

Following is an unpublished book review I wrote in early 2012 for Maria Stephan's 2009 *Civilian Jihad*. The tone of the review comes close to an optimism that can only be considered naïve just over two years later, yet the article captures the essence of this important edited volume, and also reminds us of the very real basis and potential for unarmed democratic change that remains built into the fabric of Middle Eastern societies, however obscured today behind the fog of war and despair of dictatorship. As forces of violence seem to continue to engulf portions of the region and beyond, it becomes *more* important and not *less* to emphasize those historic moments when the conditions for political change were generated through peaceful means, especially in the face of oppression and bloodshed. -- MJC, May 2014

Civilian Jihad: 2009 Book Prefaces the Arab Spring (Review)

By Michael J. Carpenter (March 2012)

Civilian Jihad; Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization, and Governance in the Middle East
Edited by Maria J. Stephan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan) 2009, 344 pages.

In Middle East time, 2009 seems like a distant era. Yet, as the title of this volume from that year suggests, the contributors of *Civilian Jihad; Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization, and Governance in the Middle East* (edited by Maria Stephan) are speaking to the present. With this timely and pre-emptive text, the startling Arab revolts of 2011 are unwittingly demystified and realigned within a larger context of continuity. The so-called “Arab Spring” did not originate in the self-immolation of an underemployed Tunisian named Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010 (an event that triggered the Tunisian revolt, which encouraged the Egyptian uprising, and on through the region). *Civilian Jihad* demonstrates, as if with hindsight, that the roots of 2011 are found in the dedicated work of nonviolent social movements that nurtured the conditions for citizen activism and political reform, most notably in Egypt since 2003 but also more generally throughout the region and its history. The stated aim of the book is to draw much-needed attention to the viability of alternatives to violence in the Arab and Muslim world, to highlight the “role of civilian-driven strategies in forging regional transformation” and “to expand the debate on democratization and governance in the area to include these powerful but overlooked indigenous forces for change” (p. 2). Needless to say, these forces are no longer overlooked, but yet they remain poorly understood. Addressing this deficiency, the editor has provided a volume to help situate and explain the social dynamics of “people power” in the Middle East.

Twenty five authors (a roughly equal mix of scholars and activists) contribute nineteen chapters, twelve of which are detailed case studies of specific nonviolent movements across the region from Morocco to Pakistan, eight of which focus on recent struggles, several of which bear directly on unfolding events today. The book is divided into four parts; the first provides a general overview of some of the underlying regional and theoretical themes and tensions, while the remaining three detail case studies, themed respectively around self-determination struggles against foreign powers, movements to topple or democratize domestic tyranny, and campaigns for social and political rights.

Many chapters have acquired new significance through their sequels written in the tumultuous developments of the last year. For example, anyone surprised or made uneasy by the recent sweeping electoral successes of Islamist parties should consider the respective contributions by Asef Bayat and Shadi Hamid. Caught between the brutal oppression of secret police services and their nearly unlimited license granted under the cover of the “global war on terror,” Islamist movements across the region have explicitly renounced and denounced violence while sharpening their focus on social justice at the community and national level, none more so than Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood. These two chapters dispel the apparent dissonance between the twin rise of civil rights movements and political Islam by showing that *both* have been strong proponents for increased political participation and transparent, accountable government (insights that might alleviate common fears about the popularity of Islamist parties).

No chapters shed more light on the pivotal events of last year than those chronicling the rise of Egyptian civil society opposition to President Hosni Mubarak. As Sherif Mansour, Shaazka Beyerle, and Arwa Hassan show in their chapters, predominantly secular initiatives began in 2003 and continued to expand and spawn larger successor movements, building consensus and bridging cultural divides through a combination of creative online social media networking and traditional labour strikes and street protests. Mansour’s chapter documents the Kefaya movement, dedicated to ending Mubarak’s perpetual rule, including a 2004 historic protest in Cairo organized “solely to demand that the president step aside” (p. 208) and the 2005 coordination of simultaneous demonstrations in more than a dozen cities calling for political freedoms to be enshrined in a new constitution. Today, the chapter’s optimism reads like history: “Although it did not achieve its ultimate goal, Kefaya showed people that mobilization in Egypt was possible—that ordinary people could be powerful” (p. 213).

The volume’s diverse contributions are also relevant to several other ongoing and nascent struggles across the region. Mary Elizabeth King’s chapter on the rich experience of Palestinian nonviolent struggle during the first *intifada* (uprising) of the late 1980s and the fledgling movement against Israel’s separation wall in the last several years leaves the reader anxiously awaiting its sequel. Two distinct chapters on Iran, one by Mohsen Sazegara and Maria Stephan, the other by Fariba Davoudi Mohajer, Roya Toloui, and Shaazka Beyerle, provide a similar sense of unfinished business and remind readers of the of the brutal (and successful) police crackdown on Tehran’s student uprising in the wake of the disputed 2009 presidential elections. Rudy Jaafar and Stephan’s entry on a successful Lebanese nonviolent campaign that succeeded in forcing Syrian President Bashar al-Asad’s hand on a major security policy shift—the withdrawal of all Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005—evokes frustration with the contemporary spiral of violence encircling Damascus today. Perhaps the most peripheral to the “Arab Spring,” Mohammed Raqib’s chapter on the legacy of the Pashtun leader Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan in British India’s volatile North-West Frontier Province, reminds us that even in Pakistan there are living roots of powerful civil society mobilization (as testified to by the civil revolt of the judiciary in late 2008).

Apart from a wealth of detailed background on a range of specific cases and issues, the volume also provides important groundwork for correcting a generally skewed perception of the region as a whole. The events of 2011 are mysterious and surprising within a context that is dominated by misguided discourses about fundamentalist Islam and still burdened by the stereotypes of Orientalism. The peaceful pursuit of democratic rights and political freedom illumines the radar of the Muslim Middle East not only during the darkest years of the United States-led “war on terror” but also across half a century of political struggle. The book also encourages us to broaden our basic understanding of the role of nonviolence in politics. The authors are not suggesting that peaceful activism is a miracle cure political woes (of course, neither is violence) but they are highlighting neglected alternatives to the “realist” fixations on coercion and war that dominate the textbooks of Western political thought.

Civilian Jihad is an important resource for students of the theory and practice of nonviolent political struggle, and it should also be of interest to anyone researching Middle Eastern affairs, peace and conflict studies, democracy and human rights theory, and the legacies of empire and colonialism.