



[Image from unknown archive]

Imperial Feminism, Islamophobia, and the Egyptian Revolution

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" . . . I'm making this video to give you one simply message: We want to go down to Tahrir Square on January 25. If we still have honor and want to live with dignity on this land, we have to go down on January 25. We'll go down and demand our rights, our fundamental human rights...The entire government is corrupt—a corrupt president and a corrupt security force...If you stay home, you deserve what will happen to you...and you'll be guilty, before your nation and your people...Go down to the street, send SMS's, post it post it on the 'net. Make people aware...you know your own social circle, your building, your family, your friends, tell them to come with us. Bring 5 people, or 10 people; if each of us manages to bring 5 or 10 people to Tahrir Square...talk to people and tell them, this is enough! It will

make a difference, a big difference...never say there's no hope...so long you come down with us, there will be hope...don't think you can be safe any more! None of us are! Come down with us and demand your rights my rights, you family' rights. I am going down on January 25th and I will say 'no' to corruption, 'no' to this regime."

These are the words of Asmaa Mahfouz, a 26 year old woman whose Jan. 18 vlog is said to have helped mobilize the million that turned up in Cairo and the thousands in other cities on Jan 25. Asmaa's vlog, like the stories of many Egyptian women of this revolution offer up a challenge to two key questions framing U.S. discourse on the Jan. 25 Egyptian revolution:

1) Where are the women?

2) and..."but what if Islamic extremists take over?"

Often ignored in U.S. discussions on Egypt is how protests led by labor unions—many women-based labor unions in the manufacturing cities of Egypt—have catalyzed the Egyptian revolution ([Paul Amar, 02-05-11](#)). The women now holding down Tahrir Square as we speak—are of all ages and social groups and their struggle cannot be explained through Orientalist tropes that reduce Arab women to passive victims of culture or religion or Islam. They are active participants in a grassroots people-based struggle against poverty and state corruption, rigged elections, repression, torture, and police brutality. They are leading marches; attending the wounded, and participating in identity checks of state supported thugs. They have helped create human shields to protect Egyptian Antiquities Museum, the Arab League Headquarters, and one another. They have helped organize neighborhood watch groups and committees nationwide in order to protect private and public property. They are fighting against dictatorship among millions of people—not guided by any one sect or political party—united under one slogan: we want an end to this regime. Master Mimz—protest rapper in the UK best represents my point in the lyrics to her song: Back Down Mubarak...where she states:

"First give me a job—then lets talk about my *hijab*"

For anyone wondering about the oppression of Arab women, the women of this revolution have indeed suffered—Professor Noha Radwan was attacked and beaten half to death by Mubarak thugs who ripped

her shirt open and had stitches in her head. Several women—and men are now martyrs (they are now over 300). Amira, killed by a police officer; Liza Mohamed Hasan, hit by a police car; Sally Zahran, hit by a Mubarak thug in the back of the head with a bat, went home to sleep and never woke up.

Since the demonstrations pushed the police out of the center of Cairo, several women have made statements such as this: “It’s the first time that I have never been harassed in Cairo”—Egyptian police are notorious for sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

Some Egyptian women are also on the frontlines of the war over ideas—fighting the Egyptian state TV and exposing the contradictions between U.S. discourses on democracy and U.S. practices. As Mubarak’s regime pays thugs to run over peaceful demonstrators, stab them and kill them, many women have expressed outraged over Obama and Clinton’s advice that: “both sides need to refrain from violence.”

Aida Seif Al Dawla is a leading human rights activist with Nadeem Center for psychological rehabilitation of victims of violence and torture. By extension, her work, like the work of many Egyptian feminists and human rights activists fighting against state violence, involves confronting U.S. imperial relations with the Mubarak regime. Today, the people of the revolution are outraged over the U.S.’ unanswered loyalty to Mubarak as well as Obama’s backing of vice president Omar Suleiman and the lack of discussion about Suleiman’s role in Egyptian torture and his important role in the US rendition-to-torture program. U.S. leaders have called Suleiman a distinguished and respected man. They use these words to describe the coordinator of the CIA’s extraordinary rendition program, an extrajudicial procedure in which suspected terrorists are transferred illegally to countries like Egypt that are known to use torture during interrogation. Consider, for instance, the case of the Pakistani man Habib—in which the CIA passed Habib to Omar Suleiman in Egypt. Habib was then repeatedly zapped with high-voltage electricity, immersed in water up to his nostrils, beaten, his fingers were broken and he was hung from metal hooks. After Suleiman’s men extracted Habib’s confession, he was transferred back to US custody, where his testimony became the basis of his eventual imprisonment at Guantanamo. U.S. policy helps sustain the structures of torture and violence in Egypt. As Egyptian American media pundit Mona Tehawy puts it: U.S.’ “stability” comes at the expense of freedom and dignity of the people of my or any country.”

Of course a democratic Egypt would benefit women. The government recently passed a law restricting the work of civil society organizations, many of them led by women. The current regime is responsible for widespread human rights violations, including intense forms of harassment and violence against women, which many organizations such as Nazra for Feminist Studies, the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights, and the Egyptian Association for Community Participation Enhancement

, have well-documented.

So rather than asking, “where are the women,” we might ask:

Why does much of U.S. public discourse frame the revolution through Islamophobia logics and why has the corporate media focused mostly on images of Egyptian men?

Islamophobia fuels popular U.S. discourses on Egypt and drives the question: what if Islamic fundamentalists take over Egypt? And it is this very discourse that legitimizes the U.S. administration's complicity in Mubarak's violent efforts to quell the revolution. This explains why my public expressions of hope for the success of the revolution and for democratization in Egypt are often met with a sense of grave concern: “but what if Islamic fundamentalists take over?” These questions must be understood in terms of an imperial psyche, a state of consciousness that is driven by panic over Islamic fundamentalism and that works as a blocking operation, or a rationale against supporting the Egyptian revolution. These questions must be located in the historical trajectory of the post-Cold War era in which particular strands of U.S. liberal feminism and U.S. imperialism have worked in tandem. Both rely upon a humanitarian logic that justifies military intervention, occupation, and bloodshed as strategies for promoting “democracy and women's rights.” This humanitarian logic disavows U.S.-state violence against people of the Arab and Muslim regions rendering it acceptable and even, liberatory, particularly for women. Islamophobic panic over the future of Egypt similarly de-centers the U.S.-backed Mubarak regime's past and present repression. It denies historical conditions such as the demographic realities in Egypt, the complex, multidimensional place of the Muslim Brotherhood in the revolution, and the predominance of secular visions for the future of Egypt. Islamophobia thus legitimizes complicity with dictatorship and U.S. empire, producing this message for the Egyptian people: “It's best that you continue to live under tyranny.” Gender fuels Islamophobia, requiring “the Arab woman” to be nothing more than an abject being, an invisible sister, wife, or mother of “the real revolutionaries.” Islamophobia legitimizes itself through the disappearance of Egyptian women as active agents in the revolution.

I do not intend to be overly celebratory. We have learned from history that following the revolution, women are often pushed back to the sidelines, away from center stage.

We might also then ask, if Egypt enters a democratization period, will the voices of the women of Tahrir remain center stage? And what are the possibilities for a democratization of rights in Egypt-- all civic rights—in which women's participation, the rights of women, family law, and the right to organize, protest, and express freedom of speech remain central? And what are the possibilities for international solidarity

with Egyptian women and Egyptian people—amidst a war of ideas that often obstructs the possibility to see Arab or Muslim women and as human-- and as rightful agents of their own discourses, governments, and destinies? It has become increasingly clear that this revolution is much greater than a conflict between Egyptian state and non-state actors. Egyptian women's rights, like the rights of all Egyptians are entangled in the global, imperial relation between the U.S., Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and other repressive regimes of the region and beyond. Only when we can take these local and imperial forces seriously can we begin to understand the oppression millions of Egyptian people are determined to end. The people of Tahrir and all the demonstrators of Egypt have spoken and said, we will not betray the blood of our martyrs--we will not give up until Mubarak steps down. It remains to be seen what the transitional period will look like but one thing is clear: it must be led by the people of Egypt. And as the Egyptian movement for freedom and democracy continues, will U.S. social movements—whether feminist, anti-war, or beyond—forget the imperial past and the blood of the Egyptian martyrs or commit to holding the U.S. and Israel accountable for complicity with dictatorship and thirty-plus years of repression in Egypt?

* I prepared this piece as a public speech for a public event at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Feb. 7, 2011.