

Egypt Shakes the World - II - On Tahrir

Friday 4 March 2011, by [LEVINE Mark](#), [WEISSMAN Suzi](#) (Date first published: 11 February 2011).

SUZI WEISSMAN INTERVIEWED Yoav Peled and Mark LeVine on her program “Beneath the Surface,” KPFK Pacifica Radio in Los Angeles, on February 11, 2010. The following are edited excerpts from those discussions. Thanks to Meleiza Figueroa for transcribing. Second part below. First part: [Egypt Shakes the World - I - What is the reaction in Israel?](#)

Suzi Weissman: Well, there’s a fresh air blowing on the planet now; let’s hope it blows in all directions, and let there be a thousand Tahrirs. That’s my editorial statement. I’m very pleased to have with me — from Tahrir Square, and actually just right up above it — Mark LeVine. He is a professor of history at UC Irvine, and a senior visiting researcher at the Center for Middle East Studies at Lund University in Sweden. He’s also a musician and he’s bringing us music from Tahrir Square that was recorded yesterday. Mark speaks Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish, Persian, Italian, French...and he’s an accomplished rock guitarist, and observer and writer. He’s blogging at [aljazeera.net](#). Two important books of his are *An Impossible Peace: Oslo and the Burdens of History* (Zed Books, 2007) and *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (Three Rivers Press, 2008).

Mark, I’m so glad to have you on BTS. You’re now at the square in Cairo, it sounds like you’re next door. Tell us — we’re all just in jubilation today, as the news that not only did the Mubarak regime have to go with their tail tucked under, but that we’ve heard now that martial law has been lifted in Algeria.

Mark LeVine: Well, I think the most important thing about this revolution — and it was clear even from days ago, from when I first got here — that this is not just an Egyptian revolution, this is a world revolution, really the first revolution of the age of globalization. In many ways, 1989 was a revolution that closed the book on a previous era, and this in some ways takes us back to 1789, really at that level of importance.

When the news came, there was just such an incredible sense of jubilation. There were Italians and Greeks and Portuguese and Lebanese, and everyone was just saying “we won.” It wasn’t just Egyptians who won, even though certainly it is their revolution, but for them to nonviolently defeat this system, which so many countries have invested so much in maintaining — think about all the European leaders, and then Obama’s waffling, and then Israel, and then all the Arab countries who were all supporting Mubarak — is really the most important example to the world that I can think of in my lifetime.

I left Tahrir Square around seven this morning, after I don’t know how long... I had to take a shower and get some food. I went back to a nearby neighborhood, where my hotel is. When I left, I was nervous, and when I came back, I was very nervous because of the threats that [the appointed Vice-president] Suleiman, and certainly Mubarak and his police force, had made.

People here were ready for a bloodbath. And they were prepared, but the most interesting thing was when I came back and it was during the noonday prayer, there were imams on the street just urging the people to stay peaceful. That was the message: no matter what happens, don't succumb to the violence and the provocations.

The fact that there wasn't a provocation was an absolute miracle, because it would have been so easy for someone to come in here with a bomb, or to come in with a gun and just fire a couple of shots, and that would have led to a stampede that could have killed I don't know how many people.

I guess it's hard for people who weren't here to understand how difficult it was to pull that off, because everyone really thought that today was going to be a day that was going to end in misery for hundreds of thousands of people.

Yet it never happened, and people just kept taking care of each other, and keeping it peaceful. And that is absolutely the reason for this victory, and it is a lesson for everyone. I mean, the first group that comes to mind is clearly Palestinians, because they've been shown a way to end the occupation in as quick a time as the Egyptians that ended their oppression, and the nonviolence is absolutely the key.

I just came in from being outside a couple of minutes ago, and the most striking thing is that the security cordon is gone. Anyone who's been following the story probably has read about this intense security cordon, about five or six layers deep, of just volunteers from the square who frisk everyone over and over and check their ID to make sure those thugs of Mubarak can't get back in, or anyone else for that matter who shouldn't be there.

As late as this afternoon, that was still the case, and it took over an hour to get your way in. It was very dangerous while you were waiting there because if someone was walking by with a bomb it would have been a disaster. But now it's gone, and everyone's just moving completely freely, in and out, climbing on top of tanks, kids are on tanks playing with soldiers.

I think this is the hope. As so many friends of mine here said, "this is the true Islam emerging." Everyone's been waiting for it to emerge, but when you're living under this kind of oppression, it's so hard to have it emerge. Several people said, "This is the real jihad." It was a jihad without violence, and it won, unlike the ones that use violence.

SW: Everyone here is asking, "Is this a leaderless revolution?"

ML: I don't think the theory has been invented to really understand this yet. In a way, it's spontaneous and so much of it wasn't planned, because it was a response to events on the ground. But in the background there has been the labor movement; movements of young people who for years have been leading and having study groups and really trying to understand social theory and understand how to apply it in this situation; people who have been strategizing, who come like Wael Ghonim from the high-tech field who have been contributing in that way, but even as important are people who have been doing the hard work on the ground of grassroots mobilization.

It's a combination of so many different things, and I don't want to overemphasize its leaderless nature, but there's certainly no one leader. Most of the people who are on TV, other than Wael who was the catalyst for rejuvenating this — all the older people from the previous generation who were trying to negotiate, really couldn't represent this movement.

That's probably why while they were in charge of the negotiation, nothing happened. It was only when the people on the street took control and refused to bow down that this move to a new phase was made inevitable.

SW: It seemed, because there are no more mass radicalized, nationalist parties and the Left has been so repressed there, that Islam was the only alternative. Yet that's not what characterizes it either.

ML: No really, it wasn't in fact. The Left still remains intellectually fairly strong. For a long time, people have said "oh, the Arab Left is discredited," and certainly the older generation that came of age in the 1950s and '60s has been utterly discredited. But the younger Left is a Left that we would all recognize from Seattle — the Left from Prague, a much more mature and sophisticated and progressive Left that is not weighed down by any particular ideology — they have been absolutely crucial.

This Left has been showing the way, even to the Muslim Brotherhood who everyone said was the organized force. Well, guess what happened at the end of the day — the Brotherhood was basically following a bunch of young longhaired Lefties. And that's the God's honest truth. Everyone has had to learn, and for years people are going to be trying to figure out how to emulate it. In the end it's not going to be emulateable, because it's local and came out of the roots here. Each country or each region is going to have to follow its own model.

There's an incredible party right now but everyone knows tomorrow the war continues, and as many friends have said to me, "we're not going anywhere." They're not cleaning out this square until they know in an absolute, ironclad way, that the military is guaranteeing the reforms that they had said today they would implement.

SW: Do these reforms include the end of the Emergency Laws, the freeing of political prisoners, the end of censorship?

ML: I mean, this is what people are demanding, and they are not going to leave — the majority of people who are organizing this hope they won't leave in any major numbers until that is guaranteed.

No one thinks victory has been won in the long term. There is no doubt that the military is going to try to pretend to give what they can to get people off the streets, and then backtrack slowly — in a sense, that's what's already happened in Tunisia, where the repression is continuing and the system is in no way really dislodged.

I've talked to many Egyptians who understand that well, and they want to make sure that this system really is dead. That's obviously a wise move. You know, when they were coming back from the Presidential Palace and they walked past one of the main Army buildings, and thousands of people stopped and started chanting to the Army building and the military leaders inside, "We are here, we are here, the Egyptians are here!" I saw it quickly on Al Jazeera — that was a statement.

Yes, they're supporting the Army sort of, they recognize the army has played an important role, but they're not going to let the army just take over and have a continuation of a military-led government. And it's going to be a major ongoing negotiation, because the army has been one of the main beneficiaries of the last 20 years of liberalization.

That so-called privatization has really passed a lot of state industries into the hands of senior army people, and they're going to have to give a lot of that up. No one gives up anything unless they have to. So that's why, in many ways, this is a great beginning, but still the beginning of a much longer-term struggle.

SW: When labor got on the scene and started striking, it looked like that was really the end. That's when Mubarak realized he couldn't stay.

ML: I was in the square with one of the main organizers when he started getting the SMS text messages from his colleagues saying, “this is a strike, and these guys are striking, and those guys are striking.” He turned to me and said, “it’s all over.” And we all knew, once that happened, because Tunis was the paradigm for that. Once it moved from a localized strike in Cairo and several cities to countrywide labor strikes that was it — the system was finished.

SW: Given that you come from the United States even though you speak Arabic, have people talked to you about the Obama administration’s “dual policy” — on the one hand, he says the right thing, but Hilary Clinton’s State Department supported the “slow transition” and Suleiman — has there been any talk about that, or is that just in the background?

ML: You know, people are utterly disgusted with the Obama administration on the one hand, and on the other hand, they don’t care anymore. I’ve been writing very critical things about Obama in my columns, but in some way, in the end, it’s almost better they did it without him, because now it’s really theirs. As one friend said, “we did this by ourselves, no one came to help us and stood up for us.” And in that way, the victory is that much sweeter.

But when the dust settles, if there’s really a fully civilian led government of opposition figures, the United States and the Europeans are going to have a very hard time having much influence, and for them to maintain their privileges and their positions will certainly be much harder.

The main thing is going to be military aid, for example — the military wants to keep all its perks, and all the money, and all the aid that comes to it. Any civilian government, in order to have the kind of redistribution of wealth that will be necessary to have a fundamental change in the levels of poverty here, will have to take on the privileges of the military, and that’s really going to be the long-term struggle.

It’s a big party here tonight, but as everyone’s saying, “Tomorrow we start over.”

P.S.

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