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Introduction: Children and Arab Spring

By Sangeeta Sinha¹, Emilia Garofalo² and Muhamad Olimat³

The eruption of Arab Spring toward the end of 2010 came as a surprise to some observers and policy circles. However, area specialists warned of the upcoming rebellions decades ago. Arab Spring represents a critical moment in modern Arab history. It has been described as a real “democratic moment” that, if utilized well, will most certainly bring about significant change in the region. To Arab masses, the wave of protest and the fall of some dictatorial regimes across the region is a testimony to the revival of the Arab spirit, and a quest of the Arab people to liberate themselves from centuries of external domination and domestic tyranny. However, nearly three years into this historical change, the Arab people find themselves facing a counterrevolution in which ancient regimes reinvented themselves, sabotaged the process for change, and initiated a new wave of violence and civil wars. Unfortunately, the eternal conflict between Islamists and nationalists turned Arab Spring into an upside-down period of dark modern Arab history; daily massacres of innocent women, children, and men are no longer news.

Arab women and children actively participated in revolutionary efforts to end tyranny in Syria, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Tunisia, and elsewhere. However, their contributions faced the savage fury of state repression. Hamaza Al Khateeb's case in Syria is one of thousands of Arab children who are abused, tortured, murdered, starved and displaced around the world. Arab women suffered systematic violence including rape, torture, starvation, murder, and extermination at the hands of authoritarian regimes and paramilitary groups in Syria, Egypt, Yemen and other parts of the Arab world. This third Special Issue seeks to examine the impact of Arab Spring rebellions and the counterrevolutions' impact on women and children in particular.

The contributors to these issues examined the impact of Arab Spring revolutions on Arab women and children in particular in several Arab countries. Ebtehal Al-Khateeb examines El Saadawi's 1984 play *Twelve Women in A Cell*, in light of the ongoing political dissidence that gave birth to the recent Arab Spring and its intricate relation to feminist dissidence. Hae Won Jeong examined the tension between state sovereignty and human rights in Bahrain, and analyzed the moral and ethical implications of political participation and detention of Bahraini children against the backdrop of sectarian geopolitics, which ascribes them a minority status based on age and sect. Lere Amusan examined the revolutionary process in Libya and the impact of regime change on Libyan children. Amusan highlighted the fact that actors in the civil war disregarded various international

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² Dr. Emilia Garofalo was a professor of Romance Languages and Literature for many years in some United States universities, and is currently the CEO of Stilus Copy Editors. Her interest in the Middle East stems from family links and her personal concern with the plight of women and children in the region.

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treaties that protect children and indigenous people during the war. His paper argues that “the issue of minorities should be addressed through domestic legislation and international treaties in which the country is a signatory. Also important is the resolution of problems of disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and reinsertion for a stable society in a divided post- al-Qaddafi government where different militias are in control of the state.” Manal al-Natour examined the victimization and role of Syrian children in the Syrian Revolution 2011 at the hands of both the regime and the rebels. She emphasized that, “through engaging in competing performances and representations of the nation, both the regime and the opposition victimize Syrian children. Nevertheless, art projects undertaken by nonviolence activists have proven to help children heal and cope with the predicaments brought on by the crisis. Poetry, paintings, drawings, and songs produced by these children are the best means they have of representing their victimization and their role in the revolution, and communicating their perspectives of the Syrian nation today. I argue that by producing art that conveys their perception of the revolution, Syrian children reclaim their identities as citizens of Syria.”

Layla Saleh explored the participation of children in the Syrian uprising against Bashar al-Assad. She stated that “the involvement of children in democratic social movements and regime transitions has not been addressed in the literature, although some works describe the role children can play in making public policy or in the humanitarian domain.” She argues that “just as the role of women and of university-aged youth was gradually incorporated in the body of research on the social movements and regime transitions, so should the role of children be studied.” She then characterizes “the role of children in the Syrian uprising as a three-stage cycle, whereby children unwittingly sparked the revolution, then were targeted by the regime in response, and finally, along with adults across the country, were spurred to further anti-Assad action, rather than to silence and submission, as a result of the regime’s brutality.”

Lorraine Charles and Kate Denman examined the Syrian refugees’ plight in Lebanon and its impact on the Lebanese society and economy. They specified that, “the humanitarian crisis resulting from the Syrian conflict is estimated to be the worst so far of this century. The recent influx of refugees has now reached a point where they are equal to one quarter of Lebanon’s population, causing evident strains on its fragile economy and social structure. Syrians have fled from their home to seek safety in Lebanon, however their vulnerability is now in question as women’s and children’s rights continue to be under threat. This paper investigates the plight of Syrian and Palestinian Syrian refugees in Lebanon with an emphasis on women and children.”

Contributors to this and previous issues consistently found that Arab women and children continue to be victims of revolutionary change and instability in the region. This is not to exclude the victimization of men, as we see in the cases of Syria, Egypt, Libya and elsewhere, but the impact of war on women and children is catastrophic. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian women and children are scattered around the world in refugee camps. An entire Syrian generation of children is lost. Statistics of Syrian children who lost their parents and families are staggering; children live alone, homeless in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. The level of abuse on women and children is unprecedented in modern history. Systematic rape, exploitation and starvation goes unnoticed by an international community that continues to claim high moral grounds, and sits idle, passive, silent and deaf to the human rights violations committed against women, children and men

in Syria, Egypt and elsewhere within the context of Arab Spring revolutions.

The article, “Gender and State Building in Libya: Towards a Politics of Inclusion” by Zahra Langhi was originally included in this special issue but has been removed due to a conflict in publishing protocol.