

Conclusion

On a sunny December afternoon in 2011, I arrived in downtown Los Angeles for an event billed as “International Human Rights Day, Occupy LA, Solidarity with a Free Syria.” The park surrounding City Hall, recently the site of the Occupy LA movement, was enclosed with a mesh fence after the movement’s eviction. However, the western steps were still open for demonstrations, and a huge banner stuck between two planters let me know I was in the right place. It read, in all caps, *SYRIANS ARE DYING, WHERE IS THE MEDIA?* A few men I recognized from past protests for Syria were standing together to one side. In future months, we would greet each other with enthusiastic handshakes. On this day, they simply murmured hello and turned back to their conversation.

I looked around and spotted a petite young woman with a glowing face wearing sunglasses and a Free Syria T-shirt. Spotting my own shirt, which displayed a photograph of Hamza al-Khateeb, Syria’s most well-known victim of regime brutality at the time, she bounded over to me. In an Arabic accent, she asked, “Are you Syrian?” I had not seen her before; I learned later that this was because she was visiting from her hometown in Texas. This organizer, whom I will call “R.,” gave me an enthusiastic hug and kissed me on the cheek. R. then excused herself, yelling “MIC CHECK!” to the group. Surrounding youth sporting ripped jeans and bandanas echoed back “MIC CHECK!” in the call-and-repeat style of the Occupy movement. R. then asked the crowd of about thirty people or so to gather in front of the banner for a short “teach-in” about Syria.

She began by asking, “What would you say to a father whose son was killed? What would you say to a mother whose children are being killed, mutilated, and tortured? What do you *say* to the *free world*?” After a pause, she answered her own question: “Why are you not standing in solidarity for Syria?” She described how in the Syrian city of Dara’a, forty protesters were being killed

every day – protesters just like us. She then taught the crowd a chant from the front lines: “*Allah! Suriya! Hurriya-wa-bas!*” meaning “God! Syria! Freedom only!” as in, freedom is all we want. R. then pleaded, “Cry their pain. Be one of them. *Speak for them.*”

I have thought of R. often since that day. During a time when many were still too afraid to come out against the regime, R. was speaking out, using her voice to condemn the regime through a megaphone. At the time, I did not fully appreciate how brave such an act really was, but that was only the half of it. I attempted to reach out to her a few years later through Facebook for an interview, but I did not see or talk to R. after that. It turned out that she had left the United States to venture home to Syria and volunteer in places like Idlib, a liberated province that the Assad and Putin regimes were bombing into oblivion. Through her social media posts, I gleaned that she was publicizing information, putting her contacts on the ground in touch with helpers abroad, and distributing aid with her own hands. R., like so many of her conationals, had become part of a transnational auxiliary force for the revolution as a broadcaster, a broker, and a volunteer on the front lines.

As R.’s story illustrates, diaspora mobilization during the Arab Spring was about far more than retweeting headlines or holding demonstrations on the weekends. Instead, scores of anti-regime activists took on the revolution as a calling, fighting tooth and nail to support their compatriots. By helping to facilitate revolutionary political change and supply humanitarian relief, these activists found their voices as home-country nationals demanding freedom, as members of the free world with civil liberties, and as global citizens vying for universal human rights. As the previous chapters show, by broadcasting their allies’ plight to the outside world, representing the cause to the media and policymakers, brokering between allies, remitting all manner of resources homeward, and volunteering in person, these diaspora movements brandished voice *after* exit as a weapon against tyranny and authoritarianism. They did so for a range of reasons, including out of nationalistic pride, concern for their relatives and hometowns, a belief in human dignity, indignation and outrage over regime brutality, and a desire to realize long-standing interests. Whatever the reasons, their interventions in home-country conflicts and crises demonstrate that diaspora mobilization is not something that observers should take for granted. As the *Arab Spring Abroad* argues, the ability of activists to help their allies during periods of acute need is highly contingent. By pinpointing the conditions giving rise to voice after exit, this book sheds new light on the conditions under which diaspora activists become transnational forces for change.

By comparing diasporas’ collective action before and during the Libyan, Syrian, and Yemeni revolutions from the United States and Britain, I find that fear and mistrust resulting from *transnational repression* and *conflict transmission* can divide and silence anti-regime populations, thereby suppressing members’ voices in democratic states. I then show how *quotidian disruptions*

in the home-country upend these transnational deterrents by lowering the costs and risks associated with voice, motivating diaspora members to go public in spite of the risks, and by bringing people together against a common threat. During the Arab Spring, quotidian disruptions enabled anti-regime members to engage in public, collective claims-making against regimes and their abusive practices, albeit to different degrees over time. Yet, I also argue that diaspora movements need to do more than just project their voices on the streets of their host-country in order to meet their goals. As the final chapters demonstrate, activists require *resource conversion* and *geopolitical support* in order to contribute in meaningful ways to rebellion and relief. Otherwise, diaspora movements will be left without a way to support their allies in times when their help is most desperately needed.

By providing a new explanation of when and how diaspora movements mobilize against authoritarian regimes, this book demonstrates that such anti-regime activists are neither irrelevant to the study of contentious politics nor the ready-made “long-distance nationalists” who meddle in international affairs (Anderson 1998; Huntington 2004). Instead, I show that although the trappings of globalization make transnational activism faster and easier than ever before, not all movements are equally advantaged to intervene in the homeland. Rather, members’ simultaneous embeddedness in home-country conditions after exit, their varied capacities to convert resources to politicized causes, and the different degrees of geopolitical support they receive for home-country liberation impact their transnational practices in significant ways. By specifying the conditions under which diaspora members come together against tyranny and suffering, the arguments presented here have a number of implications for future research.

THE VALUE OF A TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

The first implication of this book is the tremendous value of taking a transnational perspective of contentious politics. Revolutionary episodes like the Arab Spring are not just country-specific or region-wide events, but globalized phenomena that diffuse and activate constituencies across national communities. By systematically accounting for the “transboundary” dynamics of contention (Lawson 2019), we see more clearly how anti-authoritarian insurgency is fundamentally dependent on how and to what extent activists are able to channel their claims outward, acquire resources, and build alliances on a global scale (Keck and Sikkink 1998). As persons who “keep a foot in two worlds,” as Peggy Levitt (2003) posits, diaspora members play pivotal roles in these processes. They are often the first to respond to conflicts and crises, fill in gaps in the international response along the way, and the last to leave the scene (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015). Yet, studies of transnational activism overwhelmingly focus on the work done by formal nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) at the expense of diaspora movements. This is a major oversight, given

the fact that diaspora activists are often responsible for supplying NGOs with the connectivity and insider information these organizations require to do their jobs. Accordingly, scholars would do well to pay serious attention to the role of diasporas in the dynamics of cross-border contention.

Building on this point, I echo calls by transnationalism researchers to be more conscious of the “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) that delimits what topics and actors we view as important objects of study. Of course, state borders matter a great deal in distinguishing liberal territories from illiberal ones and shaping the character of social and political life. Yet, the tendency of movement scholars to treat the dynamics of contention as a contained phenomenon has led to the neglect of the transnational alliances and geopolitics that shape resistance movements.¹ All notable rebellions in the modern world, from the anti-fascist movement in Spain, to “Third-World” liberation struggles, to demands by organized labor and the US Civil Rights Movement, have gained the attention of foreign supporters and detractors.² The framework elaborated suggests the importance of investigating how groups divided by social, political, legal, and physical borders transcend the boundaries that are designed to keep allies apart (Adler 2019; Russo 2018; C. Smith 1996). As scholars continue to debate the causes and consequences of events ranging from the French Revolution to the insurgencies underway in Libya, Syria, and Yemen today, it will be useful to investigate how peer patronage and foreign sponsorship impact “local” social movements.

Applying a transnational perspective also brings needed attention to the ways in which states and other illiberal authorities adapt to the threats posed by diaspora activism and act back on their nationals to impede voice. As this book shows, just as transnational *advocacy* poses a threat to illiberal authorities (Keck and Sikkink 1998), so too does transnational *repression* pose a powerful counter-threat to anti-regime activists – and not only for Libyans and Syrians (Hilsum 2012; Pearlman 2016, 2017; Shain 2007). A growing literature on this topic shows that transnational repression continues to present pervasive dangers to activists from Belarus, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the former Soviet states, among other places (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Farooq 2015; Lemon 2019; Michaelsen 2018; Glasius 2018; Williamson 2015; see also Brand 2006; Miller 1981; Shain 2005 [1989]). This is a pressing subject of investigation as regimes deploy internet-based technologies, Interpol, and accusations of terrorism to impede the voices of human rights advocates around the globe.

¹ For a good example of a work that accounts for transnational alliances in anti-authoritarian mobilization, see Chang (2015).

² For sources on the transnational dynamics of these rebellions, see Carroll (1994), Lindsley (1943), Orwell (2015[1952]), Richardson (2015), McAdam (1998), and Skrentny (1998). More research is needed on foreign state support of movements, for example, Muammar al-Gaddafi’s sponsorship of the Irish Republican Army and Louis Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam.

Of course, it is not only authoritarian states that engage in such practices. This study also points to how democracies participate in transnational systems of repression and social control (Blanton 1999; Gordon 1987). The ongoing war on terror's impact is not only detrimental to realization of Middle Easterners' civil liberties (Cainkar 2009, 2018; Maghbouleh 2017; Naber 2006, 2012; Pennock 2017); as this book shows, it also impedes their abilities to support democracy, human rights, and humanitarian relief in their homelands (Chaudhary 2021; Chaudhary and Moss 2019; Nagel 2002). If the West continues to justify its foreign policies on the so-called promotion of global goods such as democracy and freedom, the least that these governments can do is facilitate diaspora mobilization for humanitarian aid and human rights. Sociologists and policymakers alike would do well to pay further attention to these dynamics.

A transnational perspective of social movement activism can provide a useful framework to study mobilization *within* the nation-state as well. With so many territories internally divided by invisible but highly policed boundaries (Simes 2021), the question of when movement actors cross borders in a transgressive fashion is a critical one. In the US civil rights movement, which continues to serve as a bedrock in the study of contentious politics, northern Black activists and their multiracial, interfaith allies played a significant role supporting high-risk activism in the south. They did so by remitting resources to their repressed counterparts for bonds and legal fees and by participating in direct action campaigns, such as the 1961 Freedom Rides (McAdam 1986, 1988, 1999 [1982]). Crossing state lines for civil rights was extremely risky during this period due to the major differences in laws, policing, and white vigilante racism by state. Thus, while the border-crossing characteristics of movements are sometimes taken for granted, we would do well to remember that the literal movement of movements was absolutely essential in defeating Jim Crow. A transnational perspective reminds us of the importance of free movement in combatting apartheid and dehumanization, both within and beyond the nation-state.

QUOTIDIAN DISRUPTIONS BEYOND REVOLUTION

This book further contributes to studies of contention and social change by showing how quotidian disruptions (Snow et al. 1998) mobilize previously silenced and divided diaspora members by reducing the costs of activism, making members willing to take risks, and creating new solidarities against common threats. However, regime repression and revolutionary uprisings are not the only types of disruption that can mobilize people across borders. Environmental disasters, which are increasingly common owing to climate change, can have congruent effects. For instance, Grady Vaughan's (2020) research on Turkmenistan and diaspora politics finds that as of 2020, members of diaspora communities in Turkey, Cyprus, and the United States "have initiated a rare wave of demonstrations in response to Ashgabat's inadequate

response to a raft of man-made and natural disasters.” In light of President Berdimuhamedov’s poor response to floods and economic crises, diaspora members’ grievances have been further exacerbated by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. In an effort to assert their power, Turkmen authorities have actually confiscated and withheld medical aid donated by the diaspora. Because Turkmenistan’s regime is infamous for enacting transnational repression, voice after exit in the diaspora has been relatively rare, just as it was for Syrians and Libyans before the Arab Spring. Yet, as of 2020, Turkmen abroad have begun to protest against Berdimuhamedov and have vowed to overcome their internal divisions (Vaughan 2020). Accordingly, the overlaying of urgent crises and fresh grievances may push diaspora members to engage in high-risk activism (Hechter et al. 2016) even when the chances of regime change are low. Additional comparative work within and across regions will help us to understand how the dynamics described here transcend regions and revolutionary waves.

It is also the case that diaspora members may come to exercise voice after exit when home-countries experience quotidian disruptions in the form of liberalization and democratic reforms.³ As respondents reported in the Libyan and Syrian cases, perceived openings in their home-countries in 2004 and 2005 motivated some anti-regime members to embrace voice in new ways. However, the question of whether voice endures and grows in a community will depend on whether liberalization becomes sustained and meaningful in practice. If regimes do make meaningful progress toward reform, then we can expect these changes to impact voice in positive ways abroad. Otherwise, diaspora members are likely to remain skeptical of using voice as an independent means of expression – or else they may learn the hard way that doing so will put them in danger.

In democratic and semi-democratic sending-states, a key factor shaping the emergence of diaspora voice is whether home-country governments actively encourage transnational practices such as voting, bond buying, and migrant investment in public goods, as in the case of Mexico and Israel (Bada 2014; Goldring 2004; Lainer-Vos 2013; Shain 2007). In cases such as these, the initiation of meaningful political rights at home may extend into transnational citizenship and sustained political engagement in the diaspora (Gamlen 2014; Délano and Gamlen 2014). However, home-country attempts to foster diaspora engagement do not necessarily promote free-wheeling voice. Lauren Duquette-Rury (2020) finds, for instance, that migrants’ efforts to support their hometowns with public good provision fail when local governments are disengaged and exclusive to ordinary citizens. Furthermore, out-of-country voting may not be the obvious indicator of transnational citizenship that it seems (Pearlman 2014). Research by Elizabeth Wellman (2021) demonstrates that

³ I thank Dr. Erin McDonnell, Kellogg Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame, for encouraging me to address this point.

while one hundred countries across the world have extended out-of-country voting rights over the past thirty years, not all of these citizens abroad are franchised in a meaningful way. She finds instead that access to out-of-country voting for members of African nations is often selective and precarious. Governments have also *reversed* these rights when diaspora voters have shown insufficient support for incumbent parties.⁴ In light of these nuances, scholars should avoid being overly focused on home-country voting as the true signifier of transnational citizenship. Instead, we need to look at the broader range of practices that signify diaspora political engagement in the homeland, including both institutionalized and contentious forms of political action.

This book also serves as a cautionary tale against labeling diaspora remitters as harbingers of peace or war (Smith and Stares 2007). When combatting totalitarian regimes and mass killings, armed resistance is often the only possible means to pursue liberal change. Accordingly, diaspora activists' support for Western military intervention needs to be evaluated with care by pundits and peace activists. UN-mandated interventions in Libya, for instance, were regarded by Libyans on the ground and in the diaspora as the only way to defend civilians against slaughter and uphold the Responsibility to Protect (Moss 2016a). Because humanitarian intervention and imperialistic interests collide in the geopolitical arena (Bob 2019), more attention to the ways in which diaspora activists manage these tensions is needed.

Relatedly, the blame that diasporas often receive for manipulating foreign affairs is deeply misplaced. While exile-lobbyist Ahmad Chalabi, who helped to justify the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, has been vilified as an example of a manipulative, scheming long-distance nationalist run amok, such characterizations obscure the true source of Chalabi's power. He was, in fact, placed on the CIA and State Department payrolls in the US government's years-long effort to overthrow Saddam Hussein (Roston 2008; Shain 2007; Vanderbush 2014). Without geopolitical support from the United States, Chalabi would have been like many of his counterparts longing for regime change in other countries – a lone figure left to voice his demands to a deaf public. We should be sure to attribute diaspora activists' influence not to their savviness or scheming, but to their resources and the geopolitics that undergird foreign policymaking.

The case of the Arab Spring abroad also points to the need for scholars to look beyond violent conflicts to understand the roles of diasporas in the aftermath of acute crises, as when their members flood back home to fill

⁴ Diaspora engagement in democratic home-country politics can also contribute to outcomes that are unintended by home-country governments. Pérez-Armendáriz and Duquette-Rury (2021) find, for instance, that the more often Mexican hometown associations contribute to public goods in their places of origin, the more likely these hometowns are to produce militias that provide local security in the absence of state protection. For a comparative and historical perspective on immigrant associations, see Moya (2005).

political offices, establish political parties, man businesses and hospitals, and promote civil society initiatives (Baser 2015; Baser and Swain 2011; Koinova 2010b). Even when the resources and expertise of diasporas are needed for rebuilding purposes, significant tensions may arise between those who maintained a foot in both worlds (Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001; Levitt 2003) and those who never left – especially since diaspora members may exit again after conflicts reignite. The Libyans I met with in Tripoli in 2013, for example, attested how resentment over their repatriation was creating friction with those who had never left. Returnees were often referred to by their conationals as “double *shafras*,” a pejorative term for those who carried both a Libyan and an international SIM card in their mobile phones. Indeed, many of the respondents who moved home after Gaddafi’s fall were forced to leave again after renewed fighting and the influx of ISIS in 2014. The question of whether and how returnees achieve social reintegration into their home-countries remains an open one. Future studies would do well to investigate how different quotidian disruptions impact the process of return and reintegration, and how diasporas shape economic, social, and political life after exit and return.

BROADENING OUR VIEW OF DIASPORA AND IMMIGRANT VOICE

This study also has implications for understanding the effects of diaspora activism on the political practices of immigrant communities. As we have seen in the previous chapters, whether conationals come together or splinter apart shapes “horizontal voice” in fundamentally important ways (O’Donnell 1986). As studies of Balkan diasporas (Koinova 2011, 2013), Somali refugees (Besteman 2016), and Latin American immigrants (Guarnizo et al. 1999, 2003) demonstrate, acute conflicts at home can divide conationals as easily as unify them. This suggests the importance of disaggregating groups by the ways that they identify *themselves*. The Libyans, Syrians, and Yemenis featured in this study are too often lumped together in sociology as Arabs and Muslims, despite the fact that many of them are neither and do not identify as such (Brubaker 2013). If sociologists rely primarily on the pan-ethnic and racialized categories used by host-countries to identify minority groups, we miss how these groups are socially constructed (Brubaker 2004, 2015) and how internally fractious their intra-group politics can be. We will also neglect to understand the roles that national and ethnic groups play in politics, especially when they are treated as too statistically small to be counted in census data. Without attention to this heterogeneity, we will miss some of the most important and interesting mobilization dynamics underway in minority and immigrant communities (Pupcenoks 2012). Observers will also erroneously take instances of nationalistic solidarity for granted. As Rogers Brubaker (2004, 2015) argues,

“groupness” is a dependent variable rather than a constant, and should be treated as such by investigators.⁵

The effects of immigrant identities on coalition building remains another important but neglected topic in the study of diaspora mobilization. Many of the activists in this study had previously mobilized as part of pan-Arab and Muslim coalitions in defense of Palestinian rights along with white-majority anti-war and pro-peace Jewish American and British groups. The Arab Spring undermined this solidarity in a variety of ways, however, as many pro-Palestinian, pro-Arab, and so-called peace groups came out on the side of Bashar al-Assad in Syria due to his long-standing anti-Western, pro-Palestinian rhetoric.⁶ These pro-regime alignments have ignored the terrible crimes that Assad has inflicted on Palestinian refugees in Syria (Chatty 2018) and have put many Arab American and British organizations in a bind. After many Arab organizations refused to publicly condemn violence being committed by Syria and Russia, many pro-democracy Syrians reported feeling betrayed and abandoned by their former allies. The effects of home-country conflicts and intra-regional struggles on pan-Arab, Asian, African, and Latinx mobilization, among others, remains a fruitful topic, particularly when these coalitions are needed to contest white nativism and xenophobia.

More research is also needed on the relations between diaspora movements and non-foreign-born activists, particularly when it comes to fights over foreign policy (Grillo and Pupcenoks 2017; Zarnett 2015). During my fieldwork in 2012, for example, I observed white anti-war activists protesting with *pro*-Assad Syrian men and women in Los Angeles, holding “No Blood For Oil!” signs next to Syrians singing Assad’s praises and threatening the lives of anti-Assad protesters in Arabic. So too did Libyans in Los Angeles and London report being forcefully kept out of anti-war meetings by white-majority socialist movements. As one of Raed Fares’ banners from Kafrabel, Syria, read before he was killed for his peaceful activism, “Anti-war activists! Please support intervention. We are anti-war, we are against Assad killing our children.” The ways in which the Arab Spring revolutions have exacerbated racial and ethnic exclusion by the Left deserves practitioners’ attention for practical and moral reasons, not only academic ones. It has been shocking, alienating, and maddening for pro-democracy Syrians to see white anti-war activists and journalists *defend* the horrific atrocities committed by the Syrian and Russian regimes and *deny* Assad’s chemical weapons attacks in the name of so-called anti-imperialism. This disturbing trend should haunt parts of the Left for years

⁵ See, for example, Okamoto (2014) and Zepeda-Millán (2017) as examples of the utility of treating pan-ethnic and racial formation and solidarity as a dependent variable.

⁶ See Zarnett (2015) for a fascinating study of the impact of diaspora mobilization on western solidarity given to Kurds and Palestinians.

to come (Munif 2020).⁷ Far more attention is needed, therefore, to the ways in which diaspora activists are included or silenced by white activists who claim to know what is best for them and their home-country (Moss 2016a).

This study also highlights the utility of considering the varied political “positionalities” of diasporas and immigrants across host-countries in a comparative perspective (Koinova 2012). The access that diaspora activists have to great powers like the United States and Britain may grant them a disproportionate influence in political affairs when compared to kindred movements in less powerful host-country states (Quinsaas 2016, 2019). That said, more research is needed to compare host-country contexts, particularly as diaspora members become empowered to launch claims against home-country regimes from countries like Spain, Germany, and Sweden. As of 2017, for instance, a Spanish national court agreed to hear a case involving the murder of a delivery van driver in Syria. This was raised by the driver’s sister, who accused top Syrian regime officials of state terrorism from her residence in Madrid. In 2020, Germany also opened cases against Syrian refugees accused of committing crimes against humanity in Syria (Amos 2020). Given the sway that authoritarian powers have over multilateral, rights-enforcing institutions, such as the United Nations Security Council and the International Criminal Court, host-countries without veto rights in the UN Security Council may provide new political opportunities for justice (Human Rights Watch 2017; Koinova 2014). This is particularly important when international institutions fail to fulfill their basic mandates of protecting human rights, as has been the case in Syria and elsewhere.

Diaspora activists in peripheral states also play an important role in rebellions when their host-country governments lend at least tacit geopolitical support to the cause (Betts and Jones 2016), as did Egypt, Tunisia, and Malta during the Libyan revolution. Aspiring powers – even ones that ban independent civic organizing – fuel diaspora activism when they see opportunities to advance their interests, as when Gulf monarchies permitted Syrians to remit resources during the Arab Spring (Dickinson 2015). This suggests the usefulness of attending to how different host-countries and the geopolitical dynamics in which they are embedded facilitate transnational activism beyond the cases investigated here.

Lastly, the question of how movements become transnational agents for change highlights the role of diaspora and immigrant activists in contesting the authoritarian practices of their democratic host-country governments (Quinsaas 2019). As mentioned above, the groups in this study have long been subjected to discrimination, racism, and systemic violence across the Western world for over a century (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009; Cainkar 2009; Chaudhary 2015; Fadlalla 2019; Jamal and Naber 2008; Santoro and Azab

⁷ See Yassir Munif’s (2020) discussion on how these debates have also spread to academia.

2015; Tarrow 2015). This situation worsened during the US presidency of Donald Trump owing to his travel ban against these communities and many other marginalized nationalities. Yet, the Libyans, Syrians, and Yemenis who mobilized for the Arab Spring remain some of the strongest supporters of the principles that Western democratic governments claim to stand for. The cruel irony is that while transnational ties purportedly implicate diaspora actors as exporters of terrorism and culture clashes (Huntington 1997, 2004; Pupcenoks 2016), it is precisely Libyans, Syrians, and Yemenis who are *most* victimized by violence and who do the *most* to defend democracy and human rights in their homelands. Diaspora mobilization against authoritarianism should be protected and respected, rather than treated with suspicion. So too should their voices, which are as diverse as their identities, be listened to with care. They have a great deal to teach us about the perils and promises of activism in a globalized world.

