"Apolitical" Translocal Activism in the Mediterranean: An Exploration of New Dynamics of Contestation and Participation

Sarah Anne Rennick
Deputy Director
Arab Reform Initiative

As the dust has settled on the 2011 uprisings that transformed the Arab world at the beginning of the decade, what remains in many places today are increasingly closed spaces for activism, contestation, and political participation. The momentary period of open opportunity – when diverse sectors of the population were able to organize themselves politically for the purpose of demanding their rights and attempting to re-shape the contours of state-society relations – has given way to renewed political elitism and popular fatigue in the best cases (such as Tunisia) and reinforced authoritarianism and violent conflict in the worst (such as Egypt and Syria). For the region's youth, who either participated as the vanguard of the 2011 political moment or who still seek means of social and political integration, the perspectives are stark. While some have chosen to stay in their home countries, even in the face of bodily harm or imprisonment, others have chosen – or been forced – to leave, seeking safety and peace of mind in places such as Istanbul, Berlin and Paris. And in most cases, the direct forms of political contestation that so marked the early years of the decade, such as the protest movement or the sit-in or the campaign, have either faded or have been curtailed altogether.

Yet, the activist tide from 2011 has not disappeared entirely. And though there are in fact diverse new venues of mobilization and participation that have emerged in recent years, one interesting phenomenon that has emerged is translocal activism in seemingly apolitical domains.[1] Looking at the trajectories of over 100 youth activists[2] from Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon and Syria in the post-2011 period shows for some a re-assembly in new sectors, including participation in social and health service delivery, social entrepreneurship ventures, the arts and cultural sectors, and other less overtly political fields. It also shows in certain cases new translocal dynamics: while the action itself is highly local in terms of the place of intervention, the distribution of the activists themselves goes beyond territorial confines, overcoming the spatial distribution caused by migration, diaspora and exile.

Exploring this particular subset of post-2011 Arab youth activists reveals new forms of political contestation and participation that circumvent, at least in part, the political and geographic challenges they face. First, in assessing the locations and sectors of this activism, what emerges is that interventions are taking place in areas of limited statehood, where the imposed political order has failed or is absent. In this way, this new activism is making claims on the State by filling gaps and proposing a different political order. Second, the translocal nature of this activism includes not only the mobility of agents but also of practices of citizenship, allowing for new identities and agencies to emerge that defy territorial configurations and the primacy of the State. Third, the predominant tool that allows this translocal activism to exist – new digital technologies and, in particular, Information and Com-

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[2] Here, the term "youth" does not represent a specific age cohort but rather a broad community within the fields of activism and contestation who see themselves as a distinct generation. They hold shared implicit and explicit understandings and interpretations of the political and of politics, leading to shared practices in terms of their participation and manner of "doing" activism.

munications Technologies (ICT) – not only serves as a resource but actually influences decision-making processes and opens possibilities for new organizational forms and processes. Exploring these different dimensions of this apolitical translocal activism reveals their potential to impact political practices and social integration across the Mediterranean.

"Apolitical" Engagement as a Form of Contestation

The post-revolutionary backlash in the Arab countries that has replaced the fervour of the 2011 uprisings, whether in the form of state repression and violence or more general popular political apathy, has been accompanied by a waning of social movements and mass demonstrations of contestation. This is not to say that displays of opposition have stopped entirely; on the contrary, new organizational and strategic forms of claim-making – such as cause lawyering in Egypt, or single-issue campaigns in Tunisia – have found alternative means of resisting the political status quo and carving new spaces for contestation. Nonetheless, there has been a visible decline of many social movement organizations and activist groups who had previously engaged in political protests, marked by a prolonged phase of demobilization and high drop-out rates. This cycle of abeyance thus begs the question: where has everyone gone?

Looking at the trajectories of Arab youth activists, and in particular those from the 2011 uprisings or who took part in similar protest movements, reveals a variety of different paths that are, at least in part, related to the broader political context in which the activists find themselves. The difference in political opportunity structure for activist efforts between Tunisia and Syria, for example, is vast and naturally contributes to different patterns and forms of engagement. Nonetheless, in taking a comparative perspective, one similar trend that does emerge is a refocusing on development-oriented and community-based actions in highly local contexts. This includes a variety of different organizational formats and specific areas of intervention: participation in Syrian local administrative councils for the purpose of coordinating humanitarian relief and basic services at the municipal level; volunteer-based neighbourhood beautification projects in underprivileged zones in Lebanese cities;

the establishment of Slow Food initiatives in rural and semi-urban Egypt; social entrepreneurship platforms promoting sustainable tourism in localities in Algeria… Common among these diverse initiatives is the focus on poorer populations or those falling outside the regime's planning radar, the effort to stimulate collaborative work with members of the community, and the attempt to produce meaningful and tangible change in daily life without recourse to authorities or changes in the political system. These activist efforts also share a common ideal to apply democratic and participatory decision-making processes, and to promote inclusiveness in the implementation of their work.

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The extent to which these new activist efforts are truly "apolitical" in nature is of course open to debate: organizational structures such as the Syrian local councils, for example, can be easily categorized as a form of decentralized political structure, albeit unofficial. The use of the term "apolitical" in fact reflects less an objective assessment than the activists' own perception and qualification of their actions, which, in themselves, reflect their own understandings of politics. In interviewing activists across the southern Mediterranean who have gravitated to these new forms of engagement, two trends regarding their relationship to the political become visible. First is their dichotomizing of their own work vs. political work. The youth activists interviewed here hold a denigrated notion of the term "politics." In Algeria, for example, the concept of politics remains associated with the negative experiences of the civil war and the *décennie noire*. This coincides with a tendency to consider political action as occurring only in institutionalized domains – parties, the state bureaucracy, elections, etc. –, and to view political work as detached from the real needs of the population. This dichotomizing of activism and political action has in fact been reinforced in

the latter years of the decade, as disappointment with post-revolutionary political processes has further isolated activists from the formal political sphere. In Syria, for example, there is a distinct impression of lost agency among the 2011 generation of youth activists, which directly impacts the way they view their current work in the local councils: as they perceive the political process to be taking place outside of the country, in elite negotiation events, they view their own action as something other than political. Yet, at the same time, the qualification of activist work as "apolitical" also reveals itself to be a rhetorical device. By qualifying their new forms of engagement as acts for the benefit of local communities outside the domain of politics, they are afforded more room for manoeuvre, especially in highly repressive contexts such as Egypt. Likewise, in avoiding the use of the term "political," they are able to gain more popular support among the community members with whom they seek to collaborate.

By qualifying their new forms of engagement outside the domain of politics, the activists are afforded more room for manoeuvre

While these new forms of engagement do represent a break from the mass protests and outright political contestation that occurred in 2011, interviews reveal an important degree of continuity in the underlying objectives that activists seek to achieve. Though not outwardly demanding regime ouster or radical change to the system, the activists still strive for the values of social justice and equality that made up an essential part of the demands of the Arab Spring. In this sense, although the move to different sectors is both a reaction to observed needs and the result of the closing space for collective action, this activism, nonetheless, is still pursuing the same goals as those of the 2011 uprisings. Moreover, this new "apolitical" engagement is serving as an alternative form of contestation by filling governance gaps in areas of limited statehood, where the State's ability to govern and enforce rules is either faltering or absent (Börzel, Risse and Draude, 2018). In providing services such as garbage collection and sewage in zones where the State has col-

lapsed, or by undertaking urban planning and zoning enforcement in areas that are ignored by the central authority, these new efforts are not just exerting autonomy, but are in fact contributing to a process of "governance from below" (El-Meehy, 2017). These non-state actors are exercising a degree of political authority, including the promulgation of new policies and rules, and are promoting different decision-making processes to those of the formal political system. Just as importantly, these sectors of engagement constitute a symbolic recognition of population groups and areas that are marginalized, excluded or ignored by the central authorities. In so doing, the activists are enacting new challenges to the State's authority by investing power to formulate policies and provide services in non-state actors, and are defying the State's politics of recognition – both of which contribute to implementing social justice and equality and contesting the State's normal order.

Translocality as Shaping Identities and Practices

Beyond this sectoral shift is also the physical relocation of many of the activists themselves. While the effects of the spatial diffusion of groups and the alienating, isolating nature of exile, diaspora and forced migration have certainly contributed to a decline in activism through the depletion of human resources on the ground and – importantly – morale, the participation of youth activists abroad has not disappeared entirely. On the contrary, many displaced youth are contributing to these new forms of engagement, in spite of their distance from the local. Syrian activists who have had to make new homes in Gaziantep or Istanbul, for example, are still contributing to the work of local councils inside their home country through online coordination meetings and resource-sharing. Likewise, Algerian activists based in France are contributing to sustainable urban planning in poor neighbourhoods in Algiers using participatory methodologies and direct communication with the residents themselves. These modes of work reveal dimensions of translocality that allow for new political identities and organizational practices to be expressed.
As opposed to "transnational," the concept of "translocal" adds certain nuances to understanding the empirical reality unfolding in these new activism initiatives, as it provides a different approach to assessing

the effects of the spatial fracturing of activists. Whereas the concept of transnational upholds the territorial configuration of the nation-state and the corresponding imposed power arrangements and political identities, translocal implies a degree of spatial connection and circulation in terms of political identities and lived practices, ideas and resources, which defies the top-down frameworks of the nation-state (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013). The translocal is composed of the local-to-local interactions that arise through the phenomenon of transnational migration and mobility, enriched by the multidirectional flows between homeland and host space, and between those that stayed behind and those that left. Translocality does not just imply transgression of the boundaries imposed by the State, but instead refers to dynamic spaces where new practices and political identities are produced and reproduced in a processual manner, as a result of these socio-spatial networks. In this sense, translocal space is marked by dichotomies such as continuity/discontinuity and anchoring/unmooring, but also provides the possibility for creative expressions of agency and power that go beyond existing orders. And, importantly, translocality also provides the possibility for transforming places, and in particular local conditions, through the production of political identities and new practices.

These dynamics of translocality are rooted in activist networks of the post-2011 Arab youth and their social- and economic-oriented interventions in local communities. For many of those who have been forced to leave their homes for safety reasons, or for those who have left as a result of a lack of opportunities or despair, their future trajectories depend greatly on how the political context of their home countries evolves. Many do not know whether they are temporary guests abroad or permanent residents, and their legal status in both their native country as well as their new location is unsettled. As such, the feelings they harbour towards both their homeland and their host society can be quite ambivalent, and they navigate a simultaneity of being in both places and neither. Some of these displaced activists recount their feeling of guilt about leaving others behind; others speak of the lost legitimacy to represent places they have left. Yet, participation in this translocal activism can be a source of inspiration and a vector of continued integration in their home community, despite the barriers of displacement. Even if largely demobilized, participation in lo-

cal activist efforts, even if only virtually, provides a degree of continuity in their action and pursuit of goals. At the same time, for those who have not left, access to material and immaterial resources located abroad through these networks can be of key importance. For example, activists speak of the knowledge of institutions and sources of funding that can be leveraged through diasporic networks and the utility these can have for their new forms of engagement. And indeed, activists who have migrated abroad do attest to the positive impact of new lived experience on their perception of self and their societies. For example, Algerian activists based in France confirm that their experience outside their homeland has created a new self-awareness of themselves as social and political actors, and has provided new models for civic action. Likewise, Egyptian activists in various locations of exile speak of the broader understanding of the political processes taking place in their home country, which stems from their regional vantage point. This potential flow of resources, ideas and new forms of experiential knowledge from living abroad are recognized and valued within these activist networks.

The translocal space allows for new political agency to emerge through acts of citizenship beyond the parameters imposed by territorial boundaries and the contractual relationships imposed by the State

This translocality, observed among Arab youth activists in the post-2011 period, has an important effect with regard to identities. The translocal space created in these activist networks contributes to building a new collective identity that transcends the vastly different experiences of daily life. Participation in such networks also allows activists to develop common interpretations and shared understandings of their work and its meaning, reinforcing their sense of joint enterprise despite the spatial fracturing. In addition, the translocal space allows for new political agency to emerge through acts of citizenship beyond the parameters imposed by territorial boundaries and the contractual relationships imposed by the State. While

citizenship is traditionally understood as a relationship of legal rights and obligations that are granted by the State, the translocal space allows individuals to construct their own citizenship via social and political action. This "active citizenship" can be understood as "processes of social interaction with other members of a specific civic and political community that bring about – through the reference to specific values, rights and responsibilities – the need to assume participatory behaviours that have the finality to reach the common good" (Bee and Kaya, 2017). The new forms of engagement of Arab youth, infused with the objectives of social justice and equality, which constituted the main political claims of 2011, and undertaken specifically for the purpose of meeting the needs of those forgotten by the State, can be understood as expressions of this active citizenship. As such, they defy both the legal limitations and territorial boundaries of traditional citizenship regimes, imposed by both homelands and host states, but also the associated loss of political agency.

While these new forms of engagement among Arab youth activists demonstrate their ability to act as alternative methods for contestation and participation, the longer-term impact and ability to stimulate broader changes to political practices remains to be seen

In addition, one of the critical tools that allows this translocal activism to exist – digital technologies that collapse differences in time and space – also reinforces certain practices and organizational formats that can potentially prove more durable in the long run than mass protest movements. The utilization among these translocal activist networks of digital technologies and, in particular, new ICTs, such as mobile phones, and free applications, such as Whatsapp and Skype, serves as a basic and essential resource for coordination. Digital technologies and ICTs allow for spatially-fractured activists to participate in a very meaningful and operational way in local

community efforts through their ability to produce virtual presence. In addition, new ICTs are utilized by certain activist networks to establish a secure space for exchange, with many using free services such as Signal or Telegram for their ability to ensure encrypted messaging. Yet, beyond their role as a resource for activists' coordination and communication, digital technologies also play a role in shaping practices within these new forms of engagement themselves. The act of meeting, discussing and taking decisions in virtual spaces has an impact on decision-making processes and structures within these activist networks. ICTs have been shown to influence organizational practices within social movements by promoting horizontal decision-making and informal or even un-institutionalized modes (Garrett, 2006), and indeed the Arab youth activists partaking in these new initiatives repeatedly cite a practice of "horizontality" in their collaborative work. This includes consensus-based decision-making, collaborative leadership and the encouragement of participation from all members of a group – including not only the activists themselves but also the beneficiaries of their efforts. Such organizational practices are not unique to this particular trend of apolitical translocal activism – on the contrary, youth groups and social movements across the region since the heyday of the 2011 uprisings have attempted to manifest non-hierarchical structures and democratic practices within their organizations and networks. Nonetheless, digital technologies are helping to achieve these ideals by permitting the existence of un-institutionalized structures that are able to assemble, disassemble and reassemble in a manner that allows activists to launch projects and then enter a resting phase without jeopardizing the overall initiative. Indeed, the activists feel that these rather loose formations, in many cases composed of a small core group of connected yet informally affiliated activists, in conjunction with a periphery of beneficiary-participants, will enable these initiatives to be sustainable in the longer term.

Future Perspectives for Political Participation and Research

While these new forms of engagement among Arab youth activists demonstrate their ability to act as alternative methods for contestation and participation, the

longer-term impact and ability to stimulate broader changes to political practices remains to be seen. Within the localities where this new activism is being carried out, there is at least the potential to shape local governance practices. In providing models of community-based development and service provision, these new activist efforts can change expectations and awareness. In the case of the Syrian local councils, for example, though they have acted less like political structures than service-providers, they have obtained a degree of popular political legitimacy that could translate into future roles in local decision-making processes. Yet this may not necessarily lead to increased youth participation, nor increased democratic practice. The sense of exclusion from political processes felt by youth active in the local councils is compounded by their own reluctance to engage in political action in the post-conflict period, while the ability to achieve democratic ideals within the modus operandi of the local councils has not been entirely satisfactory.

Likewise, in many of the cases explored here, the highly local nature of the new forms of engagement, along with the activists' stance on their "apolitical" nature, has translated into a certain degree of isolation. Local actions are seen as responding to specific local needs only, and in this way can be disconnected from one another as well as from a broader vision of change. The potential political impact of these activist efforts is thus somewhat obfuscated. Digital technologies could provide the possibility of creating virtual forums that can coordinate action and promote knowledge-sharing – even without establishing formal coalitions or specialized coordinating bodies. For example, the Al Chabaka virtual platform, which consists of a collaborative directory, interactive map and live agenda of Algerian civil society groups, is cited as a useful tool for increasing the awareness and visibility of local initiatives and stimulating broader citizen engagement. That said, a proliferation of virtual forums and tools is not necessarily the solution to the broader issue of aggregation and alliance-building, as they must be integrated into everyday lived practices to be truly useful and durable. In addition, while the transformative quality of translocal dynamics on local contexts has the potential to be quite far-reaching, the impact on practices and patterns of participation throughout the Mediterranean remains to be seen. In the neighbourhoods and communities where activism is occurring, a knowledge of practices in other contexts, for example, along with

new resources, can enhance local development processes, and these effects should be documented to understand the impact of translocality in home communities. But, critically, there is also potential for a transformative impact in the other direction, meaning on local contexts in host societies. Indeed, displaced activists are in a privileged position to elevate and diffuse the knowledge, strategies and tactics that come from the local contexts where their activism is occurring. As the local-to-local interactions in these activist networks treat as equal the knowledge, know-how and resources that emanate from different locations along the network, there is a real possibility for effecting practices in host communities as well. As many of the displaced Arab youth are likely to remain in their host societies for the foreseeable future, it is a worthwhile research agenda to study how this translocal activism is impacting their practices and participation in their new locations. Indeed, taking a holistic approach to the impact of these local-to-local exchanges within these translocal activist networks could reveal new forms of engagement and models of participation across the Mediterranean.

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