New public diplomacy as a tool for revolution

Coined in the 1960s, diplomacy originally encompassed state-to-state interactions and relations between a nation's leaders and diplomats of other sovereign states.[2] These activities, including exchange programs, language training, and media outreach, were aimed at achieving the public diplomacy goals: 1) an improved public image and 2) influencing foreign policy to the nation's benefit.[3] This type of diplomacy is still in use today, though a new hybrid form of diplomacy has emerged: public diplomacy. This public diplomacy is similar to public affairs, where governments attempt to sway the opinions of their own nations. In contrast, it is used to negotiate with the publics of other nations as a hybrid form of international relations.

Importantly for the Arab Spring, this public diplomacy is no longer the exclusive domain of high-level officials and governments. It is now a tool that can be utilized by sub-national actors ranging from common protests to terrorist organizations. Globalization and the proliferation of media and communication technology have empowered these sub-national actors and non-governmental organizations to manufacture their own type of public diplomacy to engage with lay audiences at both local and international levels. It is no longer necessary to have a government's financial resources and a large public profile to obtain radio and television slots. Anonymous messages can be sent for free on any number of websites and social media platforms and reach large audiences. This ability to influence large groups of people has empowered sub-national actors and increased their national and international legitimacy.[4] Tunisian protestors, partially inspired by Iranian protestors' use of social networking platforms to bypass regime control on the media during the 2009 uprising in Iran, were quick to use the modes of media available to them, especially Facebook and blogs, to start their own public diplomacy campaign to spread their message quickly and build legitimacy.[5, 6]

Background

The Tunisian uprising started when an unemployed fruit seller, Mohammad Bouazizi, lit himself on fire after Tunisian security forces confiscated his produce. The horror of Bouazizi's act struck a chord with Tunisia's young population, many of whom were in similar situations of un/underemployment.[7] At the time of the Tunisian revolution, an estimated 44 percent of young people aged 15 to 29, including university graduates, were unemployed.[8] Protests against police brutality and high unemployment quickly expanded to condemn government corruption and oppression as well. Images from protests in the southern part of the country saturated the Internet and the revolution swiftly spread to the streets of the capital, Tunis. In a mere twenty-nine days, Tunisians were able to overthrow the dictator of twenty-three years. It was the first revolution of what came to be called the Arab Spring and it was not long before other countries followed in Tunisia's footsteps.

The game

History has shown that the reactions of the national military or security forces often determine whether a popular revolution lives or dies.[9] The national forces are a tool used by a regime to maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. During civil uprisings, clashes between protestors and security forces often turn violent. This results in a polarizing effect where protestors see the security forces as synonymous with the regime and therefore, they must be destroyed along with it. In turn, members of the security forces find themselves in a position where their safety, and that of their families, is tied to the survival of the regime. No longer able to remain neutral, security

THE NEW PUBLIC DIPLOMACY:
THE WINNING MOVE IN REVOLUTIONS

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Abstract

The countries of the Arab Spring have taken differing approaches and have experienced conflicting outcomes. Egyptian and Tunisian protestors utilized public diplomacy as a political weapon while other states failed to realize its potential. In particular, social media were used to communicate with local actors, the military, and the international community, allowing protesters to disseminate their messages of non-violence. As a result, the revolutionary movement was not alienating to the citizenry or to the security forces. This paper will explore the use of public diplomacy by nonviolent protesters to 'win' the security forces and prevent their uprising from descending into a civil war.

Key Words

Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Arab Spring, elections, security forces, rhetoric, framing, civil-military relations, protest

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Introduction

As the Arab Spring unfolds, it is impossible to overlook the diverging paths the uprisings have taken and their strikingly different results. Why were the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions successful while those in Libya and Syria are facing protracted struggles? In all cases, protestors in each country were connected by a common desire for self-rule and freedom from oppressive regimes, and they all faced seemingly insurmountable odds against dictators who had proven their willingness to use force to remain in power. Where the protestors differ is in the response to the Libyan and Syrian governments' violent oppression of the nascent civil uprisings. Due to several factors, such as government monopoly of the media and the shifting allegiance of factions of the military, the Syrian and Libyan conflicts descended into civil war, one of which continues to this day. Tunisia and Egypt chose, with some small exceptions, to push forward with peaceful protests. Those tactics led to the swiftest and most successful uprisings. One standout reason for the successes, and comparatively low level of violence, was the protestors' appropriation and use of public diplomacy as a political weapon. The protestors' efforts were so effective that they were able to compete successfully with the dictatorship for the loyalty of the security forces. This paper will explore the use of public diplomacy by non-violent protestors to 'win' the security forces and aid in the overthrow of dictatorial regimes. Though applicable in both Egypt and Tunisia, only Tunisia will be discussed in depth.[1]

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1 The author was in Tunisia as a Boren Fellow from September 2010 through June 2011 and witnessed many aspects of the revolution first hand.

2   Jorge Heine, "On the manner of Practising the New Diplomacy," The Center for International Governance Innovation Working Papter No. 11, October 2006.
3   University of Southern California, "What is Public Diplomacy?" Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School. Accessed May 27, 2012. http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/index.php/about/what_is_pd/.
4   University of Southern California, "What is Public Diplomacy?"
5   "Editorial: Iran's Twitter Revolution," *Washington Times*. June 16, 2009, accessed August 2, 2012. http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jun/16/irans-twitter-revolution/.
    Several Facebook pages were started in the weeks after Mohammad Bouaziz's self-immolation. These pages were originally intended to share information within Tunisia but, since Facebook was not censored by the government and is commonly used in several other countries, it became a platform for disseminating information outside of Tunisia's borders. Bloggers, such as Lina Ben Mhenni, who was in Regueb and Kasserine and provided photos and information about the massacres of civilians by the security forces, and Slim Amamou, who was jailed for criticizing the regime in his blog, provided information and a public face to the uprising.
6   Michele Penner Angrist, "Morning in Tunisia – The Frustrations in the Arab World Boil Over," *Foreign Affairs*. January 16, 2011. http://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/67181?page=show.
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8   The World Bank, "Tunisia Overview," The World Bank. Accessed August 2, 2012. http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tunisia/overview.
9   David D. Kirckpatrick, "Military Backs New leaders in Tunisia," *New York Times* (New York, NY). Jan. 16, 2011.

personnel are forced to choose a side, and may be forced to commit acts they would not normally in order for their chosen side to win. Tunisian protesters were able to avoid this polarization during the Arab Spring protests by avoiding violent confrontations and focusing instead on winning the support of the security forces. The uprising became a competition between the protesters and the regime for the loyalty of the armed forces.

The players

At the time of the revolution, Tunisia's security forces were comprised of three parts: the presidential security forces, the police, and the military. Of these three, the presidential security forces were the strongest part of the Tunisian security apparatus. Directly controlled by the president, they numbered somewhere between 120,000 to 180,000, or 1 security force officer for every 55 Tunisians.[10]

The police had higher numbers (~250,000) but far less training than the presidential security forces. Many of them were young Tunisians who chose that occupation due to lack of other viable options. Even so, the salary for a police officer in Tunisia was not enough to support a family.

The military was the smallest part of the security structure in Tunisia. President Ben Ali kept the military small, between 36,000 to 45,000 troops, with most of the soldiers serving in conscripted service.[11] In addition, the military was neutered politically in an effort to avoid military coups, making it unique from other Arab militaries due to its unusual separation from the autocratic regime.[12, 13] Internal funding for the army was minimal, barely totaling 1.4 percent of Tunisia's GDP, and was the lowest in the Arab world .[14] In comparison, the presidential security forces received 50 percent more funding than all of the military branches combined.[15] Despite this, the small force was considered professional and distinctly apolitical.

The loyalty of the presidential security forces was unwaveringly with President Ben Ali but the allegiances of the police and the army were more tenuous. While these forces may have been willing to maintain the status quo, using violence against their fellow citizens – especially when those citizens were not a direct threat – was far beyond what these forces were prepared and trained to do. Recognizing the importance of having the security forces remain neutral, the protesters geared their movement and their message towards ensuring that the army and police were not forced to choose the side of the regime in order to ensure their own safety. The revolution was not a conflict between the protesters and the regime, but a competition over who could win the loyalty of the police and army.

The rules

Tunisian protesters were quick to realize that opposing President Ben Ali with violence would almost surely result in crushing reprisals by a government with far superior military capabilities. Non-violent conflict resolution theorist Gene Sharp argues that using violence against dictatorial regimes is the exact opposite of what civil uprising should do. According to him, "By placing confidence in violent means, one has chosen the very type of struggle with which the oppressors nearly always have superiority."[16] Acknowledging President Ben Ali's military superiority, Tunisian protesters were forced to look to other tools to combat government control. Their answer was a mixture of non-violence and public diplomacy, something Sharp calls "political defiance."

The tools

To win over regime supporters, protesters needed to undermine regime legitimacy while enhancing their own validity. This was divided into two primary tasks – widely disseminate the protesters' message, and ensure that the protests were conducted in a way that avoided alienating Tunisian citizens and the security forces. This necessitated a fast, well-organized public diplomacy platform and a strong message of non-violent reform.

A question of legitimacy

Dictatorships rely on the support of the masses and receive their political power from the authority endowed by the people.[17] Remove the population's support, especially the support of members of the security forces, and the dictatorship will struggle to function and become incapable of defending itself. Tunisian protesters recognized this and began to exploit this vulnerability. Initial protests in response to Mohammad Bouazizi's self-immolation were impromptu, but in a matter of days, democracy advocates began a public diplomacy campaign to highlight regime abuses by posting and widely disseminating photos and cell phone videos of regime violence. This included not only forums on Facebook and blogs but also included sending this information to both major and minor news outlets round the world.[18] This was done in conjunction with strong messages conveying the protesters adherence to strict non-violence with the aims of 1) encouraging recalcitrant or timid citizens to join in supporting the protests and 2) swaying those who were working with the regime (either in a civilian capacity or in the security forces) to either withdraw their support for the regime or shift their support to the opposition. Combined, these two tools created a form of public diplomacy, with protesters' intent first shared via Facebook and Twitter and then confirmed with their continued non-violent actions.

Social media as a tool of public diplomacy

For outreach, the Tunisian protesters turned to the one form of media that the regime did not absolutely control – the Internet. Ben Ali's government dominated the print, radio, and television media in Tunisia. In fact, the portrayal of the regime by most Tunisian newspapers was almost sycophantic. Freedom House ranked both the press and the Internet as "not free" for 2011.[19] Television was slightly less censored due to the proliferation of satellite television that beamed in channels such as Al-Jazeera. However, this effect was mitigated by the fact that local news stations were severely restricted and reporters from foreign-based networks were closely monitored.[20]

Tunisia's high Internet penetration was certainly a factor in the effectiveness of the protesters public diplomacy campaign. At first glance, the Internet does not seem like an appropriate medium for anti-government messages in Tunisia. Popular sites such as YouTube were blocked and search inquiries about Tunisia and the ruling regime were redirected to benign web pages. However, Facebook and Twitter were available and widely used, especially by the youth. As of December 31, 2011, one in five Tunisians was on Facebook, a saturation rate that guaranteed the majority of the population was in contact with someone connected to the revolutionary platform.[21]

Although claiming Tunisia's revolution was a Facebook revolution may be an overstatement, it is impossible to deny that Facebook was a key tool used. The same day as Mr. Bouaziz's self-immolation, videos began to appear on Facebook with mobile phone footage of the resulting protests in Sidi Bouzied. These were shared from page to page, and within 24 hours, the information about the unrest from the South had spread into the larger coastal cities. As the movement grew, pages were created to help protect the identities of those that wanted to share information on the unrest. Some examples include,
"Smile, you're not from Sidi Bouzied"[22] (بوزيد سيدي من لست فأنت كثرأ ابتسم)
and, "People burn in Tunisia Mr. President" (الرئيس سيادة يا روح في يحرق تونس شعب)

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[10] Clement M. Henry and Robert Springborg, "The Tunisian Army: Defending the Beachhead of Democracy in the Arab World," *Huffington Post*, Jan. 26, 2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/clement-m-henry/the-tunisian-army-defendi_b_814254.html.

[11] Steven A. Cook, "The Calculations of Tunisia's Military," *Foreign Policy*. January 20, 2011. http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/20/the_calculations_of_tunisias_military.

[12] Kirckpatrick, "Military Backs New leaders in Tunisia"

[13] Clement M. Henry and Robert Springborg, "The Tunisian Army: Defending the Beachhead of Democracy in the Arab World," *Huffington Post*, Jan. 26, 2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/clement-m-henry/the-tunisian-army-defendi_b_814254.html.

[14] CIA World Factbook, "Tunisia," Accessed May 27, 2012. Figures dated 2006. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ts.html.

[15] CIA World Factbook, "Tunisia,"

[16] Gene Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation*, (Boston: The Albert Einstein Institution, 2010), 4.

[17] Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation*, 18-19.

[18] Dr Noureddine Miladi, Al-Jazeera, "Tunisia, A media lead revolution?" Al-Jazeera. Accessed August 2, 2012. http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/01/2011116142317498666.html.

[19] Freedom House, "Tunisia," Freedom House, Accessed June 7, 2012. http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2011/tunisia.

[20] Freedom House, "Tunisia: Freedom of the Press 2010," Freedom House, Accessed August 6, 2012. http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2010/tunisia.

[21] Internet World Stats, "Africa," Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics, Accessed June 7, 2012. http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#tn.

[22] http://www.facebook.com/ebtasem.

These pages showed videos of protests in Sidi Bouzied,[23] the lawyer strikes, and photos of injuries allegedly caused by security forces. Videos shared via Facebook were posted to YouTube by those outside the Tunisian zone of censorship and made available to the international public. In addition, bloggers added their voices to the din, providing public opinion and additional detailed information about incidents occurring across the country.[24]

For those without easy Internet access, SMS and Twitter connected them to the protests. Twitter accounts like SBZ News focused on spreading information about Tunisian events that were not covered by major news outlets.[25] Often, those who had Internet would tweet or text information to those without access. This informal communications network became a clearinghouse for raw information that allowed people to confirm stories from more than one source and dispel propaganda from extreme factions on either side. In addition, news networks were able to find and verify protests had occurred, broadcast incidents of violence by the regime, and source newsfeeds with first-hand footage and accounts, bypassing the state controlled media apparatus.[26]

Most importantly, this free access to uncensored information painted a clear picture of the protestors and the regime despite media repression. Secrecy, a trademark of the regime, was avoided whenever possible. Instead, the anonymity of social media was used to ensure that protester motivations and intentions were clear and widely known because the protest movement *wanted* members of the security forces and those outside the inner circle to know their intentions.

Non-violence as public diplomacy

With a strong communications platform underfoot, Tunisian protestors had to ensure that the images disseminated via the web conveyed a message that furthered the uprising's mission rather than undermined it. The holistic nature of their communications platform made sending specific messages impossible. Instead, the conduct of the protestors themselves became their message. Adherence to non-violence was probably one of the most strategically important decisions the Tunisian protestors made. Well-organized, non-violent protests provided pre-packaged messages of non-violent reform to the general public and security forces. The regime's clumsy and violent responses only further strengthened the legitimacy of the protest movement and earned them the sympathy of the population, the police and military, and the international community.[27]

A key diplomatic move to this non-violent approach was ensuring that the police and military did not become targets. Non-violence was necessary to convey to the security forces that the protestors were fighting against the regime, but meant no harm to people representing the regime. When uprisings turn violent, police must use force to protect their lives – making their survival synonymous with the survival of the regime. Understanding this, protest coordinators strongly advocated non-violent protests and asked that people attending manifestations self-police to ensure that such gatherings did not degrade into violence. Protestors continually affirmed their non-violent intentions by maintaining high standards of behavior. Protestors would stop looters they saw in the streets and 'neighborhood watches' were arranged by citizens to guard stores and residential areas at night from looters and agent provocateurs.[28] Some violence did occur, but it rarely escalated past the odd thrown stone. As a result, Tunisian protests were marked by their restraint.

This maintenance of social order and discipline was key to reassuring the military and police that the protests threatened the regime but not the protestors' personal safety, as well as the safety of their families or the security of the society as a whole. By clearly articulating their position, the protestors changed the police's and military's situation from one where their safety was tied to the survival of the regime to one where they had the freedom to choose sides based on beliefs rather than necessity. When placed in this neutral position, and able to see the conduct of both sides, the army and the police began to side with a non-violent public and turn against the regime.

Shifting power relations

As the Tunisian protests quickly gained strength, several things began to happen. First, the heavy-handed response of the regime juxtaposed with the non-violent conduct of the protestors started to alienate Ben Ali's supporters. They shifted from supporting the regime to becoming fence-sitters or in some cases, supporters of the opposition. Neutral parties, disgusted by the regimes viscous crackdown, began to support the uprising.

Second, the police and military began to waiver in their support of Ben Ali's regime. It was his presidential security forces, separate from the army and police and fiercely loyal to the president, who were responsible for the majority of the violence. The Tunisian police and military forces were not trained in crowd control and had severe reservations about using force against their fellow Tunisians. Being asked to use increasing levels of violence against staunchly non-violent protestors, the police became increasingly alienated from the regime and its goals. This is elegantly portrayed a now infamous picture, which depicts a Tunisian policeman with tears streaming down his face, pointing his gun into the crowd. This alienation was only compounded by the fact that the protestors had made their non-violent intentions clear.[29]

Conclusion

Tunisia's revolution came to a dramatic conclusion on January 14, 2011. The day before, a beleaguered President Ben Ali ordered the leader of the Tunisian military, General Rashid Ammar, to use live rounds against the tens of thousands of protestors crowding the streets of the capital city of Tunis. The army had already made clear its disdain for the violent tactics employed by Ben Ali's presidential guard, and no doubt aware of the repercussions of firing into unarmed crowds, the general refused. Instead, he withdrew his forces from the streets and informed the president that he could no longer guarantee the leader's safety. It is believed that it was this declaration that led to the president's flight a day later, ending the revolution in the protestors' favor.[30]

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[29] At the time of the revolution, the average Tunisian police officer made between 350 – 400 Tunisian Dinar a month. Roughly that of a secretary and not a wage sufficient to support a family. Noureddine Hlaoui, "Quels Salaires gagnet les Tunisiens?"Businessnews.com.tn. Accessed August 6, 2012. http://www.businessnews.com.tn/details_article.php?t=519&a=19911&temp=1&lang&w
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[28] Al-Jazeera and Affiliates. "Tunisia Gripped by Uncertainty" Al-Jazeera. January 16, 2011. Accessed May 30, 2012. At the time of the revolution, the average Tunisian police officer made between 350 – 400 Tunisian dinar.

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