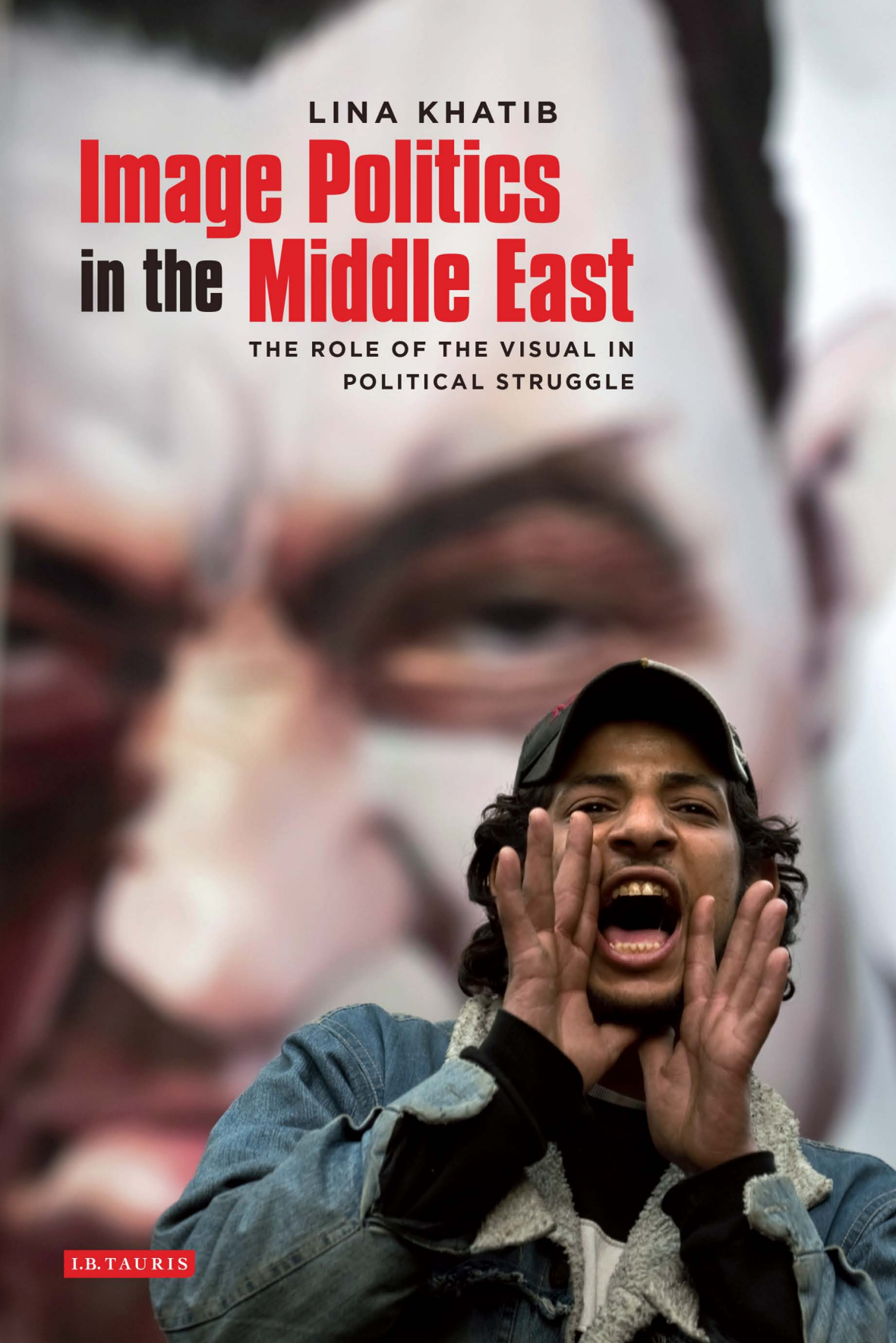
LINA KHATIB

Image Politics in the Middle East

THE ROLE OF THE VISUAL IN POLITICAL STRUGGLE



I.B. TAURIS

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LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2013 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010
www.ibtauris.com

Distributed in the United States and Canada
Exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

ISBN: 978 1 784885 281 5 (HB)
978 1 784885 282 2 (PB)

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library
A full CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: available

Typeset by Newgen Publishers, Chennai
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

This book is dedicated to my great teachers,

Samir Khalaf, for making me fall in love with cities, starting with my own, and forever changing the way I "see" urban space and its relationship with people, politics, and history,

Patricia Nabti, for the inspiration and creativity and for teaching me the importance of perseverance,

Nabil Dajani, for your non-wavering belief in my work and the optimism you bestow upon it,

and Paula Saukko, for your guidance, moral support, and leading by example that have shaped the scholar I have become.

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Illustrations

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been completed without a Small Research Grant from the British Academy that funded most of the fieldwork, and a Research Project Grant from the Leverhulme Trust that funded work on Chapter 2.

Research that formed the seed of this book started in 2005, stirred by the image explosion that Lebanon and Egypt had been witnessing through visually saturated political campaigns, leading to fieldwork in those and other Middle Eastern countries in the years that followed. The Green Movement in Iran and then the Arab Spring came to both affirm the primacy of the image in processes of political struggle in the Middle East and to consolidate the fact that the use of the visual in this context is part of a longer-term process of political expression that had started well before those protest movements. I am indebted to the Middle Eastern people who have inspired this work, and hope that this book is a small step towards acknowledgement of the need to document their efforts. The book itself offers just a snapshot of the rich discursive field of political expression in the Middle East; more research ought to be done to do the field justice.

I am obliged to the following fantastic group of people who dedicated time and resources without which research for this book would not have happened: in Egypt, Amr Gharbeia, Iman Hamam, Nora Younis, Gamal Eid, Wael Abbas, Ahmed Sherif and Ghada Shahbander; in Iran, Majid Karimi, Hadi Khaniki, Amirali Ghasemi, Mahmoud Bakhshi Moakhar, Homayoun Askari Sirizi, Aram Asgari, Simin Motamedarya, Esmail Yazdanpour, Bita Aziminezhadan and Arash Hanaei; in the UK, Tarik Sabry, Mohsen Biparva, Golriz Kolahi, Dalia Mustafa, Kay Dickinson, Anoush Ehteshami, Hossein Salimi and Francis Robinson; in the USA, Mona Eltahawy and Hamid Dabashi; in Lebanon, Hikmat El Khatib, Rana Issa, Omayma Abdel-Latif, Romy Lynn Attieh and Khaled Ramadan; in Syria, Khalid Ali; and in Palestine, Rich Wiles, for a breathtaking photographic collection. Thanks also to Neil Smith, Ben Rowswell, Hisham Issa, Samia Issa, Tareq Al-Samman, Tarek Zeidan, Sarina Beges and Lina Mikdashi for helping with images. Credit for the photographs of Qaddafi-era images in public spaces in Libya

(taken in 2008) goes to Musa Mansour and Hussain Muftah – what a shame you eventually chose to be on the wrong side of history.

I express much gratitude to my hardworking research assistants. At Stanford University, Elizabeth Buckner: I would not have managed to finish this book without your meticulous and rigorous work – and Steve Monroe: thanks for the background research on Kifaya and the Green Movement; Jacqueline Barkett and Mona El Hamdani at the University of Southern California (USC): thanks for helping with researching Chapter 2. I also thank USC's Center on Public Diplomacy under the directorship of Philip Seib, for granting me a non-resident research fellowship at CPD from 2010–2012, and publishing a working paper based on Chapter 2 in the series CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy in February 2012.

Thanks are due also to Larry Diamond at Stanford University, who generously supported this project through granting me encouragement, writing up time, much needed academic empathy and wonderful collegial support, and Philippa Brewster, my editor at I.B.Tauris, for being so patient and passionate.

Last but not least, I am grateful for the encouragement, comments and belief in this work by my dear friend and colleague Dina Matar, and for the moral support and intellectual exchanges of Nabeel Khoury, Zahera Harb, Kamran Rastegar, Radwan Ziadeh, Maha Issa, Kamal Samhan, Marwan Kraidy, Fadi El-Khatib, Adam Ganz, Gail Pearce, Mandy Merck, Gideon Koppel and Ryan Johnson.

Introduction: The Visual in Political Struggle

Politics in the Middle East is now *seen*. The image has claimed a central place in the processes through which political dynamics are communicated and experienced in the region. States, non-state actors, oppositional groups and ordinary people are engaging in political struggle through the image, and the media, especially the visual media, are not only mediators in this context, they are also political actors, deliberately using images to exert political influence. The image is at the heart of political struggle, which has become an endless process of images battling, reversing, erasing and replacing other images. As Groys argues, "[t]he desire to get rid of any image can be realized only through a new image – the image of a critique of the image."[1] Political struggle, then, is an inherently visually productive process. It is also itself visual to a large degree: It is a struggle over presence, over visibility. For authoritarian states, political power means having control over visual production and consumption. For political oppositions, democratic representation merges with visual representation. For people, possessing political agency means possessing the ability to be seen, not only heard.

The visual manifests itself in several forms in processes of political struggle: as a mass media image; a digital image; a cartoon; a piece of art; a physical space or object; an ephemeral image on paper, a wall or another physical medium; and as a human embodiment. It can also be a conceptual image, a visual idea. All those forms merge and interact, so that it is no longer possible to look at an image in any one form in isolation from the others. While the visual is not new as a component of visual struggle in the Middle East, its rise has accelerated since the attacks of September 11, 2001, so that key political moments in the last decade are mainly remembered as images and images of images: the Twin Towers collapsing, Osama bin Laden's video messages, the Separation Wall in Palestine, the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad, Abu Ghraib, the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, Saddam Hussein's execution, the mobile phone video of Imad al-Kabir, the

Green Movement in Iran and the extraordinary visual rush that was the Arab Spring.

The Middle East has become a site of struggle over the construction of social and political reality through competing images. In this competition, one political actor's carefully self-constructed image can be erased by a new, oppositional image. The lasting image of bin Laden is not the video image of him giving speeches defying the West, but the mental image of him sitting in a house in Pakistan, smoking marijuana and watching pornography. The lasting image of the United States' war on Iraq is not the televised, staged image of the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad, but the photographs of tortured prisoners in Abu Ghraib. The lasting image of Saddam Hussein is not that of the public monuments in Iraq which embedded his likeness, handwriting and even blood, but the mobile phone video of his hanging. The lasting image of Israel's Separation Wall is not the wall itself but Banksy's graffiti challenging the physical supremacy of the wall with symbolism. The lasting image of the Hosni Mubarak era is not that of Barack Obama giving a "historic" speech in Cairo in 2009, but of government thugs attacking peaceful protesters in Tahrir Square on camel and horseback.

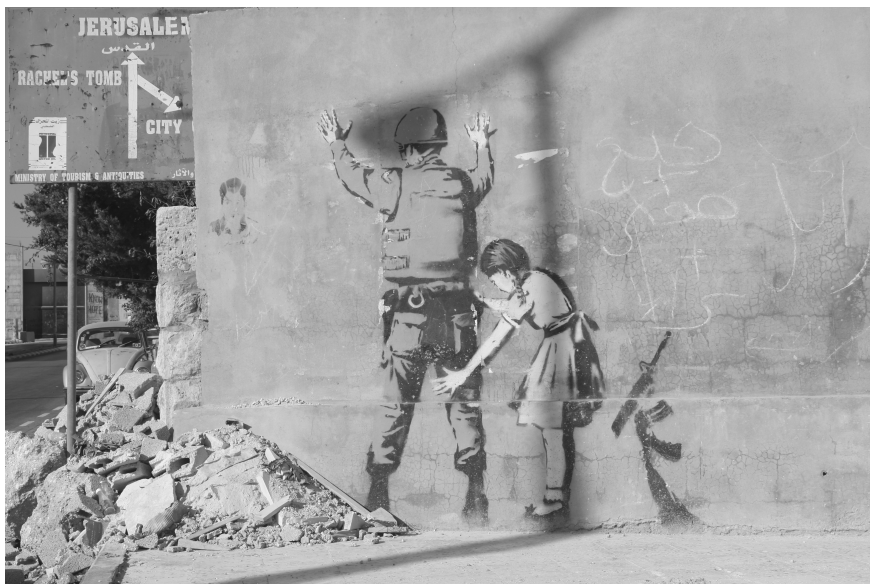

Fig. 1. A mural by Banksy on the Separation Wall in Palestine in September 2008. Photo by Rich Wiles.

This book aims to provide a snapshot of the role and dynamics of the image in processes of political struggle in the region from the second half of the past decade and into the present (2005 to today). It acknowledges images as constructs infused with meanings, attributes and projected perceptions.[2] As such, and although it mainly focuses on the role of visual representations, it also alludes to the image as a mental attribute.[3] David Morgan provides a useful definition of visual culture, which forms the basis of this book's analytical approach. He says,

> Visual culture is what images, acts of seeing, and attendant intellectual, emotional, and perceptual sensibilities do to build, maintain, or transform the worlds in which people live. The study of visual culture is the analysis and interpretation of images and the ways of seeing (gazes) that configure the agents, practices, conceptualities, and institutions that put images to work.[4]

This book is therefore concerned with image content in a variety of mediums, from television to the internet to street art, as well as the political meanings and practices by individuals, states and non-state political actors surrounding those images, be they practices of production or perception. The book argues that to understand political dynamics in the Middle East, one needs to take into account the role of the image in those dynamics, and to understand image dynamics in the Middle East, one needs to examine all those mediums and practices simultaneously.

The argument in this book does not separate "hard politics" from "soft politics" in its understanding of the role of the image in politics, for those two spheres are intertwined. It also does not separate the cultural from the political. Existing scholarship has examined the link *between* culture – especially popular culture – and politics, arguing for example that sometimes politics takes a popular cultural form (such as in the case of politicians who are regarded as celebrities) and that politics often *incorporates* elements of popular culture such as image making and performance.[5] This book argues that in the Middle East (as is elsewhere), often there is no longer a distinction between the cultural and the political spheres; it is not just that popular culture and politics feed off each other – very often, popular culture is politics. The image-making act can itself be a political act. As Lisa Wedeen argues, "[p]olitics is not merely about material interests but also about contests over the symbolic world, over the management

and appropriation of meaning."[6] It is those contests over the symbolic world that the book aims to unearth. Focusing on case studies from Lebanon, Iran, Egypt, Syria and Libya, the book discusses images of and by states, political actors, artists, the media and ordinary people. The book's primary data has been collected mainly through trips by the author to Lebanon, Iran, Egypt and Syria between 2005 and 2011 and commissioned photography in Libya. The book's key argument is that there is a "visually epistemological sense of politics" in the Middle East that demands attention, and the book itself is a modest effort to document some of this visual knowledge as well as analyze its dynamics.[7]

Perhaps the first communication channel that comes to mind when thinking about image politics in the Middle East is the media, particularly after the Arab Spring. As Simon Cottle writes about this period,

> new social media and mainstream media often appear to have performed in tandem, with social media variously acting as a watchdog of state controlled national media, alerting international news media to growing opposition and dissent events and providing raw images of these for wider dissemination. International news media, in turn, including Al Jazeera, have distributed the flood of disturbing scenes and reports of the uprisings now easily accessed via Google's YouTube and boomeranged them back into the countries concerned. Mainstream newspapers and news broadcasters in their online variants also increasingly incorporate direct links to these new social media, effectively acting as a portal to their updating communication flows and near live-streaming of images direct from the protests themselves. This moving complex of interpenetrating communication flows and their political efficacy across the different uprisings deserves careful documentation and comparative analysis.[8]

The media space of the Arab Spring was not a mere space of remediation, "the representation of one medium in another,"[9] but a hypermedia space, as defined by Marwan Kraidy:

> Hypermedia space is a broadly defined symbolic field created by interactions between multiple media, from micro text-messaging to region-wide satellite broadcasting. The

> term "hypermedia" captures the technological convergence and media saturation that characterize many contemporary societies, while emphasizing the speed and convergence of communication processes. The "interoperatibility of once-discrete media . . . linked together into a single seamless web of digital-electronic-telecommunications" (Deibert, 1997, pp. 114–115) creates a space with many "points of access" that are personalized, mobile, non-conspicuous and networked, and therefore not easily subjected to overt social or political control . . . Arab hypermedia space is constituted by various types of communicators (citizens, consumers, activists, etc) using email, mobile telephony, text messaging, digital cameras, electronic newspapers, and satellite television. This space's non-hierarchical nature invites a rethinking of Arab information dynamics.[10]

Kraidy argues that this hypermedia space is changing the relationship between states and citizens in the Arab world and blurring the boundaries between popular culture and politics, and between producers and consumers.[11] Etling et al. echo this, highlighting that there is now a

> collision of old realities and new technologies taking place in the Arab world, and a surprising number of elements intertwine in them: abuse of power, legitimacy of authority, the power of television, the ubiquity of video cameras, feedback between blogs and the press, traditional vs. modern sensibilities, freedom of expression, the power of online voices, and the scope of political arenas – local, national, pan-Arab, pan-Muslim, global. At stake in this collision are both the symbolic construction and the hard power of "The Public" across the region. Notable is the seamless combination of modes of communication into a single system: face-to-face interaction (including cattle prods), mobile phones, television, newspapers, and multiple genres of Internet sites (blogs, forums, chat rooms, video sharing, photo sharing, etc.). Increasingly, these comprise an emerging networked public sphere, in which the power of elites to control the public agenda and bracket the range of allowable opinions is seriously challenged.[12]

The Arab Spring also went beyond this notion of hypermedia space as it saw a central role for the physicality of people and places. Sonia Livingstone argues that as the boundaries between interpersonal and mass forms of communication disappear, "everything is mediated."[13] But mediation still means that the body and the media are seen as two separate entities, even as bodies sometimes perform for the media. During the Arab Spring, the media were not just mediators in social and political interactions; the media were the individuals. Each person on the street in Tahrir Square or Daraa was an image creator and "broadcaster" of political messages. This broadcasting of messages, whether verbal or visual or both, did occur often using third-party communication tools like the internet or mobile phones or the carrying of placards, but it also occurred through performance by the body, through visible presence, through being in a space.

Silverstone argued that "politics, like experience, can no longer even be thought outside a media frame."[14] The last decade, particularly its second half, has witnessed a change in political culture in the Middle East as this culture became more visual in form. Amin defines political culture as "the values, norms, beliefs, sentiments and understandings of how power and authority operate within a particular political system. Generally, political culture sets informal and unwritten ground rules as to how the political process is to be performed."[15] Political culture in the Middle East is not just mediated, it is also mediatized. Mediatization "refers to the process through which mediated cultural products have gained importance as cultural referents and hence contribute to the development and maintenance of cultural communities."[16] It also refers to "both the (institutionalized as well as technologically composed) specificity of different media *and* their contents as moments of influence on other 'fields' or 'systems' of culture and society."[17] This mediatization has had three consequences in relation to political culture. First, it has resulted in the rise of the recognizable Middle East politician[18] who is almost a celebrity (like Hassan Nasrallah).[19] Second, it has resulted in symbolism becoming an established means of conveying political messages for states and oppositions alike (for example, through the staging of symbolic events like pro- and anti-regime public rallies).[20]

The third result is a change in the way political communication dynamics are conceived. Traditionally, political communication theorists conceived of citizens as being more on the receiving end of political communication messages, where those messages are sent by the state through the media.[21] Political communication

theory has now moved beyond the state-citizen binary to incorporate other political actors, and beyond one-way communication to include non-linear exchanges, yet it remains focused on the media, mainly the mass media and later the internet, as a go-between. The Arab Spring is a reminder of the limitation of this approach. Rami Khouri argues that the four most important communication channels during the Egyptian January 25 Revolution were al-Jazeera, mobile phones, mosques and public spaces, as word of mouth worked hand in hand with digital communication.[22] The process of political communication today has therefore moved beyond the media, especially the press and broadcasting, and has become an all-encompassing collection of communicative processes occurring in physical, electronic, non-electronic virtual and embodied spaces. Television and radio broadcasts are now supplemented by internet campaigns, staged actions in public space, the wearing of symbolic attire, the production and consumption of merchandise, posters and other symbolic objects. Political communication dynamics must take into account the role of the citizen as an individual and as an agent in all those visual processes.

States and non-state political actors also have embraced visual processes in their image management strategies, particularly as they struggle against political opponents in an image-saturated world. Those image management strategies, ranging from propaganda to public diplomacy, rely on images for legitimation (of the self) and delegitimation (of "others"), mobilization and demobilization and empowerment and disempowerment.[23] Images, domestic and foreign policies in the Middle East can no longer be separated; none is simply dependent on the other, they all both influence and produce one another.[24]

Authoritarian states in the Middle East are particularly reliant on the image as a tool for "the engineering of consent."[25] Henri Lefebvre divides oppressive societies into three levels. The first is the "repressive society," characterized by poverty and an exploitative class that maintains its authority through ideological persuasion and compulsion. The second is the "over-repressive society," which, in addition to the above, uses language to deaden opposition, and "relies more on the self-repression inherent in organized everyday life."[26] The third is the "terrorist society," where "compulsion and the illusion of freedom converge . . . In a terrorist society terror is diffuse, violence is always latent, pressure is exerted from all sides on its members . . . terror cannot be located, for it comes from everywhere and from every

specific thing."[27] Images testify to the progression of authoritarian states in the Middle East to this third level, as images have become a way in which terror is diffused. Terror is diffused through a simultaneous process of production and reception of images by the state. The citizen in this kind of society is always the object of the gaze of the state, whether physically (through human and electronic surveillance) or symbolically (through the watchful eye of the leader's image in public and private space) or both (through being made to perform in pro-regime spectacles).[28]

Lisa Wedeen argues that this kind of state "attempts to control the symbolic world, that is, to manipulate and manage systems of signification . . . official rhetoric and images operate as a form of power in their own right, helping to reinforce obedience and sustain the conditions under which regimes rule . . . 'successful' rhetoric and symbols produce 'legitimacy', 'charisma', or 'hegemony' for the regime."[29] One way in which this is done is through the aestheticization of politics and political life.[30] An example is the reliance on staged pro-regime public rallies in places like Iran and Syria.[31] Walter Benjamin argues that mass movements are particularly suited to the eye of the camera, and thus have great propaganda potential.[32] The staged rallies are a way for despotic regimes to communicate power, approval, credibility and obedience. As Lefebvre puts it,

> The signal commands, controls behavior . . . and . . . can be grouped in codes . . . thus forming systems of compulsion. This shift to signals . . . involves the subjection of the senses to compulsions and a general conditioning of everyday life . . . Signals and codes provide practical systems for the *manipulation* of people and things.[33]

Hypermedia space allows despotic regimes and rulers to extend their control over the symbolic world into a public diplomacy message. This dynamic was particularly seen during the Arab Spring, when state television in Syria was keen on broadcasting footage of huge pro-regime rallies that was directed both at the Syrians and at foreign powers. This reliance on the image as visual evidence is an illustration of the belief that, in the words of American Civil War photographer Mathew Brady, "the camera is the eye of history."[34]

Yet, as Susan Sontag reminds us, "to photograph [is] to compose."[35] Ironically, it was Syrian president Bashar al-Assad who had once agreed with Sontag in his criticism of the camera's representation of

anti-Syrian rallies in Lebanon during the Cedar Revolution in 2005, saying that close camera angles made the demonstration sizes appear larger than they were. The response by the demonstrators at the time was to organize a huge rally in which they carried placards instructing the television cameras to "zoom out and count." The camera, in this context, provides an arena "in which symbolic contests are carried out among competing sponsors of meaning."[36] The fact of composition erases the innocence of the image, complicating the projected images of despotic regimes even before they are received. Another complication arises because there is a difference between projected images and perceived images.[37] As Barthes puts it, "the language of the image is not merely the totality of utterances emitted . . . it is also the totality of utterances received."[38] The images projected by the Syrian, Libyan, Iranian, Egyptian, Tunisian and other authoritarian regimes in the Middle East in recent years have been subject to rejection and reversal by citizens who strived to reclaim a position of political agency. And while the process of rejection and reversal did not manage to topple the regime in Iran – not yet – it is an ongoing process that should be taken into account when one thinks of political struggle in Iran and other authoritarian states in the region. As Lefebvre argues, a terrorist society "cannot maintain itself for long; it aims at stability, consolidation, at preserving its conditions and at its own survival, but when it reaches its ends it explodes."[39]

The Arab Spring is an example of this process of gradual visual rejection and reversal leading to an explosion of the status quo. This process is in turn a reminder of Manuel Castells' conception of power in the network society, in which he argues that "political institutions are not the site of power any longer. The real power is the power of instrumental flows, and cultural codes, embedded in networks."[40] In the mediatized age, Arab citizens have become part of a network society in which cultural codes flow, and their acts of image reversal and subversion – which, before 2011, had taken place quietly, such as through contemporary art, and loudly, such as through movements like Kifaya – paved the way for the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring was itself a field in which cultural codes flowed. The domino effect of the uprisings speaks of images as possessing the potential to activate the viewer, not because they impose a uniform meaning – images are always open to interpretation, negotiation and rejection – but because the image can be an empowering agent, enabling citizens to perform a meta-narrative of political agency.[41] As Joel Handler puts it, "[p]rogressive forces have to act

as if the walls will come tumbling down . . . this is a meta-narrative – a construction of human nature that transcends context."[42] Images also make events more intimate and create further identification with them for the viewer. Sontag argues that the absence of well-known images documenting atrocities makes those atrocities seem more remote.[43] By the same token, the presence of images documenting revolution in a neighboring country makes the concept of revolution less remote. As Sontag puts it, "a photograph has only one language and is destined potentially for all."[44] Photographic images, whether through still cameras or video, brought the Arab Spring closer to audiences within and outside the immediate locales of the protests, acting as "a means of making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the mere safe might prefer to ignore."[45] It is undeniable, then, that the visual media played a role in creating the domino effect of uprisings during the Arab Spring. In this the media were not mere reflectors of social change, they were also themselves mediators and part-creators of social change.[46]

But media images were only one kind of image in the visual sphere of the Arab Spring. They were joined by physical images of bodies and places, in other words, physical presence. Asef Bayat argues that the "art of presence" is about the "*active* use of public space by subjects who, in the modern states, are allowed to use it only *passively* – through walking, driving, watching – or in other ways that the state dictates."[47] Being present in public space in an "active" way as defined by Bayat is a visual political act. This visual complexity means that image politics in the context of the uprisings is about images *in* the Arab Spring (such as protest posters and protesters performing in public space), *of* the Arab Spring (such as of the presence of protesters in Tahrir Square) and produced *by* the Arab Spring (such as murals in Cairo). What links all three modes is the presence of intentionality in the act of creating the visual, the inherent acknowledgement of the potential power of the image. Images *in* the Arab Spring acted as political weapons: People carried placards and recorded videos on their mobile phones to declare political demands, and their presence (and actions) in public space was itself a visual political act. Images *of* the Arab Spring served as a visual record as well as a catalyst for others to join the action. The images produced *by* the Arab Spring are somewhat different. The Egyptian revolution, in particular, is noted for triggering a new visual field in Egypt, that of street art. The creation of images in public space as a way of claiming political power and marking territory is an established mechanism;

one only needs to think of the visual discursive space of Palestine for a vivid illustration of this. But in Egypt under the Mubarak regime, the authority to create an oppositional image in space, including to freely perform this role through the body, was denied to the citizen. The appearance of murals all over Cairo after the January 25 Revolution is, then, a way to let the body and the art make a "permanent" statement about public visibility. As Groys argues, "[a]rt and politics are initially connected in one fundamental respect: both are realms in which a struggle for recognition is being waged."[48] Through street art, the previously disenfranchised are waging a war of presence.

This war of presence has also led to another visual process in Egypt and Libya, the creation of exhibitions and museums commemorating the uprisings. In Egypt, an effort is being made to collect and display artifacts from the January 25 Revolution like tear gas canisters, protest signs and bullet casings at the American University in Cairo[49], while in Libya, two exhibitions in Misrata and Benghazi in the summer of 2011 also displayed weapons and paraphernalia as well as specially commissioned art about the battle between the rebels and the regime. This process of museumification can be related to two factors. First, the museum is an example of power in the public realm, as objects on display in a museum call attention to themselves as important. Museums are therefore a sign of agency for citizens; choosing what to include, what is important, is a sign of reclaiming power in the public realm. Second, as Levi-Strauss argues, cultures without museums "feel the threat of oblivion, of a complete loss of historical memory."[50] Museums are a way for citizens to cement the memories of revolution in history. What is notable about those museums is that they mainly harbor collections of visuals. Susan Sontag says that the act of remembering is increasingly taking on a more visual form, becoming more about the recall of pictures rather than of stories.[51] She adds that "[i]n an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it."[52] The image, then, is a way for citizens to reclaim national and popular memory from the authoritarian state.

The embodied performances of protesters in public space, digital images, visual art, television images and other visual forms transformed the Arab Spring into a spectacle. But the Arab Spring is not just an event experienced through established kinds of images. It has itself crystallized the production of a new kind of image, which I call the floating image. The face of Khaled Said, the 28-year old man

who was killed wrongfully by the Egyptian police in 2010, is the ultimate example of the floating image. Khaled Said's face with its multiple meanings, references, mediations, reincarnations and presences illustrates how the floating image combines the characteristics of other kinds of images. Like a floating signifier, the floating image's "initial meaning has been appropriated for a purpose that has no connection to the original context of its creation."[53] Like a meta-image, it is an image referencing other images.[54] Like a hyper-image, it blurs the line between what is real and what is represented. Like a hypermedia image[55], it floats between different nodes of representation, but unlike the hypermedia image, those nodes of representation go beyond the media sphere, as they include "physical" representations in offline space too. The floating image is a "strong image," one of those images with the "ability to originate, to multiply, and to distribute themselves . . . immediately and anonymously, without any curatorial control."[56] It is in possession of agency, not needing outside help to be seen. It imposes its identity by the sheer fact of its presence. The floating image, then, blends the dynamics of images in political struggle in the Middle East with the political agency of the region's people. It is the ultimate product of image politics in the Middle East.

PART I

REVOLUTIONARY ILLUSIONS