

From Mauritania to China The arc of pride

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A sea of ignorance separates China from the Middle East. This is the sad reality resulting from centuries of slow displacement of the silk road as the exclusive Western passage of China to the ME, and from the ME to China. The passage to China from the Middle has since been uniquely Western, and so is the passage to the Middle East from China.

The scene changed slightly in recent years, but the change was commercial, one of material goods that took the shape of oil from the Middle East to satisfy Beijing's rising energy needs. The passage in the other direction, from China to the Middle East, may have been more variegated, but in fact was predominantly that of several products, socks, pirated cds and weapons, rather than oil and gas. Similar to the rest of the planet, it took the shape of cheap products massively manufactured in China.

In that long, silent passage of total mutual ignorance since at least the fifteenth century, there was little thought, and even less humanity; a sustained ignorance of each outside some nondescript material goods. Something different, massively different is suddenly afoot. What we are exchanging, or about to exchange massively, is the fruit of liberty: pride. Pride in human history will remain incomplete without that successful exchange in our respective nonviolent revolutions.

As a native of tiny Lebanon, I have argued in recent years that the liberty we seek in Lebanon will not happen if it does not also happen in the Middle East; that the weight of ME dictatorships will not be cast off Lebanon if the nonviolent revolution -which is the hallmark of the 2005 Cedar Revolution, an essay on non-violence and justice as I have described it in [a little book](#),- is not waged across the ME. This is clearly borne out: without freedom in Cairo, Damascus, Riyadh and Tehran, there will be no peace, no justice, and no democracy in Lebanon. I can tell you that despite all our differences inside Lebanon, not one colleague will disagree today. The Revolution will be Middle Eastern, or will be nothing.

Now I'd like to take this further. The 2011 Middle East Revolution, if it is to succeed, must also be Chinese. Curiously, this does not come from me: it comes from the Chinese autocratic leaders, who have never been as nervous in their entire life as since the ME Revolution started in January 2011 in Tunis. We see it everyday in their utterances, and in the way the state media cover the news, half-heartedly, scared, and auspiciously hostile.

Let me elaborate further on this, in two little telling anecdotes.

On April 30, the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao spoke in Indonesia. Please allow me to deconstruct his speech, to which he himself 'attach[ed] such a great importance' that he 'began to prepare it almost a year ago.' This is a speech that says nothing about what matters to him and his host. I can tell you, for I happen to know, the president of Indonesia, a now free country, was listening to him half-heartedly, for he knows what is on both leaders' minds. They share one

concern: the ME 2011 nonviolent Revolution and what it means for the world. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia is proud of the Middle East, he would like to share this pride in a visit to Cairo, and to share his experience of the formidable Indonesian transition to democracy, operated in nonviolence, which brought him to power in free elections. The Chinese PM has the ME on his mind as well, but his is a great fear, the fear of Middle East recovered pride extending to China. This is why he talked in his speech of trade relations, of innocuous historical exchanges between Chinese monks and Indonesian society, and Chinese Muslim travellers and the building of mosques, and of the importance of avoiding 'chaos'. Of democracy, freedom and political participation, not a word. This silence is ominous.

This is one short anecdote; I am sure you can supplement with hundreds of personal examples of jitters amongst China's autocratic rulers who shudder each and everytime a demonstration rises in the Middle East, at the sound of "the people want the end of the regime, *al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nazam*," the ME Revolution now a universal demand.

Let me share this other, more personal quote. 'From Mauritania to China' was precisely how the promise of the nonviolent Revolution was conceived by Middle Easterners, and here is the message that Middle Easterners have been receiving and disseminating in recent years:

In 2005, Lebanon's Cedar Revolution charted the path to nonviolence in the Middle East. In 2009, the Iranian Green Revolution promised a similar course. Now the whole Middle East is poised for a 1989-like year of change. The people of Tunisia have ended a 23-year dictatorship without violence in January 2011, and the Egyptian people have followed suit in the most promising Revolution to date. The Middle East Revolution underway must remain nonviolent to mark a historical break for human rights and democracy. Without them it remains incomplete. This [communication] draws its inspiration from the ongoing tragic sacrifices and high hopes of participants in the unfinished Middle East revolution. *It carries the message of nonviolence as the key instrument for change from China to Mauritania*, with a focus on the Middle East.

Forgive me for this very personal message. It is part of our work across the Middle East in [Right to Nonviolence](#), a now international NGO which seeks to spread that message of nonviolence as the midwife of history across the planet. This little text appears in the dozens of emails sent across the globe by internet from the heart of the ME resistance to dictatorships for some years now. The emphasis on China is deliberate, for it was with a very clear agenda that the connection was meant from Africa to Asia, from China to Mauritania. We Arabs, we Middle Easterners, know from experience that courage is the antidote to dictatorship, and that the more courageous the challenge the more a paper tiger of cowardice dictatorship looks. We learnt it from our experience, but also from the example of our colleagues in China.

Never has humankind in recent history been more inspired than with that man – the Tank Man as he is forever known - standing in front of the killing machine in Tien an Man Square on 5 June 1989.



Tien an Men, Beijing, 5 June 1989



Deraa, Syria, 28 April 2011

I am sorry for being trite to such a learnt audience: those of you who have been brave, braver in the silence of solitary confinement and torture, know that this is an image which offers little by way of the immense, non-photographed courage of so many brave Chinese dissidents. But the man v. the tank, the mythical Wang Weilin (王维林), is a powerful link of our nonviolent Revolution, from China to the Middle East. For this is where it started, in Budapest in 1956, in Prague in 1968, throughout the fall of the Berlin War era, all the way to the Gorbachev precedent inspiring the Tien an Men revolution in 1989, in turn inspiring us in the Middle East in 2011, through Beirut 2005 and Tehran 2009. Today, the torch of the tank man is carried in Deraa, a city no one had heard of a few weeks ago; Deraa, where men, women and children, unarmed, are standing up to the regime killing machine.

We, men, women and children of goodwill, failed in Tien an Men in 1989, as we did in Budapest in 1956 and in Santiago in 1973. But the arc of pride comforts us on its bend to freedom. We did not give up then, even if know that the repression that follows the outbursts of liberty is frightening: it is when the regime asserts itself by naked brutishness against nonviolence that the repression claims the largest number of victims. But we know that it's a matter of time for the regime of fear to collapse, and for the arc of history as it bends forward to meet justice. We also know that history has a surprising genius in accelerating freedom's flight forward.

I come to you today, in all humility, to say that we Arabs, we Middle Easterners, are simply carrying forward the Tien an Men torch of liberty, and that we know that both our governments know this intimately. Never since 1989 has the Chinese regime been as scared as it is since January 2011. Never has its apparatus of repression reached the heights we have witnessed in the last weeks.

From Nouakchott to Beijing, ignorance and dictatorship, -- and we know since Spinoza that ignorance and dictatorship go together, because knowledge cannot thrive with authoritarianism, for free and creative minds always flee diktats, -- from Nouakchott to Beijing, dictatorship and ignorance cast their long shadow on our people.

In 2011, the shadow is now cast on the dictators. Fear is on the side of dictatorship, no longer on the side of people, who bravely confront death every day for liberty. This is the moment for ME pride, finally recovered, and strengthened by the conviction that crimes against humanity will no longer go unpunished in our lifetime.

Crime against humanity is another definition for dictatorship, and we Middle Easterners, and you Chinese know that those guilty of these crimes, our petty dictators, will sit where Husni Mubarak and his sons now sit, or if they are luckier, will end in an obscure and isolated exile such as Ben Ali and his wife in Saudi Arabia. Nor are they going to be safe there for a very long time.

In the Middle East, we took our cue for pride from Tien an Men, and from the immense struggle of the Chinese democrats. We are no less proud to offer the success of our belief in freedom to our Chinese friends. Freedom will be complete and steady only when we share it from Nouakchott to Beijing. The Middle East Revolution will be safe only when nonviolence succeeds in China.

Allow me a final word on nonviolence. Of course, nonviolence operates in one way: in man v. tank, only man is nonviolent. Many of our close friends were killed, and will be killed for shouting '*silmiyya, silmiyya*', nonviolent, nonviolent. It is unfortunate that it was not so pure in Libya, and we are working hard to keep it pure, and indeed more effective, in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria.

I'd like to say a bit more on nonviolence. We did not invent it in the Middle East, unless of course we trace it back, and we could, to a common philosophy of peace of monotheistic religions. What I think the Middle East is offering to the world, for the first time in 2011, is the one clear moment where nonviolence becomes a dominant, conscious, successful and

irrepressible midwife of history. This is my message to my Chinese colleagues, that in man v. tank, sooner rather than later, man wins over tank.

Now we can make it sooner by spreading it carefully, courageously, consciously. We need a bridge of nonviolence across the world. I am uniquely grateful for Dr Yang Jianli for allowing me to tread on that bridge with you today, for it is quite a bridge for pride in our common humanity.

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