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## **Nonviolence from Damascus and Manama to Moscow and Beijing: Why the Middle East revolution makes dictatorships tremble** Chibli Mallat

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We are into the second year of the Middle East Nonviolent Revolution. I had the privilege to share a few thoughts with you last year. They focused on our common struggle for freedom, [from Mauritania to China](#). The Revolution, to be complete, could not remain exclusively Middle Eastern, as we then noted. To be complete, and safe, it must be a world-historic revolution; a revolution in which our colleagues in China see models of success and failure to draw upon, in the same way as we draw much of our inspiration from the precedent in Tien an Men Square. Tien an Men marked the convergence of all world cultures, against cultural relativists of many sorts, onto a common humanity defined by freedom. Tien an Men is special in history, it constitutes the embodiment of 'man v. tank', and the absolute moral superiority of nonviolence against authoritarian repression. Since Tien an Men, the countdown to Freedom's Ground Zero has started. It is up to us to accelerate the countdown to its inexorable end.

We know from Burma that the nonviolent struggle is universal, and that it is best led by women; we know from the tenacious Uyghur resistance that China's outskirts are no different, that their struggle is universal, that it is the same struggle as the free Han of Beijing, and that they are fortunate to be led by a woman; and we have known for over fifty years that the struggle in Tibet is universal, and that it is anchored in a saintly

man whose frailty is as powerful as the nonviolence he spread in his people and across the world in the face one of the most dire occupations in modern history.

And in 2011, the world – not the free people of China and the Middle East who knew better for having lived it across decades of dictatorship – but the rest of the world discovered in Tunis, Cairo, and Damascus that Arabs, Muslims and Middle Easterners are no different than Burmese, Uyghurs, Tibetans or Chinese. With repeated thanks from the Middle East to the ‘tank man’ of Tien an Men who ended the myth of cultural relativism, and with our joint pride for standing up together, collectively against the Dictator’s tank, I would like to share with you some further thoughts on the difficult path of nonviolence towards freedom, and on its institutionalization across the Middle East. Let me dwell on some of its most elegant achievements, and some of its most difficult challenges.

#### *Sects and Ethnic groups*

Challenges first. One Middle East challenge is sectarian, what we refer to in our conference today as *ethnic*. They are the two sides of the very same coin; one religious/sectarian, the other racial/ethnic. In both cases, the marker of difference is meaningless for basic rights and full of meaning for the beauty of human diversity.

Authoritarianism in China and the Middle East puts this simple equation on its head, basic rights to all, celebration of human diversity, and adds a twist of its own. It abhors diversity and denies the right to difference to any group that it victimizes, this at a time when all citizens – including its own ‘group-conforming’ citizens on the other side of the contrived difference – are also denied their basic rights.

So dictatorship denies diversity and victimizes members of the ‘other’ group especially when its own ‘group-conforming’ citizens are denied their basic rights. The tactic we see in the ‘provinces’ is to insist on that differentiating marker and to transform it into a focus of additional victimization for the dominance of the authoritarian group in power. So you see how the dual proposal is set on its head. Diversity is considered ugly, while basic rights are denied to all, with the following twist: most

specifically victimized are those among the Chinese who do not want to humiliate Uyghurs, and who do not want to continue the military occupation of Tibet. They are turned into the worst enemies of the authoritarian government, very much in the way that Saddam Hussein of the 'group-conforming' Arab Sunni was relentless in his killing of any Arab Sunni – including his sons-in-law and his grandchildren when they defected from his killing sprees of Shi'is and Kurds in Iraq. Saddam was relentless in his hanging without trial 42 leading merchants, the massive majority of whom were Arab Sunni, to further mark the point. Similarly, Bashar al-Asad is relentless towards those members of the 'Alawi 'conforming-group' who show any sympathy to the Sunnis he massacres by the thousands. And the Prime Minister of Bahrain is carrying a worldwide campaign against the Bahraini Sunnis who stand with the Bahraini Shi'is in confronting his senseless repression of the nonviolent Pearl revolution.

It is a diabolic twist. In China and in the Middle East, the exacerbation of sectarian and ethnic differences is a conscious, deliberate, systematic tactic, indeed a strategy of survival for authoritarianism: setting up Shi'is v. Sunnis, Christians v. Muslims, Jews v. non-Jews, is key to the dominance of the authoritarian group in power.

In order to deny *everyone* freedom, the dictator multiplies the intensity of the same denial of freedom to a *specific* religious or ethnic group called a 'minority', hoping through that trite and long-established Machiavellian technique to keep the country in a virtual civil war, and when necessary drive it into real civil war for the sole purpose of justifying his continued dominance in power.

This is a hard challenge to face, as we know from Syria, where the exacerbation of the repression against the Sunni population is used to drive the country into a war between the numerical Sunni majority and multiple Syrian religious and ethnic minorities: Alawis, Christians, Kurds. We see the exact same technique in Bahrain. The denial of freedom to Bahrainis is carried out by a dictatorial prime minister in power for forty years in the form of an open Shi'i mongering policy. That policy victimises Bahraini Shi'is along with dubbing any dissenting

Sunni as the ultimate traitor, including I believe the Crown Prince of Bahrain himself.

The scene will be familiar to all you present today. Just replace the Sunnis of Syria by Muslim Uyghurs, or the Shi'is of Bahrain by Tibetans. The common features of this sectarian/ethnic repression strategy are staggering. And please note that numbers do not matter. Minority is a human construct.

We have therefore a huge challenge ahead of us, and it is a common challenge down to the details of the tactics we must use to undermine authoritarianism. The challenge, and it is immense, is not to read from the page dictated by the dictators but to dictate to them from the page of human freedom.

It is not easy, of course, and our page is richer, more complex, more colorful than the grey page of dictatorship. How we prevent the sectarian, authoritarian government its brutal victimization is easier said than done. One cannot hide one's head in the sand, by ignoring the problem. It will not go away. The exacerbation of sectarian and ethnic discrimination is essential to the survival of the dictator.

But you are showing the way against China's autocrat. You have been adamantly doing the best thing to do in this formidable annual meeting: you bring everyone together in the largest possible front of free peoples, so that the bosses of the regime face an opposition that is a rainbow of all ethnicities, sects, nationalities, and you refuse to be dictated to by the dictator, and are successfully standing up to his ugly page, which is to victimize 'minorities' which it can then separate from other groups, just for him the Chinese autocrat to remain in power.

Stay the course, and teach us how to stay the course. A vast rainbow of free peoples is the departing point, and we are grateful to you for that.

Is more needed beyond the constant show of unity of democrats across the rainbow against the dictator? I am not sure. Can one do more? I am not certain, but it may be useful to be more specific of the shape of China to come in the same way as we have been struggling to lessen the dominance of sectarianism in our Middle Eastern societies. Let me end

this aspect of the sectarian/ethnic challenge with two areas of personal experience. One is political; the other is institutional and legal.

*The color of freedom*

Sectarianism cannot be easily overcome, especially when the autocrat exacerbates it. If I victimize you as Uyghur or Tibetan or Muslim or Woman, it is only human to react as Uyghur, Tibetan, Muslim and Woman. The rainbow coalition helps transcend this natural reaction, by fighting in one's soul against the ploy of the dictator to elicit the worst from you, the exclusive ethnic, religious, even gender kneejerk reaction. But the rainbow coalition is the most effective when, within it, a convergence of souls gets expressed in a political format that lessens the colors to the outside by unifying them into one color, the color of freedom.

Does that require a political party, maybe, probably not; we are testing new territory, one where the rainbow is also mono-colored by freedom. From my own small experience in trying to break the straitjacket of sectarianism in my tiny native Lebanon, I can tell you that in my presidential campaign to end the dictatorship back in 2005-6, there is a picture that I particularly like shows the small team that naturally came together in the campaign. You will note the immediate diversity of gender and age group.

And in another appear older supporters at a press conference during the campaign; one of them whom we cherished was then 95, Dr Albert Sara, died recently.

A closer look at these pictures will show that all the major sects found in Lebanon, those that are supposedly on the wrong side of the sectarian barrier, are represented in the picture. We even have a young Syrian man in this fight, and he is, not surprisingly, at the forefront of the nonviolent fight for the end of dictatorship in Damascus as we speak.

All these people came together without any effort on my side, or the campaign, naturally. 'Naturally' is a key word. Sectarianism is naturally, effortlessly defeated when the message is right: the common message of freedom and equality transforms naturally in an all-encompassing group where people no longer see themselves other than citizens.

So in the light of this extraordinary array of leaders assembled here around nonviolence, freedom and equality, my call is as ambitious as the powerful color of freedom: Maybe you should start considering transforming this impressive coalition into an oppositional front, even perhaps an oppositional government. Overnight, such a transformation puts you so much higher on the map of the Chinese dictatorship; you will represent for all the face of the future and the worst nightmare of the autocrat who fears you enough already, but can fear you even more. The battle is then no longer a free Lhasa for the Tibetan, or a free Urumqi for the Uyghurs, but a free Beijing for all. Beijing free, the rest will follow. Urumqi or Lhasa freed without a free Beijing is an incessant, continuous nightmare. We have a counterexample from the 2011 Middle East revolution. As the nonviolent revolution raged to free Sanaa, Tunis, Damascus and Cairo, South Sudan became a new state, while Khartoum remained in the grips of the dictator. The two countries, Sudan and South Sudan, are at open war now, and only the fall of the autocrat in Khartoum will give the peoples on both sides of the new barrier a chance to finally be free.

This is not to say that the specificity of Tibet, of Xinkiang, should be obliterated or forgotten. Quite the contrary, my argument from the Middle East nonviolent Revolution is that bringing down the dictators at the center is the condition for any paradigmatic change for freedom well beyond him. It is a necessary, but not sufficient condition. The end of the dictator at the center is only the beginning of the new potential of freedom for all his victims. For Tibet to fully bloom, for Xinkiang to fully bloom, far more work needs to be done, and let me suggest from my experience in Iraq the difficulties for freedom to be institutionalized when groups and ethnicities retain, as they are naturally wont to, their color in that vast rainbow.

### *Beyond federalism*

The word federalism is still taboo in many of our countries, but federalism is a unique constitutional discovery of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century that saved America from what used to be known then as 'factions.' As a lawyer, I am an advocate of federalism, which as a Middle Eastern taboo was broken for the first time in a meeting of the Iraqi opposition to

Saddam Hussein in London in the Spring of 1992. This is when, for the first time, Shi'is and Kurds came together on the general delineation of the future of Iraq as a federal state. This, a decade and a half later, was inscribed in their constitution, and I was in Baghdad in 2009-2010 working for the constitutional review committee for the completion of an incomplete federalism in the post-Saddam fragile house of democracy.

Federalism is not easy to establish in a country where ethnicities and sects have a long history of antagonism fanned by the center. I am now convinced that a new political order – one that is not quite the territorial federalism known in Western constitutions – needs to be conceived for our countries, for the Middle East certainly, perhaps for China. You might want to examine this further. This is an immense challenge, because Western-dominated comparative constitutionalism has not quite figured it out other than in territorial terms. Perhaps territorial federalism works well for Xinjiang and Tibet, you know better, maybe something more is needed, including full independence. The more attention you devote to the problem, the more open scholarly and less scholarly discussions you carry out here and in China, the better the solution comes when freedom invests Beijing. But please do not lose the forest for the trees: Free Beijing is the condition for free Lhasa, and for free Urumqi.

#### *Making nonviolence successful*

Let me now turn to another challenge, which I see actually as an even greater success than the rainbow coalition achieved in this conference. This is the challenge of making nonviolence successful. It has been partly successful already; this is why Moscow and Beijing are terrorized, for they saw Zein al-Abidin, Mubarak collapse in the nonviolent Tunisian and Egyptian tide in a few weeks. Moscow and Beijing autocrats are terrorized by the extraordinary, dogged pursuit of nonviolence in Syria and Bahrain. Yes, Syria has turned more violent, note that Bahrain hasn't, and we continue to work for Syrian revolutionaries reclaiming the high ground of nonviolence.

We may even be succeeding, despite the poor showing of Kofi Annan putting at moral equivalence the monster who rules Damascus and his

innocent, pure victims. With a group of colleagues, including Dr Yang, we have put a [program forward for Syria](#), and we are discussing it with the Syrian opposition- in the person of Dr. Sadeq Jalal al-Azm and his wife Eman Shaker who helped us pen it down – and with the larger leadership. We are discussing it with the leaders of Congress, with the State Department and friends across the Middle East and Europe, and we are confident that much of it can be inscribed in the immediate future of Syria.

Some of the plan I spoke about earlier, in reference to my suggestion considering enhancing your coalition into an ‘oppositional government’ that would increasingly become the focus of Chinese legitimacy rather than the present dictatorship for people inside the country, and for international diplomacy. From the point of view of international law, this plan was also conceived as a blueprint for Bahrain, and for China and Russia. You see, ladies and gentlemen, it is no coincidence that the duo Putin-Medvedev and the duo Hu Jintao and Wen Jia Bao have been so heavily invested in the defense of Assad’s regime. It is not about oil, or trade or contracts. A new government in Damascus would have no problem trading with China and Russia, and a military basis for Russia in Syria is meaningless in any case, for what would Russian soldiers be fighting?

The problem is not trade, it is not oil, it is not old style geo-strategy. It is the terror in Beijing and Moscow of the Damascus nonviolent revolution being successful, creating a live precedent from Moscow to Beijing. As they doggedly cast their veto in the UN Security Council against the nonviolent revolution in Syria, they say it openly: no precedent, we do not want a precedent that will in a few months be used by the Russian nonviolent revolution drawing the world sympathy and support to force the dictatorial duo to go home, or God forbid be tried. They look at Mubarak and see themselves and their corrupt families chased away from the Kremlin and the Forbidden City, their assets confiscated, and their crimes examined in open court.

So how do we stay the course of nonviolence? My conclusions, in a little book that I have just completed on the 2011 ME nonviolent revolution, is that (a) nonviolence has better chances to succeed than violence to end



the dictatorship, and the success of nonviolence is key to enhancing the chances of a democratic aftermath, that (b) the constitutional moment will take place against the risk of chaos, and that the more thought is given, the more joint work should be invested by the revolutionaries on constitutional and economic work for the day after, and that (c) the clearer the call for justice against the dictators, the better and quicker the chances for success.

Nonviolent revolution in the Middle East is a critical revolution in both senses of the word deriving from critique, criticism:

*Critical* revolution as it decides the future of the world, for success in Manama and Bahrain is increasingly enmeshed with forcing the dictators of Beijing and Moscow to retreat on the international scene and, more importantly, to be forced to retreat by their own people on the domestic scene. Nothing has been more important to the revolutionaries of Syria in the last few months than the revolutionaries of Russia demonstrating against Putin.

*Critical* also in the stronger Kantian sense: we are reinventing the world, and the more critical we are in our thinking and discussions, the better our world will be when dictators come down tumbling towards their trial in open court.

*Nonviolence and sacrifice*

Let me end on a difficult moral bind which illustrates the importance of continued, intense criticism in Kantian fashion: at a recent conference at [Yale law school](#), I took exception to the glorification of Muhammad BouAzizi, the brave Tunisian street vendor whose self-immolation sparked the Middle East nonviolent revolution. Who can fail to admire the ultimate sacrifice of the man, and who can fail to admire the dozens of Tibetan monks who have set themselves to horrible death in recent months to underline their despise of the Chinese dictators? And yet, I would like to put forward this issue as a critical problem for our common reflection.

Yes, we honor our *martyrs* in the nonviolent revolution, and people will die. But we cannot honor *martyrdom* as part of our nonviolent revolution. A nonviolent revolution is a revolution that seeks life, honors life. 'Viva la muerte' is a fascist call which the great Spanish philosopher Miguel de

Unamuno, then rector of Salamanca, denounced forcefully in the teeth of the fascist general who was sullyng the university with this 'necrophile call' at the height of Franco's fascist coup in 1936. 'Long live death' is not part of our nonviolent revolution. Nonviolence cannot glorify death as means to life, whether inflicted on the dictators' goons, or whether it is self-inflicted. I end on this very personal call, and a call which I am offering in friendship: we don't want more BouAzizis self-immolating, we want more BouAzizis in the streets not committing suicide, but saying instead 'and ode to life', *viva la vida*, making a stand once, and again and again. No more Bouazizi self-immolating, no more brave Tibetan monks self-immolating. And I say to my brave friend Abdul Hadi Khawaja for whom we also [took a stand with Dr Yang](#): no hunger strike to the death, this is not the way of our nonviolent revolution. The dictators are trembling, from Damascus to Moscow, and from Manama to Beijing. Our nonviolent revolution is the more important for its call to life without suffering because we say what we think, including and especially when we the people call for the dictatorship to end, and for dictators to face trial. We are not afraid, time and again we return to the street to face their tanks and their goons, and they are trembling before our resolve, from Manama and Damascus to Beijing and Moscow. The historic world revolution which erupted in 2011 in Tahrir, is the same world-historic revolution started in 1989 in Tien an Men, and we are bringing the two together to success, in nonviolence, from Syria and Bahrain to Beijing and Moscow.

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