

# The Virtual and the Revolution: The Place of the Internet in the Emergence of an Arab Civil Society

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The term “civil society” has circulated widely in the Arab World in the past few years, playing a pioneering role in the Arab Revolutions of 2011 onwards. This term is still trying to prove itself and its influence on Arab public opinion. The main credit for this influence has belonged to modern electronic media, which has shown a surprising efficacy to secure the success of these revolutions and a capacity to mobilize the masses in different ways.

Jawhar al-Jamusi’s *The Virtual and the Revolution* fits within this general context, seeking an understanding of the conflict between political authority and civil authority in contemporary Arab societies, and specifically the problematic of the relationship between what is civil and what is political in transitional periods.

Jamusi’s book thus comes at the ideal moment, or at an ideal sociological moment, attempting to answer the many questions and speculations surrounding it. To what extent have Arab civil forces contributed to the realization of the Arab revolutions by making use of new mechanisms of social and political mobilization whose foundation is the virtual and the digital – new methods of communication? How can these modern technologies continue to influence the other revolutionary transformations that are still unfolding? Have the technologies of revolutionary communication created a new political institution that

did not previously exist? Are we at the beginning of a transition from political democracy to a social or participative democracy? Has the virtual individual moved to the centre of political leadership and the centre of ‘truth’ production? What are the limits of the role of the internet in the emergence of Arab civil society?

The book consists of an introduction and three chapters, a list of tables and figures and another of sources and references.

In the introduction, the author draws our attention to various methodological points, including:

- That the study focuses fundamentally and exclusively on Tunisia rather than any other Arab countries.
- That the study relies on “organizational and civil society data, and analysis thereof from 2003 and then 2010, when the Arab revolutionary mobilization broke out.”
- That the research problem revolves around “a central question which considers politics during and after the Arab Revolutions to have become open to all, and a collective act, through the civil forces using media in their mobilizations both in and out of the country, and in uprisings against the ruler and revolutions against existing regimes.”

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- That the study seeks to lay out a relevant theoretical and conceptual framework, particularly in accounting for everything to do with the society of information, virtual communities, digital and cyber-society and revolution. It seeks to clarify the virtual practices which have produced great transformations in three fields – the social dimension of practice, i.e. the social practices produced by digital technology; individual changes, i.e. the individual and society in virtual reality, in the sense of ‘cyber-individuality’; and the future picture for the virtual society.

Through this lengthy introduction (pp. 9-34), I agree with the author on the importance and effectiveness of modern electronic media, which have produced real effects in the political, social and economic fields. But we must wonder why the study was restricted to the Tunisian sphere without going into important virtual fields of great significance for the purposes of the book as written, particularly in the case of Egypt and Syria.

The first chapter, “Applications in the Arab Revolutions and the Virtual Gamble”, comprises four different sections, the first of which is “the Virtual: The Tunisian Revolution as an Example.” Like other experts, analysts, sociologists and politicians, Jamusi agrees that the Tunisian Revolution would not have taken place were it not for the crucial role played by the alternative media, highlighting the blogs that represented “the peoples’ main means of expression” through rebelling and protesting against the existing ruling regimes, “producing revolutions that have continued to oscillate between the virtual and civil society, between reality and imagination, and producing a new sphere of democracy that smoothed the way for true participative and mass democracy to have its moment” (p. 39). Electronic media, as the author shows, helped to break the official media monopoly, highlight cultural change in Tunisian society, establish an effective force active in the digital-virtual field, and deepen youth involvement in political action aiming at change.

In the second section, “Civil Organizations and the Contexts of Communications Transformations and Social Mobilization”, al-Jamusi emphasizes the role played by civil organizations in political

practice, which has led to a diminished place for traditional political parties in favor of new political actors whose mobilizations make use of modern media to achieve their aims. He believes that civil society has become an active part of public life and international and national struggle, participating in the development process in its various dimensions: “the revolution that media and communications technology thrust into existence has brought us into “new organizational life”, and subsequently created an active organizational fabric” (p. 49). It has likewise contributed to ensuring communication between the communities and organizations of civil society anywhere in the world, without consideration for geographical location, and without need for official headquarters requiring material means or traditional ways of communicating that lack directness and interactivity. He concludes that this new reality will lead to complication of the relationship between what is civil and what is political in transitional periods, redistributing power relations between society and state and between individual and state with influence from virtual media and open sources.

In the third section, “The Weakness of Political Parties faced by the Growth in Influence of Civil Forces”, Jamusi draws our attention to the retreat of political parties which have lost their credibility and become incapable of regulating the process of political and social change within our societies when faced by the success of civil forces and virtual communities in using digital means in positive interaction with the various contexts of Arab mobilization.

From another perspective, the writer shows the prominence of civil society in new approaches concerning the contemporary diplomatic field and depending on organizational activities and national, regional, and global organizational networks, which contributed to the development of political work through the emergence and development of a parallel diplomacy supporting traditional government diplomatic work.

The useful element of this section was the writer’s discussion of “digital diplomacy”,<sup>(2)</sup> which means coordination and integration between diplomacy and development through intensive use of internet

2 For more information on digital diplomacy, see: Nadim Mansouri, “Sōsiyōlōjiya al-Internēt” (Beirut: Muntadā al-Ma’ārif, 2014), pp. 158-162; Andreas Andre, *Digital Diplomacy Conversations on Innovation in Foreign Policy* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), pp. 47 - 56.

services and contact between diplomats on the one hand and internet activists on the other.

In the fourth section, “The Independence of Civil Society against Universal Organizational Networking”, Jamusi highlights the non-independence of organizations from political work or political backgrounds: such organizations originally attempted to convince large political parties of their goals, later becoming an international system in the framework of a broad global space, engaging in various pursuits that gave them a renewed legitimacy, and forming a new global alliance. This alliance has become a relationship of power, authority or negotiation. He focuses on three main points: the project, the relationship and the contract. Jamusi examines the most prominent initiatives of this universal alliance in Tunisian society, including the National Assembly of Organizations, which sought to nominate independent lists of candidates to the legislative elections in 2004, and the joint efforts of various organizations to observe the legislative and presidential elections.

The second chapter, “The Development of the Digital-Virtual and Possible Hypotheses of the Culture of Demand-Making and Protest,” is also made up of four sections. In the first section the writer discusses “Future Mechanisms of Protest and Virtual Action by Civil Society”. He contends that civil society requires two fundamental mechanisms to develop in the future: continuing work nationally, regionally and globally to ensure the continuing presence of important issues, and follow-up on the resolutions of the World Summit on the Information Society. This latter has allowed organizations to participate for the first time in an international summit as an official body equivalent to governments or international organizations. This has led it to conclude that civil society will have greater presence and effectiveness in the future, without ruling out a growth in opportunities for the great powers to dominate it and for it to become more apprehensive as a result, especially in Arab societies.

In the second section, “Civil Forces’ New Virtual Spaces”, Jamusi discusses the youth’s ability to use modern electronic means and transform them into platforms through which electronic wars can be waged, leading to the fall of ruling regimes throughout the Arab Revolutions, and to the discovery of holes in the new ruling authorities. He presents various examples of this, including Anonymous,

who launched “Operation Tunisia”, aiming to draw the attention of global media to what was happening inside the country. Operation Tunisia included attacking Tunisian government sites, disseminating pictures and video clips leaked from inside Tunisia. Other examples include SBZ News, considered one of the strongest news sources in Tunisia, using VPN to connect to the internet whenever windows to it were closed. He also presents statistics and numbers concerning electronic leaders’ efforts to broadcast their slogans and ideas and republish them through social media, especially Twitter, which played an active role in the Tunisian Revolution.

In the third section, “Questions of the Contemporary and the Future in Civil Society Mobilization,” the author raises serious questions regarding virtual organizations. He asks about the legality of these organizations – some of which emerged entirely virtually with no real presence to them – the opacity of the roles they play and the extent of their influence in different areas given the possibility that some of them may not be independent. He also asks about the role played by political and cultural elites and civil society in preserving the digital media production of the Revolution. These questions, and others, lead him to the ambiguities of the Tunisian failure to successfully realize the goals of the Revolution, democracy and resistance to despotism, and the extension of this failure to Arab societies in general which have not yet been able to achieve the desired democratic transition.

Jamusi hence attempts in the fourth section, “The Extent of Digital Communications Transformations with a Political Dimension through the Arab Revolutions”, to understand the information revolution and its use in facilitating the transitional period on the ground, using a survey of a sample made up of one hundred bloggers, activists in civil society organizations, researchers and journalists to prove the theses with which he began the book. Regardless of the real representativeness of this sample, which the author himself notes is not scientifically representative of the Arab reality, he is generally able to affirm his fundamental hypothesis: that the remarkable influx of organizations into the societal and political has led to a new kind of political action, tending towards creating a new political system based on a civil society making use of information and communications technology without limits (p. 128).

In the third and final chapter, “The New Virtual and Politics”, Jamusi likewise presents his view through four sections. The first section, “The Place of the Virtual in Transformations in Political Society,” reviews the intersection that has taken place between the political and the digital, concluding that practice of political life is greatly influenced today by the development of communications and information technology. As examples of this he cites the US elections that brought Obama to power and the effectiveness of images in political action, particularly during the Arab Revolutions.

In the second section, “Technologies of Communication and the Development of Political Action”, the writer explains the contemporary changes to political practice and on ways of preserving its place in power, in a time when the spread of the virtual has impacted the ideas of “the charisma of the leader”, the “leader of the masses”, etc, replacing the leader with an icon produced by technology that manipulates people both consciously and unconsciously. Political party activity focuses on their ability to market their political discourse technologically. To reinforce this idea, the author presents nine examples supported by relevant statistics showing the ascendancy of technology and its great presence in political activity. It suffices to note just one here: that the internet today includes 1.6 million websites and blogs with political content, and approximately 3.4 million websites providing a virtual space for discussion and exchange of political positions (p. 146).

In the third section, “Factors in the Renewal of Political Activity”, the author identifies three dimensions: the geographical, the temporal, and the on-the-ground. These three dimensions are very different, but they are all – at this specific moment – closely interconnected and complement one another in their actual and symbolic content. At the same time they highlight – in his words – “the globalization of politics through the virtual-digital” which has escalated throughout the world, and in the Arab World particularly after the Arab Revolutions.

But this escalation, which has transformed the “technology of authority” into “the authority of technology”, also carries with it great danger, particularly the growth of the danger of cyber-terrorism, which includes a “gang war on the

internet”, or a “digital war” threatening the safety of virtual society and thus the stability of real society.

In the fourth and final section, “The Digital and Political Restrictions,” Jamusi affirms the retreat of political restrictions that have been liberated from traditional political relations in favor of an open world transcending all limits and transforming normal people into active and influential sources in the production of political and media fact. The author presents a range of factors that have made the electronic medium into a political actor, including its participativeness, its separation (i.e. from reality in favor of the virtual), its freedom from time and place, anonymity, deconstruction (i.e. of physical relations between people), rebellion and individualism.

In the book’s conclusion, the author summarizes his findings as follows:

- It has become clear through the study that what prevails in the political field always consolidates the idea of the struggle between the political and the civil, and takes new forms of the struggle using the digital-virtual field.
- Politics has become open to all, and a collective act, which has led to the formation of a new political structure whose base is civil society, active in the virtual field.
- The Arab Revolutions could never have achieved what they did without the power of the new media, which formed a new... of society, forming what has been referred to as “civil struggle” or “civil-electronic struggle”.
- Arab civil society has become a fundamental partner in the making of international social, economic and political development policy within the framework of participation in international governance.
- The virtual in the Arab World has not been able to become an authority in forming public opinion and pressure groups (lobbies), as is the case in advanced countries. Its role has been restricted to the field of protest, where it has formed a basis for a culture of protest and demands, according to its orientations and choices, and according to its political, social, and perhaps terroristic aims. It has also been unable to find a place in the new Tunisian constitution despite the fundamental role it played in producing the Tunisian Revolution!

Finally, we might make a few observations:

- The writer should be praised for choosing such an important and controversial topic, especially given that the topic of virtual society and its reflections have become one of the most prominent topics requiring someone daring enough to study them, especially from a sociological perspective.
- The virtual has played a major role in the Arab uprisings, helping to break fear of regimes, but it has not led to democratic transformation but rather to the advent of “a third reverse wave”, to use an expression coined by Samuel Huntington,<sup>(3)</sup> whose *Clash of Civilization* argued that “Islamic culture explains in large part the failure of democracy to emerge in much of the Muslim world.”<sup>(4)</sup> It would have been helpful if the writer had led us to a reading of the Tunisian arena after Ennahda – who have led Tunisia into a worse economic situation than it ever experienced under the dictatorship – took power, and how the nascent civil society has dealt with the failure of democratic transformation.
- When the writer talks about the “new global alliance”, he does not (clearly) note the dangers of this alliance, which may encompass new kinds of colonialism after more than a millennium of foreign rule over the Arabs. These dangers are increased by international organizations keen to train young people the world over in democratic transformation through the internet – most prominently G Sharp’s<sup>(5)</sup> Einstein Institute, which has trained a group of leaders in non-violent action, the International Republican Institute, the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, the Middle Eastern Participation Initiative, and Business for Democratic Action.

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel Huntington, “Democracy’s Third Wave,” *Journal of Democracy* 2:2 (Spring 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Considered one of the world’s leading theorists on non-violent struggle against occupation and indigenous despotism, Sharp worked for more than thirty years as a researcher at the Center of International Affairs at Harvard, and today works as a researcher at the Albert Einstein Institute (which he used to head). He has also been active in non-violent resistance in conflicts in the USA. His most famous book is *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, translated into more than thirty languages including Arabic.