

## **Corporate American media coverage of Arab revolutions: the contradictory message of modernity**

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### **Abstract**

*The article examines the discourses and images of U.S. corporate media coverage of the Arab revolutions, and the way the revolutions contravened longstanding Orientalist assumptions about the incompatibility of Arab culture or Islam with democracy, as defined by a Eurocentric conception of modernity.*

### **Introduction**

This essay will examine the discourses and images of corporate American media coverage of the Arab revolutions from their beginnings in Tunisia in December, 2010, until November, 2011, a year that saw dramatic political changes in the Arab World and ambiguous responses to those changes from American news agencies. I am particularly interested in the way the revolutions contravened longstanding Orientalist assumptions about the incompatibility of Arab culture or Islam with democracy (as democracy has been envisioned and defined by a Eurocentric conception of modernity). I have studied numerous English-language print and visual media. While there has been no homogenous form of representation by those media of events in the Arab World, I have found consistent tropes and narratives throughout the reportage of corporate sources.

Before I enter into an analysis of those tropes and narratives, I want to clarify my use of terminology and my methodology. I refer to the recent politics of the Arab World not as "the Arab Spring" or as an "uprising" because the term "revolution" connotes more accurately to the general spirit of the popular protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and other countries. In Tunisia and Egypt, popular protests led to the usurpation of standing dictators, a feat that is revolutionary in both intent and outcome. While an uprising can certainly lead to a coup-d'état, the term "uprising" doesn't adequately describe a systematic desire for widespread socio-economic reform by a significant portion (perhaps even a majority) of the citizens of any nation-state. The word "revolution" as used here, then, identifies a coalescence of rampant protest with concrete demands for political change and social justice. While the nature and performance of the Arab revolutions differ according to location, leadership, scale, and economy, they have all been revolutionary in two senses: 1) they seek to undermine an established social, political, and plutocratic order; and 2) they are willing to subject and be subject to violence in order for wide-scale transition to occur.

I exclude from this description of revolution organized political parties funded by state actors. While such parties and outside influences have been evident and present serious complications to any analysis of upheaval in the Arab World, I am more interested in the organic elements of revolutionary fervor among the citizens of the affected nations and the spontaneous communities they erected for strength and solidarity. There are always complex and counterrevolutionary geopolitical contingencies embedded in protest, but rather than tracing them out I prefer to explore representation and discourse. I focus on the spirit of the protests as genuine democratic movements (no matter their shortcomings and failures) that shocked the American public and its mainstream commentators. In corporate American media, Arab protestors have been lionized as heroic, bastardized as malicious, or simply ignored, depending on where an uprising took place. Even when lionized, however, the protestors have been envisaged through problematic tropes by most corporate media. We therefore cannot speak of homogeneous or even consistent representation.<sup>1</sup>

My identification of a “corporate American media” is comprehensive but narrow. I examine those media primarily in the United States, for such media remain influential despite the recent decentralization of traditional news and opinion sources. The United States also has vested geopolitical interests in the outcome of any social change in the Arab World (as elsewhere), which influences the tenor and content of media coverage. In this usage, “corporate” overlaps with what people generally consider to be mainstream media: network and cable news channels, major-circulation newspapers, and high-traffic websites (usually owned by conglomerates, such as *Slate* by Microsoft, or the websites of the television channels themselves). I prefer the term “corporate media” because it emphasizes the coalescence of so-called mainstream thought with elite corporate interests. There is a hegemonic symbiosis between what news sources consider mainstream—i.e., widely acceptable, inoffensive—and the control exerted by corporations (who own nearly all mainstream media) on social thought contingent on maximizing their ability to consolidate power and exploit that power for profit. Corporate media are therefore a direct participant in American state policies, as well as informational emissaries of the state policies that most benefit them.

## General Observations

There are no consistent representations of the Arab revolutions. The political machinations of those revolutions preclude accurate or comprehensive reportage. The vast differences of organization, tactics, goals, and discourses of the Arab (and ethnic minority) protestors make it impossible to subsume the recent politics of the Arab World to a singular narrative. In the realm of

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1. The e-zine *Jadaliyya* has had consistently strong coverage of the Arab revolutions. <[www.jadaliyya.com](http://www.jadaliyya.com)>.

representation, though, one can detect distinctive patterns in the discursive and imagistic choices of corporate American media. First of all, those media represent events in the Arab World from the point of view of American state interests (which is to say, the point of view of Western corporate interests). If no specific benefit to American state interests is apparent in the possible outcomes of a given uprising, corporate media simply invent an advantageous potential result and report from that standpoint.

As the Arab revolutions spread and in some cases developed into violent quagmires, the tone and tenor of American media changed. In the beginning, when events in Tunisia led to the revolt against Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, a tenor of international optimism influenced corporate media coverage in the United States, as the courage of the protestors overwhelmed strict geopolitical interests. Later, as Western nations contemplated military intervention and as revolutionary populations formed discrete parties and international alliances, corporate media assumed a more traditional perspective highlighting state actors, economic possibilities, and American market considerations. By autumn of 2011, the cautious goodwill corporate American media exhibited for Arab protesters declined and was replaced by recapitulation of United States government talking points.

Corporate American media have consistently offered particular narratives about the Arab World during the period under review in this essay, most of those narratives long in use but some of them new (or altered to reflect changed dynamics). The following are of note:

- The dynamics of media coverage do not merely illuminate American perceptions of and political interests in the Arab World, but also reinforce a preponderance of enduring American self-images (as disseminated from the point of view of the nation's economic and political elite). The self-images of import here conceptualize the United States as a timeless and natural space of opportunity and freedom, intuitive phenomena that are not alien to American people as they are to Arabs. American political righteousness has been a dominant theme in corporate media from the start of the Arab revolutions. This righteousness has been manifested through a particular discourse of Western modernity having been imported to, and finally accepted by, Arab societies.
- Corporate American media allotted coverage to certain uprisings at much different rates. Protests in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, for instance, were underreported or ignored, while those in Syria were highlighted. These disparities have been determined by whether a particular tyrant was a United States client or enemy.
- A consistent point of view has been the effect of Arab revolutions on Israel. More specifically, corporate media commentators have expressed little interest in the well-being of Arab societies, instead focusing on how events would affect the well-being of Israel. Such expressions of Zionism

overwhelmed the understanding of Arab political issues in their indigenous contexts.

- The beginning of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt represent the first time since 9/11 (and largely extending to before 9/11) that Arabs weren't systematically portrayed as barbarians, terrorists, or imbeciles.<sup>2</sup> While it cannot be said that the portrayal of Arabs has been uniformly negative in corporate American media, such portrayal has been negative as a systematic phenomenon. We must now take into account how the altered representations following the protests in Tunisia have complicated what had until then been a remarkably predictable representational formula.<sup>3</sup>
- Even when corporate media evinced sympathy and admiration for Arab revolutions, there was no notable acknowledgment or retraction of the basic Orientalist formula of Arab culture and Islam being incompatible with democracy. (In the Orientalist formula, it is worth noting, "democracy" is a highly coercive word that coheres to Eurocentric notions of modernity as well as to longstanding imperialist practices.) In turn, those formulas remained intact despite the changed tone (from general hostility to grudging respect) of media conceptions of the Arab people.

There have been other forms of representation in American media, but the ones I highlight above account for distinctive patterns, which I examine in detail below. Let us now take a look at each pattern in detail.

## **The Influence of Western Modernity**

About the recent Arab revolutions, Joseph Massad points out:

As for the larger Arab context, those who call what has unfolded in the last year in the Arab World as an Arab "awakening" are not only ignorant of the history of the last century, but also deploy Orientalist arguments in their depiction of Arabs as a quiescent people who put up with dictatorship for decades and are finally waking up from their torpor. Across the Arab world, Arabs have revolted against colonial and local tyranny every decade since World War I. It has been the European colonial powers and their American heir who have stood in their way every step of the way and allied themselves with local dictators and their families (and in many cases handpicking such dictators and putting them on the throne).<sup>4</sup>

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2. Edward Said (1981) examined these phenomena decades ago.

3. The presence of Zionist imperatives is crucial in this context. For a comprehensive example, see further Petras (2006).

4. Joseph Massad, "Arab Revolts—Past and Present," *Al-Jazeera English*. <<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/2011111810259215940.html>>. 18 Nov. 2011.

Massad's point is crucial to any analysis of corporate media coverage, for it identifies the basic assumptions on which much of that coverage is modeled and identifies the fallacious perceptions of a stagnant Arab culture. Even in the moments that commentators expressed admiration for Arabs, they did so in a framework conceptualizing revolutionary activity as an accident of history.

Samir Amin offers another germane observation:

The apparent 'stability of the regime,' boasted of by successive US officials like Hillary Clinton, was based on a monstrous police apparatus counting 1,200,000 men (the army numbering a mere 500,000) free to carry out daily acts of criminal abuse. The imperialist powers claimed that this regime was "protecting" Egypt from the threat of Islamism. This was nothing but a clumsy lie. In reality the regime had perfectly integrated reactionary political Islam (on the Wahhabite model of the Gulf) into its power structure by giving it control of education, of the courts, and of the major media (especially television). The sole permitted public speech was that of the Salafist mosques, allowing the Islamists, to boot, to pretend to make up "the opposition." The cynical duplicity of the US establishment's speeches (Obama no less than Bush) was perfectly adapted to its aims.<sup>5</sup>

Amin points to the inveterate meddling of the United States (and to a lesser degree Western Europe) that went virtually unreported in the past and has been largely ignored in the present. This meddling, replete with physical in addition to economic violence, has played a crucial role in the repressiveness of Arab societies against which the uprisings directed their anger.

The issue of political Islam becomes especially important in this paradigm, for it is usually Islam that provides both the pretext for and opposition to American interference in the Arab World. Islam is the most explicit cultural failure of Arabs according to an entire class of politicians and political elite. Arabs are unworthy of democracy even if they were programmed culturally for it because Islam, the enemy of modernity, is the only possible outcome of unmonitored Arab agency, a proposition untenable to US political interests in the region. Yet, as Amin points out, it is the American support of various Islamist movements and dictatorial regimes that has enabled the peoples of the Arab World to identify a distinctive opponent in the very discourses of freedom uttered by American officials and repeated by corporate media.<sup>6</sup> Such ironies have been central to the tenor and language of those media ever since the Arab peoples destroyed the narratives into which they had been tidily arranged.

When corporate media were forced to confront these venerable narratives of Arab stagnation, they often compressed Arab protestors into a Western paradigm of nonviolent resistance (a paradigm derived, ironically, from non-Western figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gandhi, wherein such figures

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5. Samir Amin, "2011: An Arab Springtime?" *Pambazuka News*.  
<<http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/73902>>. 6 June 2011.

6. See further McAlister 2005 and Little 2002.

are reduced to caricatures of their actual philosophies of resistance).<sup>7</sup> The Arabs, it seems, were coming to their senses, rejecting the violence and barbarity of their culture in favor of the enlightened modernity so laboriously exported to them by Western benefactors. This tendency to conceptualize an Arab awakening inspired by erstwhile American values coalesced around the peculiar figure of Gene Sharp, a retired American professor whose little-known book, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, became a *cause celebre* among corporate media. Sharp, proclaimed the BBC, is "the man now credited with the strategy behind the toppling of the Egyptian government."<sup>8</sup> The BBC's passive voice precludes accurate identification of exactly who is providing Sharp credit for toppling Hosni Mubarak. The BBC actually references other corporate media.

Under the headline, "Shy U.S. Intellectual Created Playbook Used in Revolution," the *New York Times* proclaimed of Sharp that "for decades, his practical writings on nonviolent revolution — most notably 'From Dictatorship to Democracy,' a 93-page guide to toppling autocrats, available for download in 24 languages — have inspired dissidents around the world, including in Burma, Bosnia, Estonia and Zimbabwe, and now Tunisia and Egypt."<sup>9</sup> Sasha Abramsky, writing in *The Nation*, offers a similar observation: "The force of Sharp's emancipatory thinking was on full view in Egypt last month, as a population long thought to be too passive to throw off the yoke of tyranny finally found its voice."<sup>10</sup>

Abramsky's passage illuminates the troublesome assumptions about Arab societies underlying corporate media coverage. The term "passive" recalls the venerable notion that Arabs lack agency and, based on the stagnation of their culture, are destined to acquiesce to the rule of tyrants (a notion that handsomely serves US interests in the region). Abramsky's formulation of an Arab population "finally" finding its voice validates Joseph Massad's argument that corporate media recycle the belief that Arab populations have suddenly arose from an ahistorical slumber, a radical cultural shift that can be attributed to the influence of Western scholars of nonviolence.<sup>11</sup> Western modernity remains the standard of revolution and supposedly provides revolutionaries their inspiration. Plenty of evidence suggests, however, that it is the very

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7. Gandhi's writings are more complex than liberal Western activists often suggest. A useful collection is Dalton 1996.

8. Ruairidh Arrow, "Gene Sharp: Author of the Nonviolent Revolution Rulebook," *BBC*. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12522848>>. 21 Feb. 2011.

9. Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Shy U.S. Intellectual Created Playbook Used in a Revolution." *New York Times*. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/world/middleeast/17sharp.html?pagewanted=all>>. 16 Feb. 2011.

10. Sasha Abramsky, "Gene Sharp: Nonviolent Warrior." *The Nation*. <<http://www.thenation.com/article/159265/gene-sharp-nonviolent-warrior>>. 16 Mar. 2011.

11. The seminal text these commentators overlook is Antonius 1939.

construct of Western modernity and its reliance on dictatorship for economic supremacy, against which the Arab peoples have revolted, with a keen awareness of the interplay of Western democracy with Eastern autocracy.

## **Inconsistent Coverage**

While it would appear obvious to anybody who follows patterns of corporate American media that those media highlight events and regions that prove instrumental to the practice of American imperialism, it is important to assess the discourses that rationalize such inconsistent coverage. In the case of Arab revolutions, those discourses reveal the extent to which corporate media convey the interests of the American government. They do so not only by uncritically repeating official government statements, but also by presenting limited information based on the proclivities of the economic elite, a tacit form of politicking passing itself off as objectivity.

*The New York Times*, for instance, devoted intense coverage to unrest in Syria, an enemy of the United States (though such alliances are never as clear-cut as government officials would have it). If we compare the coverage of unrest in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, strong American allies, during the same period, we see that the two countries, which brutalized protest, were virtually ignored beyond their diplomatic roles in the Arab World.<sup>12</sup> Repression in Bahrain was comparable in brutality to that of Syria, yet Syrian violence against civilians received disproportionate coverage.

The same is true of Saudi Arabia. A search of *The New York Times* online archive between September 20, 2011, and December 20, 2011, returned 67 articles on "Saudi Arabia unrest," many of them relaying Saudi officials' responses to events in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab World. A search of the same period with the terms "Syria unrest" turned up 169 results, nearly all of them implicating president Bashar al-Assad's repression. When I changed the search terms, the results were similar. "Syria repression" netted 32 results, while "Saudi Arabia repression" netted 11, nine of them actually about al-Assad's heavy hand in Syria. At *The Washington Post*, a 90-day search of "Syria unrest" from mid-September to mid-December, 2011, resulted in 14 articles, while a search of "Saudi Arabia unrest" from the same period returned 6 articles, none of them about protest in Saudi Arabia. "Syria repression" turned up 10 articles; "Saudi Arabia repression" came up empty.

At both publications, searches of "Bahrain unrest" and "Bahrain repression" produced scant material. *The New York Times* ran 39 articles under the search "Bahrain unrest" (as opposed to the 169 for Syria), around half having little to do with citizen protest in Bahrain. For the search "Bahrain repression," 10

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12. For more information on the Bahraini and Saudi repression of protestors, see further the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, <[www.bahrainrights.org/en/](http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/)>; and the Amnesty International report, *Saudi Arabia: Repression in the Name of Security*, available at <<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE23/016/2011/en>>.

results came up (as opposed to 32 for Syria), two of them op-ed pieces and another letter to the editor. *The Washington Post* returned 11 results for "Bahrain unrest" (as opposed to 14 for Syria, an improvement over *The New York Times*). For "Bahrain repression," the paper ran 8 articles (as opposed to 10 for Syria). *The Washington Post*, then, devoted more attention to Bahrain than did *The New York Times*, but practically ignored Saudi suppression. The multitudinous roles of Saudi Arabia in the affairs of all Arab nations—as overt and covert funding source, military ally, religious influence, and so forth—was largely unmentioned and unanalyzed by corporate American media in general.

To guard against the possibility of compromised results based on disparate vocabulary, in both searches I changed the terminology from "unrest" to "protest," "oppression," "suppression," and "uprising," and found comparable percentages. I also searched "Saudi" instead of "Saudi Arabia" and provided alternate transliterations of "Bahrain" (Bahrayn, Bahrein) without discovering any changes. Other major newspapers and broadcast websites covered the Arab revolutions with disparities nearly identical to those of *The New York Times*. A survey of corporate media during the first year of the Arab revolutions will reveal a consistent pattern of such tendentious points of view wherein self-assuredness ostensibly indicates an objective standard.

*The New York Times* and *Washington Post* betray tendentiousness in other ways. Both publications heavily supported the uprising against Muammar Gadhafi in Libya and editorialized in favor of NATO intervention, repeating those calls for intervention in Syria. Yet the papers rarely interrogated their own ethical and editorial inconsistencies. Israeli brutality against civilians, for instance, has never warranted calls for foreign intervention in either publication, nor has either publication called for intervention in Saudi Arabia despite vicious repression of most forms of activism. Indeed, corporate media had long supported the same Arab dictators they were later forced to disclaim, a pattern in strict keeping with the public sentiments of the American government. It is worth noting that corporate media almost universally supported the Saudi military intervention in Bahrain.

### **Israel as Sacred Icon**

Corporate media's lack of interest in Israeli state repression is counterbalanced by their intense anxiety about the safety and security of Israeli society. In turn, their coverage of the Arab revolutions was influenced by concern for Israel, which quickly reestablished Israel's status as a sacred icon of American modernity. The inclusion of Israel in discussion of Arab revolutions isn't apocryphal, for in corporate American media Israel is the primary subject of importance in the Middle East. The outset of the Arab revolutions would do nothing to change that reality.

Expressions of concern for the well-being of Israel (state and society) reinforce the elemental binary of Western modernity and Arab barbarity. Certain assumptions, sometimes stated but often implicit, become evident when that



binary is deployed: an Arab World not under the careful control of handpicked leaders is not to be trusted; the Arabs are too irrational and threatening to be left to their own devices; the Arabs, of less strategic import to the West than Israelis, are therefore inherently less valuable as human subjects; the need of Western capital to supplement the interests of the economic elite is more important than the well-being of the Arab societies that must suffer under the rule of dictators who facilitate financial injustice (a form of reasoning that corporate American media also use in relation to the United States populace); and the expansionist imperatives of Israel supersede anti-imperialist sentiment central to movements for Arab self-determination.

Although anxiety about the revolutions' effects on Israel arose mainly in opinion pieces, it was evident in news coverage, as well. Ethan Bronner of the *New York Times*, for example, complained in an article titled "Beyond Cairo Embassy Attack, Israel Senses Wider Siege" that "as the months of Arab Spring have turned autumnal, Israel has increasingly become a target of public outrage. Some here say Israel is again being made a scapegoat, this time for unfulfilled revolutionary promises."<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg evinces the same anxiety through disgusted answers to his own rhetorical question: "Why, after decades of quiet, has the Egypt-Israel border become so tumultuous? Two reasons: The interim Egyptian government has lost control over the Sinai since the revolution, and Gaza, which borders the Sinai, has been transformed by Hamas into a weapons-importing and terror-exporting mini-state."<sup>14</sup>

In a piece of news analysis, "Arab Spring Spells Uncertainty for Israel," Jeremy Bowen of the BBC allowed his concern for Israel to overwhelm his objectivity. In assessing the developments in the Arab World vis-à-vis Israel, he confessed, "In fact—and I am shuddering a little as I write these words, as I have written them so often before—the signs are not good."<sup>15</sup> At CNN, the "regional tsunami" instigated by the revolutions has produced frightening consequences:

Israel's closest partner in the Arab world, former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, is now on trial. The military council that replaced him has distanced itself from Israel and allowed space to popular opposition to the peace treaty between the two countries. While Israel sheds no tears about Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's problems, it is apprehensive about what might follow should

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13. Ethan Bronner, "Beyond Cairo Embassy Attack, Israel Senses Wider Siege," *New York Times*.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/world/middleeast/11israel.html?pagewanted=all>>. 10 Sept. 2011.

14. Jeffrey Goldberg, "Israel Surrounded as Arab Spring Turns Darker," *Bloomberg*.  
<<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-09-13/israel-surrounded-as-arab-spring-darkens-commentary-by-jeffrey-goldberg.html>>. 12 Sept. 2011.

15. Jeremy Bowen, "Arab Spring Spells Uncertainty for Israel," *BBC*.  
<[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/9573523.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/9573523.stm)>. 27 Aug. 2011.

unrest eventually unseat him. Instability in Syria would inevitably spill into Lebanon, where Hezbollah has tens of thousands of missiles aimed at Israel.<sup>16</sup>

Similar sentiments pervade corporate American (and British) media, along with many independent liberal sources such as *The Nation* and *Huffington Post*.

As the revolutions began in Tunisia and Egypt, corporate media avoid articulating such anxieties, though Israel was nevertheless a topic of conversation. Rather than speculate about how Israel might cope with hostile, unrestrained Arab hordes, those media expressed tacit anxiety by reassuring audiences that the burgeoning revolutions lacked a foreign policy component (code for: not hostile to Israel). In February, 2011, Thomas Friedman declared, "For anyone who spent time in Tahrir Square these last three weeks, one thing was very obvious: Israel was not part of this story at all."<sup>17</sup> Ten months later he would write, "Israel is facing the biggest erosion of its strategic environment since its founding. It is alienated from its longtime ally Turkey. Its archenemy Iran is suspected of developing a nuclear bomb. The two strongest states on its border—Syria and Egypt—are being convulsed by revolutions. The two weakest states on its border—Gaza and Lebanon—are controlled by Hamas and Hezbollah."<sup>18</sup>

Friedman's change of perspective essentially mirrors the evolution of the corporate commentariat. The excitement and magnitude of the ostensibly spontaneous protests in Tunisia led to guarded support and proclamations that Arab democracy would not necessarily lead to anti-Israeli sentiment. As the revolution in Tunisia progressed, however, and spread to fellow Arab nations, commentators realized that democratic Arab sentiment is largely opposed to Zionism—a sentiment effectively suppressed by dictatorial leaders—and emended their viewpoints to reflect that realization. The articles proclaiming the supposedly "non-political" nature of the Tunisian revolt gave way to concerned speculation about the true intentions of Arab protestors, a concern often expressed in a coded fashion as fear of the threat of "Islamism." In fact, the most common story vis-à-vis Israel after the Tunisian revolutionaries overthrew dictator Zine El Abidin Ben Ali was about ten—or twenty, depending on the source—Tunisian Jews being rescued to Israel.<sup>19</sup> Not long after, a

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16. Tim Lister and Kevin Flower, "Israel Faces 'Regional Tsunami' Set off by Arab Spring," *CNN*. <[http://articles.cnn.com/2011-09-22/middleeast/world\\_meast\\_israel-arab-spring\\_1\\_defense-minister-ehud-barak-mavi-marmara-israeli-government?\\_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-09-22/middleeast/world_meast_israel-arab-spring_1_defense-minister-ehud-barak-mavi-marmara-israeli-government?_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST)>. 22 Sept. 2011.

17. Thomas Friedman, "Postcard from Cairo, Part 2," *New York Times*. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/13/opinion/13-friedman-Web-cairo.html?pagewanted=all>>. 13 Feb. 2011.

18. Thomas Friedman, "The Arab Awakening and Israel," *New York Times*. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/30/opinion/israel-and-the-arab-awakening.html>>. 29 Nov. 2011.

19. This rescue operation was inherently suspicious, not least because Tunisian Jews later spoke strongly against an appeal by Israeli Vice Prime Minister Silvan Shalom to emigrate to Israel. Avraham Chiche, a Tunisian Jewish leader, responded to Shalom's appeal by proclaiming,

proposed anti-normalization and boycott amendment to the new Tunisian constitution raised the anxiety level of the commentators. The concern about Israel's well-being would pervade corporate media coverage as the Arab revolutions unfolded.

### **The New Arab Image and Unrevised Orientalism**

The improved image of Arabs in corporate American media is perhaps the most interesting dimension of their coverage. A host of venerable Orientalist tropes, discussed above, have dominated corporate media coverage of the Arab World for many decades. While there have been favorable pop culture and news images of Arabs, such favorable images were never systematic; they were either isolated or discussed with a particular subtext (to reinforce ideals of liberal tolerance, for example, or to implicitly agitate for imperialist ventures; in both cases, Arabs end up as idealized subjects lacking agency and requiring some form of Western patrimony).

The revolutions would become sources of inspiration to Americans, however. Eager to capitalize on the popular reception of Arab protests among the American populace, politicians both liberal and conservative expressed verbal support for Arab democracy (though their actions in office had long indicated much different commitments). The influence of the Egyptian revolution was especially strong in the American polity. When mass political action began in Madison, Wisconsin, in February 2011, protestors and commentators connected that action to Egypt.

For the first time in decades, perhaps ever, the Arabs were help up by Americans as sources of inspiration, as people to be emulated. Article titles and protest slogans illuminated how deeply the example of Egypt became to Americans displeased with their own government. The Madison action, for instance, produced "We Are Tahrir Square"; "The Midwestern Tahrir"; "A Child of Tahrir Square"; "Wisconsin: America's Tahrir Square"; and "Where's Our Tahrir Square?" This sort of internationalizing of domestic protest would be repeated, though to a lesser degree, during the many occupy protests throughout the latter half of 2011.

The depiction of Arabs as inspirational rather than as existential threats to modernity was unprecedented at a level more profound than mere mimicry. Evoking Arabs as positive examples constituted a serious reversal of the tenets of liberal modernity, in which white civility is to be exported to those less developed (intellectually and economically). Such evocation was also a comeuppance for liberal activists in the United States who, even in ostensible

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"Silvan Shalom needs to mind his own business and let us choose to live where we want to live, instead of making publicity statements for Israel." See further, "Tunisian Jews to Israel: We're Staying Here, Thanks!" *New Jewish Resistance*.

<<http://newjewishresistance.org/article/tunisian-jews-israel-were-staying-here-thanks>>. 10 Dec. 2011.

support of Arabs, had long refused to acknowledge legitimate humanity in them.<sup>20</sup> We have never seen a moment in the United States in which Arab protest (against any institution) has been humanized to the point of emulation. This is not to say that activists in Wisconsin and elsewhere in the United States employed the same physical, political, organizational, ethical and communicative strategies as the protestors in the Arab World. In fact, there were serious strategic differences, too many to recount. I speak instead of a form of discursive and symbolic emulation.

The metaphorical uses of Tahrir Square in the United States illuminate numerous discourses of note. In particular they enable us to identify and examine fundamentally ambiguous self-images among the guardians of American modernity and the contradictory narratives of sustaining democracy within an imperialist economy of free-market capitalism. The very notion of a freedom protected by modernity relies on assumptions that apportion humans into disparate moral and intellectual categories. Thus the metaphor of Tahrir Square deconstructs the ideal of freedom without acknowledging its failure to historicize its own meanings and connotations. Once it was held up as an ideal in the United States, Tahrir Square was no longer a physical space hosting an actual revolution but an artifact of American imperialism, appropriated into a geography whose codification of modernity required Egypt to sacrifice itself to America's domination of liberty.

Arabs, of course, could not remain idiots or terrorists if their behavior was suddenly to inspire rather than disgust. Corporate American media rarely undertake systematic depiction based on organic or decontextualized methodologies. While their coverage of Arab revolutions was calibrated toward the interests of the plutocracy they help comprise, it is probably unfair to completely attribute the favorable images of Arabs to cynicism. Much of it, certainly at least some of it, was inevitable—that is to say, the bravery of Arab protestors and the righteousness of their desire to achieve freedom and self-determination would have been difficult to ignore or to dismiss as misplaced cultural angst. The Arabs, in this case, were in charge of their own destiny in terms of how they would be represented, though they could not totally move beyond the weight of a profoundly complex representational history in the United States.

The Tahrir Square metaphor ensured that Arabs were heroes for a moment in corporate American media. No matter how incomplete the media viewpoints of the Arab World, the altered tone in coverage represented a dramatic departure from the usual patrimonial tenor to which audiences had grown accustomed. In the United States, in which individuals and institutions across economic strata offer consent to corporate authority, a metaphor like Tahrir Square—even in its watered-down and bowdlerized incarnations—can only evince limited effectiveness before it is diffused by the established mores of corporate media. In turn, the Tahrir Square metaphor functioned only as long as it signified the

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20. I examine these matters in detail in Salaita 2009.

images of freedom as defined by corporate authority and not actual liberation from the strictures of corporate rule. The limitations of the Tahrir Square metaphor in the American polity illuminate the limitations of conceptualizing Arabs favorably in a political system in which imperialism in the Arab World is fundamental to the national interest.

The imperialism fundamental to the American national interest—a devious phrase highlighting the impulses of the ruling class—has helped create a complicated position for Arabs in post-revolution corporate media. Their revolutions have at least ensured that overconfident claims about the incompatibility of Arabs and democracy will need to be reconsidered and that American military strength cannot overpower the disorganized fact of popular sentiment. Even though analysis of corporate American media between the period of December, 2010, and November, 2011, illustrates a systematic form of positive representation of Arabs, classic Orientalist discourses remain entrenched in the United States. This lingering Orientalism is due in part to the demands of American foreign policy and the dialectic between historical racism and the current public mood. Corporate media omitted historical context for popular Arab displeasure or for the series of racist narratives about Arabs those media had codified over the course of decades.

As a result, the modes of Orientalism corporate media had exhibited remain intact and were often present even in moments in which Arabs were portrayed favorably. The construction of meaning through media is complex and contested, for media constantly undertake discursive and ethical revision even as they adhere to basic strategies and principles. (For example, corporate media continuously reexamine their policies on racial representation, but rarely challenge the structures on which racism has been created and sustained.) Neither commentators nor broadcasters reexamined the longstanding Orientalism of corporate media, which, despite the discursive changes attending coverage of the revolutions, remains unrevised. It would take more than uprisings, even ones the United States was forced by popular sentiment to support, to extricate the peoples of the Arab World from the construction of the media Arab. These narratives are entrenched in corporate media as a result of the imperialist practices underlying notions of American modernity. As Hamid Dabashi (2011: 9) puts it, “Something about being American demands saving the world even if that means destroying it.”

Mahmood Mamdani offers a more elaborate version of this observation. He writes, “The modern political sensibility sees most political violence as necessary to historical progress.” Mamdani uses this observation to raise his notion of Culture Talk, a way of translating foreign populations in the United States based on cultural determinism: “Culture Talk assumes that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and it then explains politics as a consequence of that essence” (2004: 17). Even though corporate media largely portrayed Arabs favorably upon the advent of the revolutions, the tradition of Culture Talk remained intact. I will not rehash the commonplaces of Culture Talk vis-à-vis Arabs here, as numerous scholars have examined them to great

effect. Instead, I offer an update of the major assumptions of Culture Talk upon the onset of the Arab revolutions:

- That Arabs are finally awakening to democracy
- That Arabs appreciate (and often seek) the guidance of a fundamentally benevolent United States
- That Arabs constantly have to guard against their inherent barbarity (i.e., their natural impulse toward political Islam)
- That Arabs in control of their own destiny are necessarily threatening
- That Arabs have been dormant throughout their history
- That Arabs attempt to enter into a modernity decontextualized from its invention and exportation by the West in general and the United States in particular

These assumptions permeate corporate media coverage of the Arab World. It would be nearly impossible to speculate about how such assumptions might be challenged or ameliorated, for the political and economic structures in which those media operate give the assumptions their mass appeal as natural and inevitable.

## **Conclusion**

The Arab revolutions of 2010-11 produced a new set of media images for scholars to explore. The findings I present here are incomplete, as any one study will be. It is impossible to account fully for the range of images corporate American media present vis-à-vis Arabs (along with Central Asians, South Asians, and Muslims in general, groups with whom corporate media often conflate Arabs). The most noteworthy development has been the favorable portrayal of Arabs and how those portrayals have altered our understanding of the traditional demonization of Arabs. The complex relationship of corporate American media with the Arab World is ongoing, of course, and it is probably not a good idea to attempt prognostication; it is better to analyze the materials we actually have on hand.

What we now have on hand is an enrichment of American discourses on the Arab World. This is not to say that a sea-change in representations of Arabs in the United States has occurred, or even that Arabs find themselves in a more favorable position in corporate media. Instead, I suggest that socio-political circumstances in the Arab World forced a revision of typical corporate media paradigms. One element of corporate media coverage that has not changed is their promotion of rightwing Israeli policy. The main changed element is a partial acquiescence to the infectious energy of the revolutions. As the revolutions progress and stabilize, and as the counterrevolutions (many

supported by the United States) intensify, the tone and tenor of corporate media coverage will evolve, but based on that coverage to this point, it is prudent to assume that those media will retain a basic framework of interpretation and analysis.

This framework, as I illustrate above, is attached to the imperatives of American foreign and domestic policies. As a result, corporate media coverage of the Arab revolutions has been inconsistent and fraught with assumptions about the eminence of Western modernity. We learn more, in other words, about American sensibilities than we do about the Arab World in monitoring corporate media coverage of the Arab revolutions. The main thing to be taken from this learning process is the desire for continued American management of the Arab World. Corporate American media do not report news so much as articulate the anxieties of imperialist regulation. The Arab revolutions show that in moments of chaos, those anxieties seek comfort in the sureties of an overconfident conventional wisdom.

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