Social Networks and the New Citizenship" Women in the Aftermath of the "Arab Spring"

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Introduction

The upsurge of massive protests and demonstrations during the so-called Arab Spring have largely been facilitated by social networks, using media such as face book, twitter, blogs and so on in operating and promoting such protests. Several academic studies have been published on the role of media, especially social media in the construction of the "Arab Spring". Some have gone as far as suggesting that social media has been fundamental in the making of such protests. Social forms of communications have indeed played an important role in globalizing such phenomenon, however, they were neither the reasons for the emergence of the "Arab Spring", nor, most importantly did such media contribute to the emergence of a new citizen as many claim. By focusing on the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring on citizenship rights in general and women's citizenship more specifically, this article provides a critique of the very notion of "Arab Spring" and problematizes the concepts of "democracy", "human rights" and "freedoms" used to describe this phenomenon. This paper and contrary to what is commonly believed, such concepts which were flaunted by western media were largely a veil beneath which Western, especially US imperialist strategic interests in the area were/are hidden. More specifically, these concepts were ideological tools used to further control the region and pacify the agency of its population.

In this article I examine the dynamics of changes during and after the so-called Arab Spring, emphasizing on the changing position of women. After historicizing and deconstructing the notion "Arab Spring", this paper argues that women's citizenship status and social position have negatively been affected after the "success" of these events: their dreams of new civic, social and economic rights have clashed with the emergence of new socio-political phenomenon of extreme Islamism, supported by the West. Instead of gaining new rights, women, especially in Egypt and Syria have in fact lost much of the social-economic and political rights they achieved prior to the "Spring".

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Historicizing the “Arab Spring”

It is no exaggeration to suggest that the Middle East in general and the Arab world more specifically is undergoing a unique historical moment in so far as their socio-economic, cultural, political structures and civil society are concerned. For some, this period is described as “The Arab Spring”, a term which originally emerged in the United States (US), and was seen as a positive change, while others expressed scepticism about the actual implications and future of such changes. After the Egyptian “Spring” in 2011 which followed massive protests in December 2010 in Tunisia, well known Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi wrote:

To be an Arab has become a good thing … People all over the Arab world feel a sense of pride in shaking off decades of cowed passivity under dictatorships that ruled with no deference to popular wishes. And it has become respectable in the West as well… Events in the Arab world are being covered by the Western media more extensively than ever before and are being talked about positively in a fashion that is unprecedented. Before, when anything Muslim or Middle Eastern or Arab was reported on, it was almost always with a heavy negative connotation. Now, during this Arab spring, this has ceased to be the case. An area that was a byword for political stagnation is witnessing a rapid transformation that has caught the attention of the world (Khalidi 2011:5).

Khalidi’s statement captures the “Arab Spring” succinctly, but only during and immediately after the 2010-2011 events. To-date, after almost three years and looking back at the “Arab Spring”, one only sees an Arab sea of turmoil, conflicts and wars: From Yemen and Bahrain in the Gulf, to Libya and Tunisia in North Africa, along with Egypt and Syria in the eastern part of the Middle East. These countries are heavily engulfed in major political conflicts, with popular and massive opposition on the one hand, and militarized Islamists coming to power, on the other. This scene has undoubtedly shaken the “Spring” giving way to what an increasing number of scholars refer to as a dark age.

It is true that women’s and men’s massive participation in the revolutions has changed their media images, especially in the West, but also throughout the Middle East. Women specifically were cast in more positive ways. They are not what they were: the veiled, silenced, oppressed by their religion, men and culture, as were perceived by most Western media (see Abu-Lughod 2014). Women’s agency during the “Spring” was recognized not only throughout the Arab world but also in the West. But such changes, unfortunately, did not last long. After the ousting of

Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the same year, a so-called process of democratization, expressed in formal elections produced a new rule which was deemed equally dangerous and particularly harmful to women. “Formal democracy” gained through these protests has brought the rule of the Ikhwan in Egypt and al-Nahda party – an extension of the Ikhwan – in Tunisia: two Islamist parties in government.

The coming to power of the Islamists in both countries was endorsed, if not supported by the US and the West and accepted as a true democracy by virtue of the act of an election, regardless of whether the elections were fair or representative of people’s will. Still, the Egyptian and Tunisian peoples were very skeptical and alarmed by such developments. The actions and policies enacted by both governments (religious parties) were deemed exclusionary and oppressive by various sectors of the population, especially as they introduced laws and enacted policies which lacked protection for civil rights, especially women’s rights. In the case of Egypt such policies led to a noticeable set back in women’s already achieved rights. Both governments ignored the very principles for which people took to the streets: The demands for “Aish, Karama and Hurriya Insaniyya” (bread, dignity and human freedom). During the rule of the Ikhwan in Egypt the economy deteriorated further, unemployment soared and women’s disappointment with the new constitution grew wider. The Shari’a was declared the only source of legislation in the country and the Ikhwan government, instead of adhering to democratic processes, adopted a policy of what various authors call “self-entrenchment”, in an attempt to cement their presence and ideological beliefs. While in Tunisia the al-Nahda rule came in conflict with the secular culture of the country, in Egypt, the Ikhwan’s policies and practices were deemed oppressive for a country that historically has enjoyed a modicum of a liberal rule (Khanzada 2013).

The widespread popular dissatisfaction with these governments combined with their inability to change the worsening economic conditions of the people, especially the workers and the youth has once again sent the peoples to the streets demanding the resignation of the Islamist parties in both Egypt and Tunisia.

Instead of what the alleged democracy should bring, the rule of the Islamist parties was deemed by the people as a rather dark moment in their history, or as some argued, as a “winter for the region” (Schemm and Bouazza 2014).

A detailed analysis of the historical differences between the citizenship status of both Tunisian and Egyptian women and the impact of the dynamics of change

brought about with the rule of the Islamists is beyond this paper. However, suffice it to say that women in both countries, albeit at different levels, have been negatively affected by the new rule. The change in both countries is one from secular autocratic and rather dictatorial regimes into a religious (and in the case of Egypt extremist) rule. Unlike Tunisian women who came to the "Spring" with a strong social and civil right gains they achieved historically, Egyptian women came to the "Spring" with a certain measure of rights written in their then-existing constitution. Still, these little rights were facing the risk of being totally annulled by the rule of the Ikhwan. Early on in their rule the Ikhwan introduced a constitution which not only enshrined the Shari'a as the only source of legislation, but also re-arranged the political hierarchy in the country creating a new position for the Murshid (the Islamic higher authority) as the final decision maker in the politics and laws of the country. Egyptian feminists contested in particular article 2 of the constitution which does not only entrench the Shari'a as the sole source of legislation, but also the fact that the President (Morsi) would be the one to appoint the head of the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) which has the last say in legislation. As Faiqa Mahmoud (2013) argued, 'the Ikhwan considered the SCC as the floor, not the ceiling of the place of Islamic law in the state" (2013:15). The Islamists also used their rule to entrench the ideology of their parties at all levels of society, allowing for the establishment of dozens of media outlets, especially TV outlets, to popularize extreme religious beliefs and most importantly their own interpretations of Islamic rules which were particularly alienating and oppressive to women. The new media was used as a tool for many of the Islamist religious clerics to issue fatwas (Islamic decrees, which although were legally unbinding, they were hard to escape). For an account of the various fatwas introduced against women in Islamist media in Egypt see Faiqa Mahmoud's "Women's Rights in Post-Revolutionary Egypt: A Step Forward or Back?" (2013).

The Ikhwan in Egypt did not only alienate women but threatened all secular and nationalist forces. They cracked down on civil liberties and human rights in general, and were accused of mass corruption (Al-Masri 2012, Noueihed and Warren 2013). It is such policies and practices which once again sent millions of Egyptian women and men to the streets. An estimated 30 million people poured into the streets of Egypt on June 2013, and with the help of the army they succeeded in deposing the Ikhwan party. In consideration of the terror which the Ikhwan started to enact in the country the new interim government (now elected government) introduced a new constitution which aimed at further strengthening the country's three key institutions – the military, the police and the judiciary. It also gave more rights to

women and people with disability, and removed certain extremist-Islamist clauses inserted under the Morsi (Ikhwan) presidency, while maintaining the principles of Islamic Shari'a as the main source of legislation. It was stated that over 98% of participants in the first Egyptian vote of the post-Morsi era voted in favour of approving the new constitution. Today as many are raising the question about the implications of the new government of Al-Sisi, it is clear that Egypt is still heavily threatened in terms of both its weak economy and the security threats it is facing by extreme Ikhwan Islamists.

Another Middle East country with events also dubbed, albeit initially, as "Arab Spring" is Syria. The Syrian conflict is a much more complex case. It is true that initially, the Syrian opposition emerged as a legitimate movement demanding regime changes and more political rights, still, opposition demonstrations, and unlike in most other countries, were simultaneously confronted with other massive demonstrations in support of the government of Bashar al-Assad. However, this opposition which began on March 2011 as a "peaceful" movement, had soon turned into an armed movement made up initially from the so-called Syrian Liberation Army, supported and trained by many countries including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the US and France and Turkey, to mention just a few and was seen as a legitimate movement. In a western and Arab enthusiasm to defeat and oust the Assad government and seize control over the country in service of the American plan for the New Middle East, support was further extended to other military groups with radical Islamist tendencies. In the process, various extremist Islamist forces, such as ISIS and al-Nassra have emerged using various terrorist methods among the population. Members in such organizations, especially ISIS were gathered from many other Arab and Western countries. For the last two years or so, social media began to document the terrorist methods of such organizations, focusing on the role of these groups in targeting civilians, ethnic groups, especially Christians and other Muslims deemed different, However, it was not until the expansion of ISIS into Iraq and its declaration of the intention to establish a Muslim Caliphate (The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – later the Islamic State) that western mainstream media began to take note and realize the dangers of such forces. Since 2013 various academic and mainstream media began to speak of ISIS as a terrorist group realizing the international character of its membership (Farmer and Sherlock 2013, Al-Shishani 2013, Barret 2014). These armed groups brought with them their own ideologies and interpretation of Islam and forced such beliefs on the territories and people they occupied in Syria. As in the cases of Egypt and Tunisia, women in Syria were also targeted by such groups, albeit in a more cruel form.

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One major social phenomenon which emerged with ISIS is the so-called female Jihadists. The reference here is to women, reportedly going to Syria primarily from Tunisia, and more recently from other parts of the world, including the west, for the purpose of supporting the Islamist armed rebels (ISIS), by providing sexual services, hence “Jihad Nikah” (or sexual Jihad) [1]. On September 2013, the Tunisian Interior Minister Lotfi Ben Jeddou addressed the Parliament saying that young Tunisian women were being lured into sexual Jihad in Syria, having sex with “20, 30, 100” rebels and were returning to Tunisia pregnant (The Telegraph, 20 Sep 2013). The challenges faced by such women when birthing in Tunisia warrants further research.

The burden of what was termed as a global war on Syria was only partly expressed in the emergence of ISIS and other forms of militant Islamists who wreaked havoc in the country, destroying its culture, Mosques, Churches and civilization, killing in mass, capturing and selling women for sexual pleasure, it was also expressed in the creation of millions of refugees inside and outside Syria. In Syrian refugee camps outside of Syria child prostitution emerged and many young women were sold for men’s sexual pleasure. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) around 3 million Syrians are refugees outside of Syria, while millions more have been displaced within the Syrian territories. Of the refugees outside of Syria, mainly Lebanon and Jordan, over 50 percent are women and of these about 30 percent age between 12 and 59. In most camps women became the heads of their families with living conditions described as dire and appalling (Malkawi 2014). Harsh living conditions, lack of employment, absence of basic amenities, scarce food and lack of hygiene have characterised most refugee camps. Such dejected living conditions in the refugee camps have resulted in among other social ills, the so-called “Muta’a marriage” (pleasure marriage), early marriage phenomenon or what is known in the literature as forced prostitution. Various international reports have documented cases of females as young as 14 years old being sold to much older men, often married, for a small price, only to be abandoned after a short period of time. UN women produced an extensive report which details the cases of forced early marriages among Syrian refugees (UN Women 2013).

The So-Called Arab Spring: A Gender Perspective

Extensive scholarly work has been written on the “Arab Spring” (Achcar 2013, Dabashi 2012, Gelvin 2012, Glover 2010). Yet, the overwhelming majority of this literature which deals with the “Spring” as a social movement, as a process of

democratisation or as a changing moment in the Global context of the New World Order (Weddady and Ahmari 2012) remains de-gendered if not gender-blind. Using a feminist analysis of intersectionality, one that articulates gender, ethnicity, religion, class and sexuality, I hope in the following few pages to highlight some of the major implications of the so-called Arab Spring on women.

In her “Gendering the Arab Spring”, Nadje Al-Ali (2012) has correctly observed that gender is not only about women, but should include men as well. This is all the more so in the scenes of massive women and men shown in the revolts in Yemen, Bahrain, Egypt and Tunisia. The dire economic conditions along with the lack of basic citizenship rights which inflicted and still inflict most people in the Middle East affect both women and men. Still, I would argue that wars, colonialism and religious extremism, or masculine power in general specifically target women in their bodies and sexuality. Elsewhere I provide a full account of this issue focusing on the Israeli colonial prison system’s treatment of Palestinian women political detainees (see Abdo 2014).

To explain further the phenomenon of targeting women’s bodies and sexuality as one major consequence of the so-called Arab Spring, especially in Egypt and Syria, I begin with a confirmation that contrary to the Western perception of Arab women as docile, over oppressed by their religion, men and patriarchy, Arab women have historically been and continue to be active agents in the making of their history. Notwithstanding, they could not avoid their victimization by the growing masculine power of military and religious extremism.

For example, within the Egyptian case, while women demonstrated a great deal of agency and a leading role during the “Tahrir (Liberation) Movement”, especially during the first massive demonstrations on January 25th, 2011, as well as on the June 30, 2013 mass protests, some of these very women were reported to have been harassed, sexually assaulted and even raped.

During the first phase of the “Arab Spring” (January-March 2011) almost all media including social, alternative and even main-stream media agreed that women have played an important role in promoting the revolts, raising social awareness, organizing and particularly in Egypt, also taking leading roles during the days of camping in Meedan al-Tahrir (Tahrir Square). In fact the impressive scenes during those days have prompted the mainstream Canadian media, the CBC, to organize a special Town Hall discussion called “Tahrir Toronto”, after Tahrir Square in Egypt. The author as one of the discussants at the panel witnessed the euphoria of the

audience when we all listened to a skyped interview with an Egyptian woman activist narrating their strong presence and activism at the time. In other words, that women's agency in participating in the making and changing their society was omnipresent has never been questioned. However this scene was not to last long. Thus in addition to a noticeable deterioration in the social and citizenship status of Egyptian women during the rule of the Ikhwan as will be elaborated further, during the period of 7-13 2011, hundreds of people were arrested and tortured in military prisons. Among them were a score of women also dragged to military prisons and were forced to go through particularly humiliating treatments of their body and sexuality, through the so-called "virginity checks".

"What happened to me can happen to any girl in Egypt." With these words Samira Ibrahim Mohamed, 25, a native of Sohag/Egypt begins her tale of the terrible experience she encountered while subjected to a virginity test after taking part in the mass demonstrations (Zoepf 2011). The allegations of women undergoing sexual assaults by the military arose in an Amnesty International report, published weeks after the March 9 protest. It claimed female demonstrators were beaten, given electric shocks, strip-searched, threatened with prostitution charges and forced to submit to virginity checks. The allegations arose in an Amnesty International report, published weeks after the March 9 protest. According to Samira Ibrahim "I was forced to take off my clothes in front of military officials… The person that conducted the test was an officer, not a doctor. He had his hand stuck in me for about five minutes. He made me lose my virginity." Ibrahim lost her job after the arrest, and has filed a lawsuit against the military for sexual assault" (The daily Beast 2011). In a press release entitled: "Egypt: Military pledges to stop forced 'virginity tests'" by Amnesty International (27 June 2011), the organization wrote: "When army officers violently cleared Tahrir Square on 9 March – the day after International Women's Day – 17 women were detained, beaten, prodded with electric shock batons, subjected to strip searches, forced to submit to 'virginity tests' and threatened with prostitution charges." Initially, the army had denied such practices, but later, especially after Ibrahim with the support of other women who undergone similar experiences went publicly and took their case to the Egyptian Supreme Court, the military admitted its wrongdoing but claimed that they did what they did so women would not claim they were raped during their detention.

There is no denying that such forced sexual assaults were no less than rape as Ibrahim testified. Such practices against women's body and sexuality aimed at deterring women from participating in their society's liberation. As sexual assault

against Egyptian women by the military and security forces continued for several months after the March incidents, so grew public awareness and the role of women's organizations against women's targeting. On December of the same year, Samira Ibrahim won her case. Forced "virginity tests" on female detainees were ruled illegal in Egypt, after a court ordered an end to the practice. As the Guardian (27 December 2011) reported: "Hundreds of activists were in the Cairo courtroom to hear the judge, Aly Fekry, say the army could not use the test on women held in military prisons in a case filed by Samira Ibrahim, one of seven women subjected to the test after being arrested in Tahrir Square during a protest on 9 March. "Fekry, head of the Cairo administrative court", the Guardian added, "decreed that what happened to Ibrahim and six other detainees was illegal and any similar occurrence in the future would also be considered illegal." The court is expected to issue a further injunction against such tests and decree that the test was completely illegal, opening the door for financial compensation. This legal victory for Ibrahim was a victory to all Egyptian women. On December 25, Samira Ibrahim posted on Twitter: "Thank you to the people, thank you to Tahrir Square that taught me to challenge, thank you to the revolution that taught me perseverance. Ibrahim is just another example of Egyptian women's agency, resilience and resistance.

Egyptian women's victimisation and oppression, as discussed above has reached a high point during the Ikhwan rule as the latter gained control over Egypt and especially its media, using the latter to further promote their anti-women's reactionary ideology. It is important to remember that all women were targeted by such an extremist religious regime which was conservative and oppressive in nature. Thus in addition to changing the Egyptian constitution placing the final say on all important issues, including the economic, the political, the social and the cultural in the hands of the Murshid (The Ikhwan's Supreme Judge), the latter promoted a large number of new media programs issuing all kinds of Fatwas restricting women's movement and denying them rights they have already achieved (Ibrahim 2-13). The following argument between Riham Said, an anchor at al-Nahar TV with Cleric Yousef Badri (a member of the Ikhwan or Muslim Brotherhood) is just one example. The argument between the two was broadcasted live as the Cleric insisted the anchor wears a hijab during the interview. The anchor refused the cleric's demand saying, during the pre-interview with him she had no veil and he did not complain. However, upon the insistence of the cleric, the anchor walked out of the studio furious with the cleric's unreasonable insistence (Said 2012).

During the rule of the Ikhwan a plethora of women's narratives and actions against their oppression by the Ikhwan's rule emerged through blogs, on Twitter, face book and other forms of social media. One extreme case was posted by 20 year old Aliaa Magda Elmahdi who posed naked on her blog to protest the limits on expression practiced by the Muslim Brotherhood rule and received a massive popular response.

Egyptian extreme dissatisfaction with the Ikhwan's rule who responded to none of the Egyptian popular demands of "Aish, Hurriyah and Karama Insaniyyah" (Bread, freedom and Human Dignity) resulted in the Ikhwan's ousting and a new election which brought in General Al-Sisi as the President. At this early stage in the Egyptian new government, it is hard to tell how the socio-economic and political changes will unfold. Here again more research is required to better understand current politics and their gender impact in the Egyptian case.

To turn briefly back to the Syrian case, it is no exaggeration to say that the Syrian people (women, men and children) have paid the highest price for the so-called Arab Spring. What happened and is still happening in Syria is an actual war run largely by the big Western powers and financed largely by Oil capital, mainly from the two most undemocratic Arab countries, namely, Saudi Arabia and Qatar as well as from Turkey, the leading Muslim Brotherhood regime in the region. Elsewhere I provided a detailed analysis to why the West including Israel is interested in getting rid of the current Syrian state, its strong army and its social fabric [2]. It suffice it here to mention that Syria and the Lebanese resistance (Hizbollah) remain the main resisting powers to Israel's control in the Middle East and their riddance has been and continues to be Israel's and the West's aim in order to establish the "New Middle East", one molded by and in the service of US and Israel's interests.

As mentioned earlier, Syrian women during this war have been facing tremendous challenges, new forms of oppression, once again targeting their bodies and sexuality. This is true for Syrian women who if and when their territories come under attack by ISIS and its brothers (other forms of extremist Islamists), or even for refugees outside of the country. The plight of Syrian women has been documented largely, albeit not only, by social media, UN organizations and other forms of alternative media. As for Western mainstream media it has only been after the beheading of western individuals (British, Americans and French) that the latter began to mainstream news about the atrocities of ISIS. Among the gendered atrocities committed by ISIS mention is made of trading in human organs, beheadings of children and men, forcing women, including Christian women to veil and stay home, raping women and even selling them. While all such phenomena

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occurred and still occurring within Syria, other equally savage attacks on women's body and sexuality including rape are taking place in refugee camps outside of Syria (especially in Jordan).

In a Youtube video, Rawan, a teenage girl, tells the story of how she performed "Jihad Nikah" (sexual Jihad) with several armed men fighting in Syria (Beetar 2013). Karoui (2013) estimated Tunisian women who performed "sexual Jihad" in Syria and returned pregnant to Tunisia at over 100 women. Still, Syrian women rendered refugees in various camps are reported to have been subjected to various forms of oppression including rape and coerced early marriage, while others are sold to older – often married – men in what is known as Muta`a marriage (marriage for pleasure)… marriages in many cases would last for a few days or even hours (Ruben 2013).

The UK Guardian, for example has documented a large number of cases of women in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan which is home to more than 100,000 Syrian refugees. Some of the women interviewed were quite young and were forced to marry to men who then exploit them as sex workers in bars and other night clubs in Jordan. (The Guardian, January 24. 2014) [3]. Throughout the areas under their control, in Syria and Iraq, ISIS has adopted the tradition of slavery: enslaving women and forcing them to marry ISIS members and mostly only temporarily. Narratives of Syrian refugee women in most refugee camps, especially in the Zaatari camp tell horrendous stories about young women's experiences of early marriage, prostitution and enslavement. It is appalling that very little has been done internationally to alleviate the sufferings of these women. Thus despite the UN security council resolution 1325, adopted in 2000 which was considered a landmark agreement because for the first time member states recognised that women and girls were disproportionately affected by conflict and agreed that arrangements should be made to guarantee their protection, very little has been done.

In conclusion, the so-called Arab Spring in most Arab countries has in fact brought a lot of destruction, killings, death and in so-far as women are concerned also heavy abuse, targeting their bodies and sexuality. In other words the "Arab Spring" had little to do with freedom and democracy as the West had us believe, and more to do with changing the political scene of the Middle East to fit western and primarily Israel and the US interests.

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Notes

[1] I have written extensively on this phenomenon. See for example: “Has the Arab Spring Given way to a Dark fall?” http://rabble.ca/news/2012/05/has-arab-spring-given-way-dark-fall ; “Why Talk Intervention in Syria: It’s not about Human Rights or Democracy”, why-talk-intervention-syria-its-not-about-human-rights-or-democracy ;“Islamist Jihad and Sexual Promiscuities”, http://www.topnews-nasserkandil.com/topnews/share.php?event_id=1219 ; “Religion and Sexuality in Today’s Arab Condition”, http://topnews-nasserkandil.com/topnews/share.php?event_id=1635, 2013

[2] See footnote above (i)

[3] For information on ISIS sexual atrocities on women, see: women-girls-failed-international-response-syria.