression was, by far, worse in Saudi Arabia and Tunisia. The following report about a group of young Egyptians launching a peaceful campaign gives a taste of the severe restrictions against collective actors:

> July 23, 2008. Under the scorching sun on a beach in Alexandria, Egypt, a few dozen political activists snap digital pictures and chatter nervously. Many of them wear matching white T-shirts emblazoned with the image of a fist raised in solidarity and the words "April 6 Youth" splashed across the back. A few of them get to work constructing a giant kite out of bamboo poles and a sheet of plastic painted to look like the Egyptian flag. Most are in their twenties, some younger; one teenage girl wears a teddy bear backpack. Before the group can get the kite aloft, and well before they have a chance to distribute their pro-democracy leaflets, state security agents swarm across the sand. The cops shout threats to break up what is, by Western standards, a tiny demonstration. The activists disperse from the beach, feeling hot and frustrated; they didn't even get a chance to fly their kite. Joining up with other friends, they walk together toward the neighborhood of Loran, singing patriotic songs. Then, as they turn down another street, a group of security agents jump out of nowhere. It's a coordinated assault that explodes into a frenzy of punches and shoves. There are screams and grunts as about a dozen kids fall or are knocked to the ground. The other 30 or so scatter, sprinting for blocks in all directions before slowing enough to send each other hurried text messages: *Where are you? What happened?* Those who didn't get away are hustled into a van and two cars. The security men are shouting at them: "Where is [the leader] Ahmed Maher?"[21]

In the absence of free activities, the political class is forced either to exit the political scene at least temporarily, or to go underground. All of the region's guerilla movements, whether the Marxist Fedaian of prerevolutionary Iran, the nationalist Algerian resistance against the French colonialism, or the more recent Islamist al-Gamaʿa al-Islamiyya of Egypt and the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) of Algeria, resorted to subversive revolutionism largely because open and legal political work was limited. The sad truth is that the dissident movements of this sort are likely to spearhead undemocratic practices. Surveillance and secrecy disrupt free communication and open debate within a movement, leading either to fragmentation of aims and expectations—a

recipe for discord and sedition—or to outright authoritarian tendencies and a cult of leadership. Still, while only a handful of revolutionary activists would venture into such perilous subversive operations, others would find recourse in street politics, expressing grievance in public space and engaging in civic campaigns, or resort to the type of "social nonmovements" that interlock activism with the practice of everyday life.

STREET POLITICS AND POLITICAL STREET

The contentious politics I have outlined so far are produced and expressed primarily in urban settings. Indeed, urban public space continues to serve as the key theater of contentions. When people are deprived of the electoral power to change things, they are likely to resort to their own institutional clout (as students or workers going on strike) to bring collective pressure to bear on authorities to undertake change. But for those urban subjects (such as the unemployed, housewives, and the "informal people") who structurally lack intuitional power of disruption (such as going on strike), the "street" becomes the ultimate arena to communicate discontent. This kind of *street politics* describes a set of conflicts, and the attendant implications, between an individual or a collective populace and the authorities, which are shaped and expressed in the physical and social space of the streets, from the back alleyways to the more visible streets and squares.[22] Here conflict originates from the *active use* of public space by subjects who, in the modern states, are allowed to use it only *passively*—through walking, driving, watching—or in other ways that the state dictates. Any *active* or *participative* use infuriates officials, who see themselves as the sole authority to establish and control public order. Thus, the street vendors who proactively spread their businesses in the main alleyways; squatters who take over public parks, lands, or sidewalks; youth who control the street-corner spaces, street children who establish street communities; poor housewives who extend their daily household activities into the alleyways; or protestors who march in the streets, all challenge the state prerogatives and thus may encounter reprisal.

Street politics assumes more relevance, particularly in the neoliberal cities, those shaped by the logic of the market. Strolling through the streets of Cairo, Tehran, Dakar, or Jakarta in the midst of a working day, one is astonished by the presence of so many people operating in the streets—working, running around, standing, sitting, negotiating, driving, or riding on buses and trams. These represent the relatively new subaltern of the neoliberal city.