

## **Why Civil Resistance Still Works**

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The notion that "people power" can successfully challenge dictatorships and usher in new and improved governing systems seems to be dashed. Ongoing carnage in Syria and Iraq, continued instability in Libya, political assassination and restlessness in Tunisia, a bloody counter-revolution in Egypt, civil war in Ukraine, renewed bloodshed in Israel and Palestine, war-induced famine in Yemen, and the ostensible collapse of democracy in Turkey would make anyone skeptical about the promise of nonviolent resistance against oppressive regimes.

Although this skepticism is understandable, it is misplaced. Nearly ten years ago, we published an article in *International Security* called "Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict," followed in 2011 by a book of the same title.<sup>1</sup> In analyzing data from 1900 through 2006, we discovered a simple finding: that campaigns of nonviolent resistance were twice as likely to succeed as campaigns of violent resistance, and that nonviolent campaigns ushered in greater chances of democracy and civil peace than armed struggle. This was true even in highly authoritarian, repressive, and powerful countries where we would think nonviolent resistance to fail.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to conventional scholarly explanations, we found no social, economic, or political structures that systematically prevented nonviolent campaigns to succeed—or to emerge in the first place. If anything, mass-based civil resistance

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<sup>1</sup> Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, "Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict," *International Security* (Summer 2008), pp. 7-41; Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> We make a full empirical demonstration of this finding in Chapter 3 of *Why Civil Resistance Works*.

campaigns tended to emerge most often in authoritarian regimes, despite those regimes' proven willingness and ability to repress dissidents with violent force.<sup>3</sup>

Some may argue that if this finding was true until 2006, it has reversed since then. In fact, despite recent cynicism about the power of nonviolent resistance, the data tell a different story. First, in analyzing data updated through 2014, we show that the core finding remains intact past 2006, albeit with a few qualifications. Second, a number of contemporary cases suggest that the primary dynamics of civil resistance remain relevant in spite of some high-profile setbacks. In sum, civil resistance remains a remarkably effective method of social and political change, whereas campaigns that embrace violence often activate escalatory processes that are extremely difficult to reverse, often resulting in large-scale bloodshed, infrastructural destruction, and major reductions in their chances of success.

In this article, we discuss the reasons why civil resistance still works. We then walk through recent examples from the Arab Awakening to illustrate how these dynamics have played out in various cases. We conclude with cautious optimism about the promise of civil resistance in the remainder of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as well as some cautionary lessons learned from recent failures.

### **Civil Resistance as a People-Powered Force For Change**

Civil resistance is a method of struggle where unarmed people use a sequence of actions, such as strikes, protests, sit-ins, boycotts, stay-away demonstrations, and a variety of other tactics to build power and effect change. Building on insights from

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<sup>3</sup> Erica Chenoweth and Orion A. Lewis, "Unpacking Nonviolent Campaigns: Introducing the NAVCO 2.0 Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* (May 2013).

Hannah Arendt, the basic assumption behind civil resistance as a method of conflict is that no oppressive system—be it a dictatorship, a foreign military occupation, or unjust economic system—is monolithic or permanent. Nor can any oppressive system survive without the cooperation and acquiescence of the people who reside in its pillars of support—the security forces, economic elites, civilian bureaucrats, state media, religious authorities, and educational elites.<sup>4</sup> Many scholars and practitioners suggest that the main object of civil resistance is to use popular collective action to pull those pillars away from the powerholder so as to disrupt or collapse the oppressive system. Practitioners have also recognized this as a fundamental mechanism through which to confront oppression.<sup>5</sup>

Crucially, our argument does not require the opponent to possess even a baseline level of morality. Opponents may be extremely brutal, prideful, self-concerned, and petty. We assume, in fact, that there is no such thing as a benevolent dictator; if incumbents think they can commit murder with impunity, they will murder.<sup>6</sup> But the morality of the adversary does not matter nearly as much as the ability of the resistance to dislocate, over-extend, and outmaneuver the opponent while eroding its political, economic, social and military sources of power using a broad range of tactics.

What is the rate of success for nonviolent and violent resistance campaigns? From 1900-2016, about 50% of nonviolent campaigns succeeded in removing an incumbent

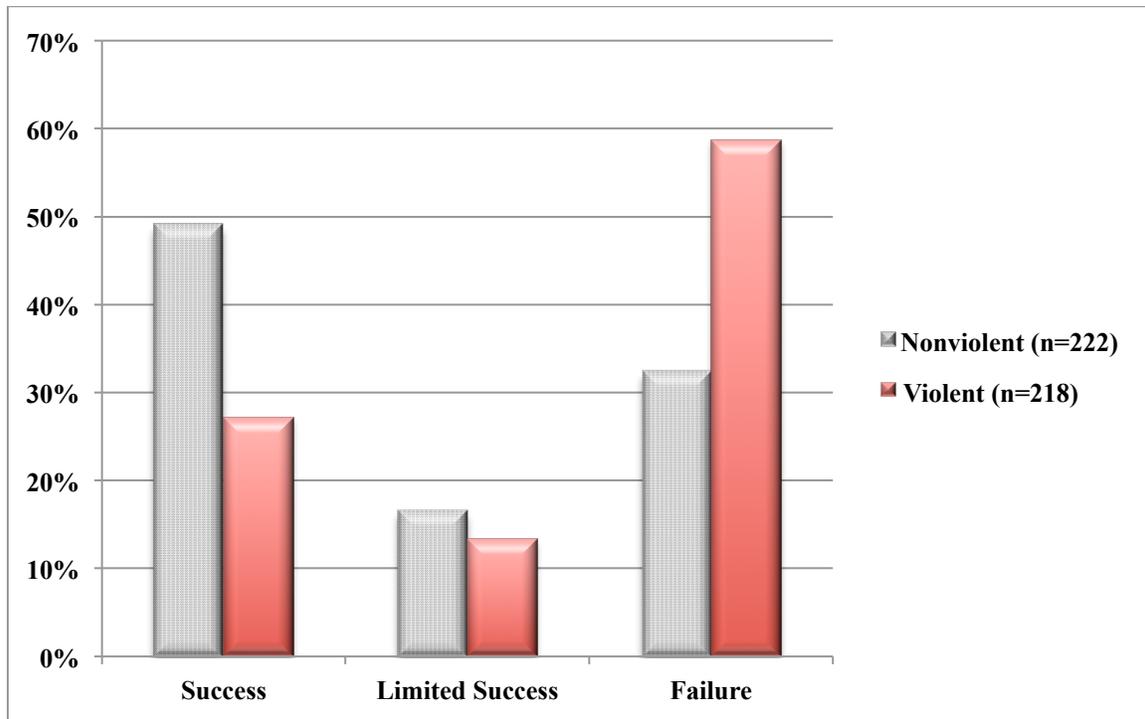
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<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (1970); Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 3 vols. (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent, 1973); Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle* (2005).

<sup>5</sup> See Robert L. Helvey, *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: Thinking About the Fundamentals* (Boston, The Albert Einstein Institution, 2004); Srdja Popvic, et al. 2005. *Canvasopedia*.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Ian Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

national leader or establishing territorial independence, compared to about 27% of armed campaigns with comparable goals (Figure 1).<sup>7</sup>



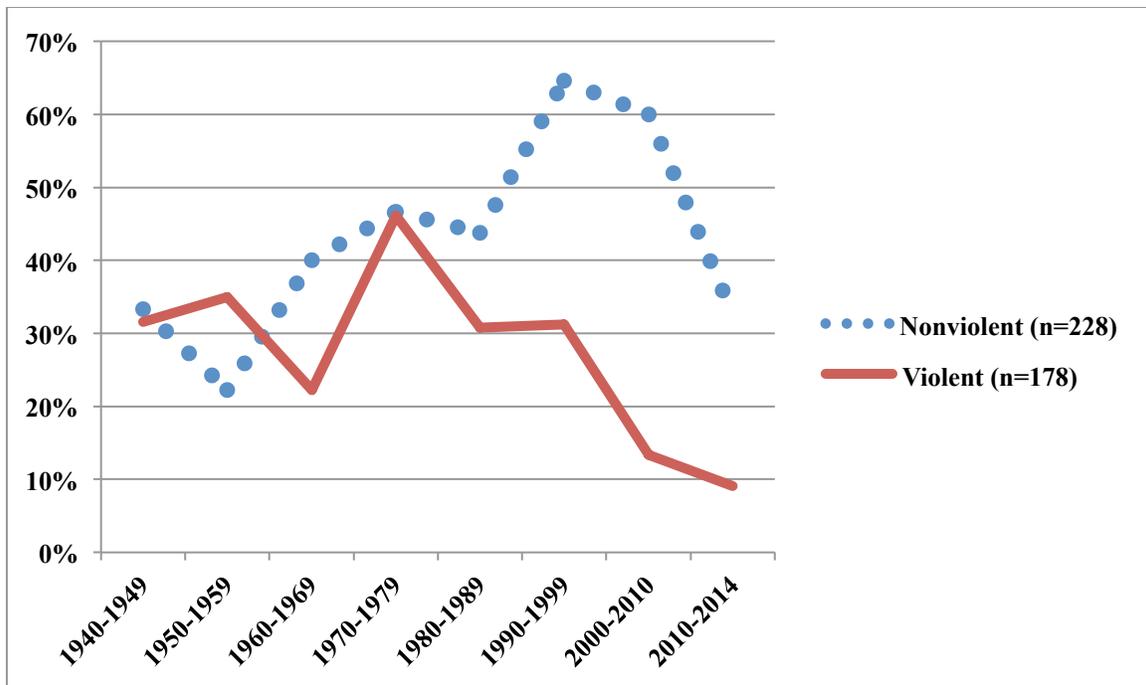
**Figure 1: Aggregate Success Rates of Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns, 1900-2014**

It is true that the absolute success rates of nonviolent resistance campaigns have recently declined – from 53% between 1900 and 2010 to 33% between 2010 and 2014.<sup>8</sup> However, the absolute success rates for violent campaigns have similarly declined—from 27% between 1900 and 2010 to 9% between 2010 and 2014 (Figure 2).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> This figure omits ongoing campaigns. Erica Chenoweth, *Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) Data*, v. 1.2. Data set in progress, University of Denver.

<sup>8</sup> Erica Chenoweth, “The Rise of Nonviolent Resistance: Implications for Policy and Practice,” *Peace Research Institute Oslo Policy Brief 19-2016*, August 2016.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* This figure counts ongoing campaigns as failures through 2014.



**Figure 2: Success Rates of Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns since 1940**

Therefore, while it is true that civil resistance may have declined in its effectiveness in the past few years, it has actually *increased* in its relative effectiveness when compared with violent campaigns.

### **What Makes Civil Resistance Work?**

The single most important factor influencing the success of a civil resistance campaign is popular participation. The larger and more diverse the campaign, the more likely it was to succeed.<sup>10</sup> Why?

First, the larger the campaign is, the more likely it is to make the costs of continued repression unsustainable, provoke defections within various pillars of support

<sup>10</sup> Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*; Eric Stoner, “Participation Is Everything—A Conversation with Erica Chenoweth,” *Waging Nonviolence*, April 2011.

(including, often, the security forces<sup>11</sup>), bring serious disruption to the status quo, and elicit the continued attention of powerholders. Even the most brutal opponent finds it difficult to indefinitely crack down and sustain repression against large numbers of people engaging in acts of non-cooperation and disruption—particularly when the campaign shifts between various types activities.

For example, although the Shah of Iran found it fairly easy to neutralize both Islamist and Marxist-inspired guerilla groups within Iran during the 1960s and early 1970s, he had a much tougher time suppressing the mass-based popular uprising that dislodged him from power in 1979.<sup>12</sup> Although security forces loyal to the Shah killed thousands of people during the 100 Days' Revolution, the regime's repressive apparatus was overstretched in the face of such massive popular dissent. When large numbers of Iranians—including oil workers, bazaar merchants, and students—used collective nonviolent work stoppages, boycotts, funeral protests, rallies, and blockades, security forces began defecting, the economy tanked, and the Shah fled the country.<sup>13</sup>

Diverse campaigns that include women, professionals, taxi drivers, religious figures and civil servants (versus mostly young, able-bodied men who receive training in explosives and hit-and-run attacks) are more likely to be broadly representative of the society, such that cracking down on the dissidents is more apt to backfire against the opponent. It is much tougher (thought not impossible) for regimes to get away with repression targeting civilians considered mainstream or even close to the regime's social circles than it is to target armed insurgents with lethal force. In fact, we find that under

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<sup>11</sup> Anika Locke Binnendijk and Ivan Marovic, "Power and Persuasion: Nonviolent Strategies to influence State Security Forces in Serbia (2000) and Ukraine (2004)." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* Vol. 39, No. 3 (September 2006), p. 416.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*.

conditions of violent repression, nonviolent campaigns succeeded 46% of the time, whereas violent ones only succeeded 20% of the time.<sup>14</sup> After all, police and military forces can hardly be comfortable in a situation where they are asked to use violence against people who may include their children, cousins, accountants, or imams. Of course, each case has its own peculiarities. For instance, sometimes it may be very difficult or impossible to provoke security force defections in highly racist or ethnically-divided societies.<sup>15</sup> Many regimes seek to insulate themselves from this risk by relying on foreign security elements, such as Pakistani and non-Bahraini Sunni Arab police in Bahrain, or by exploiting ethnic divisions within society, such as South Africa's employing only white South Africans within the security forces during the apartheid era.<sup>16</sup> But the loyalty of other pillars, such as economic and business elites, is often vulnerable to costs imposed on them from people power as well. As happened in South Africa, defections among business and economic elites can threaten to bring the economy to a halt and force the regime to comply with the opposition's demands.<sup>17</sup>

Observers should not be fooled by the “speed” with which many regimes collapse when they face a mass nonviolent uprising. Successful nonviolent campaigns are rarely spontaneous. Nonviolent organizers should be aware that successful civil resistance requires time, effort, and planning. In fact, the average duration of a nonviolent campaign is close to three years (whereas the average violent campaign lasts over nine years).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Ches Thurber. 2012. *Strategies of Violence and Non-Violence in Revolutionary Movements*. PhD Dissertation, Tufts University.

<sup>16</sup> Kurt Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Erica Chenoweth, *NAVCO Dataset*, v. 1.2.

Planning in civil resistance entails developing a vision of a better society that appeals to broad constituencies based on concerted consultations, analyzing the opponent and campaign’s pillars of support and sources of power, devising a theory for how power shifts, and selecting and sequencing tactics that maximizes participation, maintains momentum, and keeps the opponent off-guard.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, there are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of actions available to people who wish to change their political situation. Sharp, who identified “198 Methods of Nonviolent Action,” distinguishes between acts of commission, where unarmed people do something the opponent does not want them to, and acts of omission, where people stop doing something they are expected to do.<sup>20</sup> Political sociologist Kurt Schock also distinguishes between methods of concentration, where people gather in a particular space, and methods of dispersion, where people stay away from a particular space.<sup>21</sup> Technology-savvy scholars have updated Sharp’s list to include tactics activated through cellular phones, social media, and even unarmed aerial vehicles.<sup>22</sup>

Importantly, however, all of these methods carry a variety of risks and have varying political effects (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Examples of Nonviolent Methods and Associated Risk Levels**

	<b>Commission</b>	<b>Omission</b>
<b>Dispersion</b>	Coordinated & dispersed flash-mobs, development of alternative markets, political	Coordinated electricity shut-offs, stay-at-home strikes, etc.

<sup>19</sup> Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle*.

<sup>20</sup> Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*.

<sup>21</sup> Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections*.

<sup>22</sup> Meier, Patrick Philippe. 2008. "Communication Technology, Repressive Hierarchies and Defiant Networks: Is the State or Civil Society Winning the Information Race?" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. See also Mary Joyce, et al.’s *DigiActive Project*.

	boycotts, stay-at-home demonstrations, divestments, embargos, reporting in sick, structures, & education systems, singing illegal songs, overloading administrative systems, etc.			
<b>Concentration</b>	Sit-in, nonviolent occupation, march, demonstration, rally, teach-in, reverse strike, seeking imprisonment, etc.	Silence, go-slow demonstration, walk-outs, turning one's back, etc.		
<b>Risk level</b>	<b>Highest</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Lowest</b>

Historically, effective civil resistance campaigns are those that have sequenced their tactics in ways that have made them resilient to government repression.<sup>23</sup> This often means shifting between safer actions that build the support base among more risk-averse participants to riskier risk actions once the campaign enjoys the active participation of large and diverse constituencies. And, as a general rule, tactics that appear to be reducing the size and diversity of participation seldom yield victory in the longer term.<sup>24</sup>

Campaigns that share all of the features necessary for success—participation, diversity, tactical sequencing that manages and circumvents repression, and discipline—do not always succeed regardless. Much depends, of course, on how the adversary responds—and whether the adversary proves to be superior at outmaneuvering the dissidents, dividing and ruling, and provoking the dissidents to adopt an undisciplined or violent response to repression.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle*; Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler, *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*: (Westport: Praeger, 1995); Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections*;

<sup>24</sup> Stoner, “Participation is Everything,”

<sup>25</sup> Ackerman and Kruegler, *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*; Wendy Pearlman, *Violence and*

Critically, however, countries that experienced failed nonviolent campaigns were still about four times more likely to transition to democracy within five years of the conflict's end, compared with countries that experienced armed struggle. There are several potential explanations for this interesting finding. From the perspective of nonviolent action, the skills that animate nonviolent civic mobilizing may empower and accelerate the give-and-take, coalition-building dimensions of democratization.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, critics of people power campaigns might say that revolutionaries are hardly equipped to govern post-transition. In many cases, these critics may be right. Nonviolent mass uprisings rarely resolve systemic governance problems, like the lack of independent institutions, deep-seated corruption and inadequate power-sharing mechanisms, as recently seen in Egypt and earlier in the Philippines after Marcos was forced from power. As many have argued, democratic consolidation requires the development of new citizen habits, investment in independent institutions, reform of security forces, and a constitution that respects the rights of all people.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly an overreliance on “street politics” is a sign of institutional dysfunction, a problem that cannot be fixed overnight. This process takes time – often at least a generation – but one should not minimize the importance of mass civic mobilization in removing the most immediate obstacles to progress, engaging large and diverse participants in critical conversation, enshrining norms of nonviolent conflict resolution, and putting systemic issues front and center in the national dialogue. Indeed, Jay Ulfelder argues that mass protests (again, only one method of civil resistance) are probably

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*Nonviolence in the Palestinian National Movement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011);

<sup>26</sup> Ulfelder, Jay, and Michael Lustik. 2007. “Modelling Transitions to and from Democracy.” *Democratization* 14(3): 351 - 87.

<sup>27</sup> Larry Diamond. 2011. *The Spirit of Democracy*. New York: W. W. Norton.

necessary for countries to transition to political liberalization. Contrary to the view that mass action destabilizes democratic transitions, mobilization typically accelerates and solidifies them.<sup>28</sup>

One way that revolutionary campaigns can maximize their chances at achieving more representative institutional alternatives is to develop so-called “parallel institutions” as the struggle unfolds.<sup>29</sup> The Polish Solidarity movement entailed two decades of public protests and underground activities that gradually eroded the communist authority’s grip on the population. The secret publication of samizdat newspapers, resistance theatre and mobilization in churches, followed by the famous Gdansk shipyard strike that brought workers en masse in the opposition camp, paved the way to negotiations between the Solidarity movement and the regime that first legalized trade unions, then led to first-ever elections that upended the long-enduring authoritarian regime there. Of course, civil resistance did not turn Poland into a utopian society with a perfectly-functioning democracy. But Polish civil society remained mobilized enough to continue to put pressure on its new leaders – including Solidarity leader Lech Walesa – to govern with greater attention to their own aspirations.

In sum, civil resistance rarely succeed by converting or convincing the opponents. Instead, when it succeeds, it typically does so because nonviolent resistance is more likely than armed struggle to create united coalitions and attract large and diverse participation, thereby imposing unsustainable political costs on the opponent. This key asset increases the chances that the dissidents can withstand repression, and enhances the possibility that security forces or other key pillars defect.

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<sup>28</sup> Ulfelder and Lustik, “Modelling Transitions to and from Democracy.”

<sup>29</sup> Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections*.

## **A Quick Look at the Arab Spring**

Why did civil resistance succeed<sup>30</sup> in Tunisia and Egypt and fail in Syria? And does the success of violent resistance in Libya challenge our argument? In this section, we review these four cases<sup>31</sup> and argue that they actually reinforce the claim that civil resistance is the most effective method of change even in highly repressive contexts.

### **Why Did Civil Resistance Work in Tunisia and Egypt?**

**Tunisia.** On December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a poor 26 year-old street vender, poured flammable liquid over his body and lit himself on fire in front of the Sidi Bouzid municipal building in protest of government corruption and lack of job opportunities. Less than one month later, President Ben Ali resigned after 23 years in power and fled with his family to Saudi Arabia. Before the overthrow of the government on January 14, 2011, Tunisia enjoyed decades of prosperity under the rule of President Ben Ali. World leaders praised Ben Ali for developing the country, but criticized the former president for human rights violations in Tunisia and the lack of political expression. However, the world financial crisis in 2008 hit Tunisia hard with all of its economic sectors affected. The last unemployment poll conducted in Tunisia before the revolution showed a 30% unemployment rate for people between ages 20 and 24.

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<sup>30</sup> We define success as removing an incumbent leader within a year of the peak of the campaign's activities, along with credible evidence that the leader's removal was a direct result on the campaign's activities. In our book, we control for many other factors, including population size, regime type, state military capacity, ethno-linguistic fractionalization, violent repression, GDP per capita, decade, and region of the world when estimating the impacts of nonviolent campaigns on these outcomes. The next iteration of this paper will do this as well.

<sup>31</sup> Although Yemen, Bahrain, and the Egyptian coup of 2013 are important cases, we do not have the space to consider them fully here.

After Bouazizi's self-immolation, protests started in his hometown and then spread rapidly throughout the country. Protests were small at first with only a few dozen young people at a time. After word spread on social media of the self-immolation and the ensuing government crackdown against protestors, protestors started to include members of labor unions, lawyers, white-collar professionals, professors, and students. Thousands began to participate. The first protest in the capital took place on December 28<sup>th</sup>. Ben Ali sacked the interior minister on January 12<sup>th</sup>. But by then it was too late. Just two days later, he stepped down and a new chapter began for Tunisia. The Tunisian campaign was iconic from a civil resistance perspective. Participation was large, diverse, cross-cutting, and sustained. Tactics were largely improvisational but very diverse, alternating between demonstrations and crippling national strikes organized by labor unions. Repression backfired. Key regime functionaries, including high-ranking military officers, eventually defected, forcing Ben Ali to flee. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that despite several setbacks including high-level political assassinations, Tunisia currently appears as the most likely case to experience successful democratic consolidation of all of the cases shaken up by the Arab Awakening. Indeed, this case tracks closely with our finding that, taking into account the other factors influencing democratization, nonviolent mobilization has a strong substantive impact on the probability that a country transitions to democracy within five years.

**Egypt (2011)**. Although the 2011 Egyptian Revolution had its roots in the 2005 Kefaya movement and the 2008 April 6 movement, the timing of the January 25 demonstrations was directly inspired by the successful protests in Tunisia. After Ben

Ali's ouster, youth activists in Cairo began planning similar protests with the goal of ousting President Hosni Mubarak. Protests began on January 25 when a coalition of youth activists organized a secret march to and then occupation of Tahrir Square in the center of Cairo. The protests grew rapidly, and, while initially led by young men, eventually grew to include incredible diversity, with Muslims and Christians, women, and the leaders of most major political and social groups, including the banned Muslim Brotherhood.

Security forces attempted to suppress the protests in various ways, initially with riot police using batons, tear gas, and water cannons and later with paid "thugs" who attacked protesters with clubs, knives, and guns. Some of the "thugs," in some of the most memorable visuals of the uprising, invaded Tahrir on camelback. Rather than suppressing protest activity the repression led to increased public outcry against the government and larger protests. Mubarak dispatched the army to restore order on January 29, but the military refused to violently suppress protesters throughout the uprising, and instead during the later stages of the protests provided security against pro-Mubarak thugs.

The government also attempted various conciliatory measures to satisfy the protesters. On February 2, President Mubarak announced that he would step down at the end of his term and that his son Gamal would not succeed him. He also sacked his cabinet, appointed intelligence chief Omar Suleiman as his Vice-President, and raised salaries and pensions for public workers. On February 9<sup>th</sup>, in a critical move, labor unions joined the campaign with tens of thousands of workers striking in factories around Cairo, expressing both their support for the protesters in Tahrir Square and demands for higher

wages and better working conditions. Around the same time Mohammed Elbaradei and other leaders of the protest campaign called on the Egyptian military to intervene and oust Mubarak from power. On February 11<sup>th</sup>, under pressure from the military, Mubarak resigned and handed power over to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.

Like Tunisia, the dramatic sequences of events in the January 25 revolution illustrated the true force of “people power.” Creative tactical sequencing—from demonstrations to a popular occupation and sit-in to massive labor strikes—combined with fraternization with the army conspired to create a force that Mubarak could not repress indefinitely. Unlike Tunisia, however, Egypt’s 2013 popular coup demonstrates that as with any upheaval, a successful nonviolent campaign does not guarantee greater democracy and stability in the shorter term. If the January 25 revolution had been a violent one, however, there is no indication that the situation in Egypt would be any better than it is today.

### **Why Did Nonviolent Resistance Fail in Syria?**

The Syrian uprising began March 15, 2011 and was initially a primarily nonviolent conflict between a diverse coalition of opposition activists and the Bashar al-Assad regime. In the face of a lethal campaign of repression in which Assad utilized military and non-military security forces to subvert and crush the opposition, activists’ tactics ranged from traditional mass protests to sit-ins, demonstrations, digital activism, street theater, and nighttime calls of “God is great!” in defiance of regime-imposed curfews. Throughout the spring of 2011, the reliance on nonviolent tactics increased the size of the campaign, which rapidly spread across the country. Although the streets

remained relatively quiet in Damascus at that time, cities like Hama, Homs, Daraa were in a state of full-blown rebellion. Early waves of repression backfired, generating more mass support for the campaign (including among some Alawites), drawing international condemnation of the Assad regime, and apparently eliciting thousands of defections and desertions among foot soldiers and army officers alike—a sign that the regime was unable to control all of its pillars of support. Assad initially attempted placating his opponents by lifting the decades-long state of emergency and abolishing state security courts, but these concessions came in concert with increasing use of military forces to seize and clear opposition strongholds while executing captured defectors.

To succeed, the nonviolent campaign in Syria needed more numbers—particularly in Damascus and among minority sects—a plan to coordinate more defections among both security forces and economic elites, a strategy to mitigate repression, more national-level organization, and a tactical toolkit that included both high-risk tactics of concentration and lower-risk tactics of dispersion. On the ground, however, most of the tactics the opposition brought to bear against Assad’s regime were totally improvisational and locally-coordinated, and decades of living in a severe spy state discouraged social trust and collective action. As a consequence, the campaign had no real strategy with which to counter the inevitable mass repression and terror tactics used against them.

The campaign relied mainly on concentrated tactics like Friday demonstrations and flash-mobs—both highly disruptive but also highly risky. The opposition reportedly tried to organize a national strike, but it never materialized. Other lower-risk actions, like anonymous pranks and digital activism, did not allow the campaign to build significant grassroots followings in Damascus, nor did they provoke defections among economic or

business elites or security forces. Had there been more Alawites, Christians, and Druze engaged for a longer time in nonviolent resistance (especially in Damascus and Lattakia), we might have seen more Alawite military defections. But coordination was difficult, with significant mistrust among local activists. The Assad regime's counter response was organized and brutal. As a consequence, despite a spurt of collective nonviolent action in Aleppo (the country's economic capital) involving students, lawyers, and workers in 2012, bottom-up initiatives failed to coalesce into a nationally-organized campaign. At a time when mass noncooperation was critical to continue the momentum of the campaign, local activists continued to rely on concentrated, high-risk tactics in a fairly improvisational, uncoordinated manner. Mass arrests, forced disappearances, forced confessions, and routine torture to intimidate regime opponents, combined with the growing body count among activists, began to radicalize and militarize the opposition—all while reinforcing regime cohesiveness. Internationally-based exiles began to call for an international intervention to protect civilians, invoking the recent success in Libya as a model for what might happen in Syria. Simultaneously, defectors from the military began to take up arms to “protect” civilians from *shabiha* militias and infantry.

In the summer of 2011, the official formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a group of defectors from the Syrian army, significantly altered the course of the campaign. Turkey granted the FSA sanctuary in the southern border regions, and as violence on both sides increased throughout the fall of 2011, the uprising began to assume the character of a civil war. Various international actors, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and eventually the United States, the United Kingdom, and France—began to support the FSA with weapons, money, and intelligence. Increasing violence and instances of human rights

abuses attributable to both sides signaled the arrival of foreign jihadi fighters and significantly diminished the effective size of the campaign among Syrians. The militarization of the struggle effectively subverted a nonviolent campaign that was gaining ground but needed more time to coalesce.

The nonviolent phase of the Syrian uprising had been broadly popular in nature—even cutting across sectarian divisions, age, urban-rural distinction, and gender—and had provoked thousands of defections among security forces, and elicited backfire during repressive episodes. State repression was intense, with mass arrests, harassment by *shabiha* militias, sniper fire, and even artillery against unarmed civilians. On the other hand, the beginning of armed struggle meant the end of open support for the opposition by significant numbers of Alawites, Christians, and Druze. The civil war that has ensued since late 2011 has alienated many erstwhile participants and supporters of the revolution and unified the regime. The Assad regime killed about 1,000-5,000 people per month from March to September 2011. This is a horrific figure. But the civil war that followed has claimed the lives of at least 5,000 people *per week*.<sup>32</sup>

Since December 2011, the regime has killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced and over a third of the Syrian population.<sup>33</sup> Because of the massive number of competing militarized factions involved—and the enduring involvement of international actors in actively funding or fighting alongside different factions involved in the conflict—conflict insiders remain skeptical that the war will end in the near future.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Syrian Human Rights Observatory.

<sup>33</sup> This figure, from UNHCR, includes both refugees and internally-displaced persons.

<sup>34</sup> Cunningham, David E. 2006. “Veto Players and Civil War Duration.” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4: 875–92.

If Syria follows historical patterns, the odds are stacked against rebel groups there. Even with direct support from foreign state sponsors, violent campaigns in such circumstances from 1900-2006 succeeded less than 30% of the time. Moreover, despite the staggering casualty rates, the long-term impacts are yet to be fully realized. Civil wars like this one last over nine years, on average. During that time, fatalities, casualties, and displacements are likely to increase, leading to humanitarian catastrophe even worse than what has already transpired. And even if pro-democratic Syrian opposition groups won in the end, its desires for greater freedoms would be highly unlikely to be realized. Less than 4% of victorious rebels from 1900-2006 ushered in democracy within five years of victory, and nearly 50% experienced a relapse into civil war within ten years. In other words, Syria—the most violent of the Arab Spring cases, is also the least likely to produce the results that the Syrian opposition desired.

Any opposition campaign in Syria – nonviolent or violent – was facing incredibly unfavorable odds. When collective action occurs under such circumstances, it is always high-risk and high-cost.<sup>35</sup> As counter-intuitive as it might sound, we argue that civil resistance would have had a greater chance of strategic success even against this regime. But neither time nor regional dynamics were on the side of the nonviolent activists, nor did the international community launch a robust or coordinated enough response to support the nonviolent resisters.

But we strongly doubt that armed resistance would have had any greater chance of removing this regime. Indeed, rather than illustrating the limits of nonviolent struggle,

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<sup>35</sup> Pearlman, *Violence, Nonviolence, and the Palestinian National Movement*; Ritter, Emily H. and Courtenay Conrad. 2016. Preventing and responding to dissent: The observational challenges of explaining strategic repression. *American Political Science Review* 110 (1): 85-99.

Syria's path shows how devastating the choice to turn to armed struggle can be. While Syrians initially took up arms to defend families and villages, choices were later made to launch military offensives and try to seize and hold territory without any sort of political strategy. This has played to Assad's strengths while making the opposition wholly reliant on external armed intervention. Such direct intervention has not been forthcoming, while certain "Friends of the Syrian People" have been supporting unsavory groups. Although perfectly understandable under the circumstances, the choice to engage Assad on his own violent terms has had truly tragic—yet predictable—consequences.

### **Why Did Violent Resistance Work in Libya?**

On February 15 of 2011, the arrest of a human rights campaigner sparked violent protests in Benghazi. The official “Day of Revolt” on February 17 brought thousands of protestors, who called for the end of the Gaddafi regime, into the streets of Benghazi, Ajdabiya, Darnah, and Zintan. Police immediately responded with lethal force, killing more than a dozen protestors. Without regrouping to develop a coordinated civil resistance campaign, the protests rapidly escalated into a militarized rebellion that spread across the country, though Gaddafi refused to step down. On February 20, rebel forces took control of Benghazi. Two days later, Gaddafi delivered several speeches on state TV threatening to hunt down the rebels “alley to alley, house to house.”

In March of 2011, fearing an impending politicide, the United Nations called for the end of attacks on civilians and imposed a no-fly zone over Libya. International military action, enforced primarily by NATO with logistical support from several Arab countries, was authorized and air strikes began. The spring and summer of 2011 featured

intense fighting between rebel fighters and Gaddafi forces, and rebels took control of several important towns. The battle for Tripoli raged on, and Libyan rebels launched a massive offensive on Gaddafi's compound while the intensity of NATO air raids increased.

In early September, Libya's interim rulers met world leaders at a conference in Paris to discuss reshaping Libya. The National Transitional Council (NTC) was recognized as the legitimate government of Libya, and President Obama called for the last of Gaddafi's loyalist forces to surrender. Then in October, gunfights ensued between Gaddafi supporters and NTC forces in Tripoli, and NTC forces captured Sirte, Gaddafi's hometown. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrived in Libya unannounced, and urged militias to unite. On October 20<sup>th</sup>, the NTC military chief confirmed that Gaddafi was killed after being captured near Sirte, and declared the final liberation of Libya.

The Libyan case reveals several important points. First, spontaneous, disorganized mass protests are often highly vulnerable to mass repression. Indeed, Libya never saw a coordinated civil resistance campaign, with defectors turning to violence within days of the uprising. Second, despite their early tactical victories, rebel forces were badly outnumbered by Gaddafi loyalists and may have suffered a catastrophic loss without the intervention of the international community. Third, the Libyan civil war resulted in many thousands of deaths—far more than in cases where activists relied on nonviolent means. And fourth, the current situation in Libya accords with other cases of victorious rebel groups. Militia groups continue to threaten the stability of the country, with the central government teetering on collapse. Moreover, relatively free elections in 2011 have not ushered in institutions that create an effective state, protect basic human and civil rights,

or guard against corruption. Therefore, Libya is certainly a case in which violent resistance succeeded, but at a high price. The success only came with the aid of Western intervention, and uncertain prospects for the future.

### **Learning the Right Lessons about Civil Resistance From the Arab Spring**

Table 2 contains a summary of the cases discussed above. When we compare these recent cases, a few key points become clear. First, the cases where nonviolent resistance predominated attracted far larger and more diverse participation than the armed campaigns. The mass bases of their participation increased the chances of loyalty shifts among security forces and other regime elites. As with many historical campaigns, these cases show that there is, indeed, safety in numbers—particularly when those numbers are broadly representative of the population at large.<sup>36</sup>

Second, the nonviolent campaigns that succeeded used diverse methods of nonviolent action. Tunisia and Egypt both featured high levels of tactical innovation and diversity—from strikes to sit-ins to nonviolent occupations to protests – that diffused throughout both urban and rural areas. In Syria, on the other hand, activists tended to rely on two primary techniques: demonstrations and nonviolent occupations. These are both methods of commission and concentration (the riskiest kinds). In Syria, attempts at strikes, boycotts, and other forms of mass noncooperation were weak, localized, and lacked sustainable infrastructure. The main take-away from nonviolent groups is to avoid being misguided by visual images of demonstrations and attempting to simply replicate those in one’s own context without a broader strategy. Many other methods are available—including lower-risk ones that may have a higher payoff. In fact, the non-

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph DeNardo. 1985. *Safety in Numbers*. Princeton University Press.

dramatic, mundane, and often un-newsworthy aspect of campaign development and movement building – including educational outreach, coalition-building, and fund-raising – are often required before more confrontational tactics like mass protests and economic boycotts can have impact.

Third, where the nonviolent campaign failed in Syria, the armed struggle has not come any closer to removing Assad. If anything, the armed struggle has reinforced his grip on power, strengthened the commitment of his allies in Iran and Russia, and unleashed humanitarian crises on the country and region. And in Libya, where a nonviolent campaign never really coalesced out of sporadic protests and demonstrations, the current scene is far from ideal. Hence, the failure of nonviolent action should not necessarily induce activists to think that militarizing their struggle will allow them to fare better. On the contrary, using armed actions often accelerates mass killings against unarmed civilians, diminishes mass participation, slows down defections, and places a rebel group at a major disadvantage relative to the opponent.

Fourth, using armed action made rebel groups in Libya and Syria dependent on international or regional actors to achieve success. Such dependencies make the campaign far more vulnerable to accusations that they are agents of foreign enemies, further diminishing their popular support base. Moreover, as shown by the United States' reluctance to follow through on promises of significant lethal aid to Syrian rebels under the Obama administration, support from foreign actors is often incredibly fickle and unreliable. Indeed, a failure of imagination made the international community too eager to support armed actors (ineffectively) subverting and undermining the nonviolent campaign in Syria and laying the foundation for an enduring, bloody civil war there.

**Table 2: Summary of Cases**

	Tunisia	Egypt 2011	Libya	Syria Phase 1	Syria Phase 2	Syria Phase 3
<b>Primary Method</b>	Nonviolent	Nonviolent	Violent	Nonviolent	Mixed	Violent
<b>Duration</b>	28 days	18 days, though had its roots in 2005 and 2007 uprisings	9 months	5 months (March 2011-August 2011)	4 months (August 2011-December 2011)	65 months (December 2011-ongoing)
<b>Estimated peak participation (% of total population)</b>	100,000+ (1%)	~ 3 million (3.8%)	200,000+ (3.2%)	~ 400,000 (1.8%)	~ 120,000+ (0.5%)	~ 120,000 including foreign fighters (0.5%)
<b>Diverse participation</b>	Yes. Multi-gender, age, urban-rural, multi-class	Yes. Multi-gender, age, urban-rural, multi-class, multi-religious	No. Leftist/Benghazi orientation	Yes. Multi-gender, age, urban-rural, multi-class, multi-sectarian.	Yes. Multi-gender, age, urban-rural, multi-class, multi-sectarian.	No. Primarily male, Sunni; increasingly Islamist. Many foreign fighters.
<b>Key methods</b>	Concentration, dispersion, commission, omission	Concentration, dispersion, commission, omission	Sporadic protests (concentrations, commission) & armed actions	Mainly nonviolent methods of concentration & commission	Mainly nonviolent methods of concentration & commission /Armed actions	Armed actions; urban guerrilla warfare, hit-and-run attacks
<b>Loyalty shifts</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Fatalities</b>	300-350	300-900	10,000+	2,000+ during primarily nonviolent phase	3,000+	400,000+ and rising since December 2011
<b>Armed groups present?</b>	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>External state support?</b>	No	No	Yes – NATO intervention	No	Yes – Gulf States, UK, US, France, Turkey	Yes – Gulf States, UK, US, France, Turkey
<b>International sanctions?</b>	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Outcome</b>	Success	Success	Success	Failure	Failure	Ongoing

## Conclusion

With popular uprisings and violent conflicts raging worldwide, scholars and policymakers have questioned what role the international community should play in preventing mass atrocities and continuing to promote democracy. From the civil war in Syria to the Gezi Park protests to the Euromaidan to Black Lives Matter, the “emergent citizen” has become a mainstay in discussions about the future of international politics. Yet policymakers often seem at a loss when confronted with the question of how the international community can support civilians seeking to expand their rights and protect themselves from state violence—and in what form that support should come.

Such questions are present in a global context where space for civil society is visible shrinking.<sup>37</sup> Maina Kiai, the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peace assembly and association, has called on governments around the world to embrace civil society groups as partners and to coordinate diplomatic responses when governments try to stifle civil society. In a slightly edgier appeal, before President Barack Obama left office, he initiated a program called “Stand With Civil Society” to press governments and non-governmental actors to devise more innovative and effective ways to support civic groups and activists, notably in restrictive environments.

Despite the transition to the Trump administration, this call to action is an opportunity to take stock of various forms of external assistance (governmental, multi-lateral, non-governmental) to nonviolent civic groups, and to evaluate what is working and what is not. It prods reflection on what external actors can do to create an enabling environment for nonviolent civic mobilization. “Do no harm” remains an anchoring

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<sup>37</sup> Carothers, Thomas and Saskia Brechenmacher. 2014. *Closing space: Democracy and human rights support under fire*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

principle for this work – local civic actors are in the best position to determine whether, and which forms of aid are appropriate, and to evaluate the risks associated with external support. Multilateral demarches to governments engaged in crackdowns against civil society, combined with coordinated support to civil society has been effective in places like Serbia, where a “donors forum” coordinated support to the nonviolent opposition. Non-state actors, including philanthropic organizations with the ability to disburse funds more quickly, and with fewer strings attached to local community-based organizations, youth groups and media start-ups are often better positioned than some governments to support nonviolent campaigns and movements.

Support to civil society by diplomats, development practitioners, and policymakers can take many forms: monitoring trials of political prisoners, engaging in solidarity actions to support the right of peaceful assembly, helping connect civil society to reform-minded government officials, providing alternative channels of information, targeting warnings to security officials who might be tempted to use lethal force against nonviolent protestors, and supporting general capacity-building for civic groups and independent media are only a few. These and other “tools” available to diplomats, which range from low-risk to more pro-actively interventionist, are highlighted in the *Diplomat’s Handbook for Democratic Development Support*, a practical field guide that also includes over a dozen detailed case studies of effective (and non-effective) examples of external support to civil society and transitioning governments. A companion guide, *Military Engagement*, shows how the armed forces from democratic countries can positively influence the behaviors of security forces in non-democratic and transitioning countries.

Strengthening civil society is not only a precondition for sustained democratic development. It is also a way to buffer civilians from the worst excesses of violence originating from regime and non-state armed actors. Policymakers focused on atrocities prevention and the “responsibility to protect” doctrine should take note. As Table 2 demonstrates, civilian casualties may be far fewer in cases where opposition actors opt for active nonviolent resistance – versus armed struggle or mixed approaches – to challenge repressive regimes and foreign occupations. While it is naïve to assume that regimes will refrain from the use of massive violence against nonviolent protestors – Syria 2011 and Iran 2009 are only the most recent cases of regimes’ demonstrated willingness to gun down peaceful challengers – the data nevertheless suggests that helping civic groups maintain nonviolent discipline in these difficult environments, and familiarizing them with the broad spectrum of nonviolent “weapons” they can use to mobilize around repression, is a way to insulate them from the most extreme forms of violence.

In conclusion, the moment may be ripe to contemplate whether there is a normative “responsibility to assist” nonviolent activists and civic groups before “protecting” civilians, including via military force, becomes a moral imperative that may or may not result in any concerted international action. Campaigns of nonviolent civil resistance are (and must remain) homegrown phenomena, initiated, directed, and resolved by those living on the ground in the affected countries. But the international community has often wittingly or unwittingly undermined nonviolent activists by swiftly and enthusiastically supporting armed actors when they arrive on the scene. Meanwhile, some governments turn a blind eye to or actively supporting the most egregious forms of

repression against unarmed activists. The tragic example of Syria is a case in point. While it is inaccurate to state that there was no international support to Syrian nonviolent activists and civic groups, the rapid escalation of the Syrian struggle from principally nonviolent to gut-wrenchingly violent raises the question of what external actors, governmental and non-governmental, could have done better or differently. Moreover, this case illustrates the types of atrocities a state can wage against unarmed civilians—those engaged in resistance and those who are not – when it receives military and diplomatic support from powerful state allies.

Instead of demonstrating the ineffectiveness of nonviolent action, the case of Syria highlights the moral and strategic imperative of developing more flexible, nimble forms of support to civic actors and groups under siege, and to develop platforms to coordinate this kind of support regionally and through multilateral forums. Local civic actors will continue to be the principal authors of their own destinies. But external actors have an important role to play in assuring that there is space for civil resistance to have a fighting chance. As more and more people around the world embrace the lessons of civil resistance, they should embrace both the positive examples and the cautionary tales.