

Unrest, uprising, or revolution?

ODAI AL-ZOUBI AND RUPERT READ ON THE PRESUPPOSITIONS BEHIND OUR UNDERSTANDING OF EVENTS IN SYRIA

Is what is going on in Syria a *revolution*? Many analysts, academics and journalists refuse to call it a revolution. The reason is that it doesn't fit the model of revolution they have in mind. For some, the model is the Egyptian revolution: a (mostly) peaceful sit-in in Tahrir Square. For others, there must be a unified leadership, with clear goals, to lead "the mob". For all these people, events in Syria are not a revolution. It might be called an uprising, unrest, perhaps a conspiracy against Assad. We, however, submit that it is a revolution.

First, we have learned from J L Austin and Wittgenstein that there need not be one model for a concept. There is no one model for all revolutions. Although Egypt's Tahrir Square became

a role model for non-violent revolution during the ongoing Arab Spring, it is not the only one we have. Every revolution has its unique conditions. One shouldn't judge what is going on in Syria according to a pre-existing model. The only way to judge is by close examination of every detail and aspect. Not to obsessively *think* about a pre-existing model; rather, to *look* and see.

The Syrian revolution tried to copy the Egyptian model, but failed to do so. The attempts to have sit-ins in Deraa and Homs were opposed with extreme government brutality, and one still can't tell how many were killed in these attempts.

It is also true that there is no one unified leadership of this revolution. But it is the brutality of the regime, and not the choice of those involved

in the uprising, which prevents the formation of a unified leadership. To point to one part of this, the regime's brutality does not permit the Syrian opposition to have a conference in Damascus to discuss the future of Syria. It allows only those the regime chooses to attend.

We suspect that academics tend to have a prejudice: that *they* are the experts. That *they* are the ones who are entitled to decide whether or not the term "revolution" can be rightfully used. But this is a "theoreticistic" prejudice, exactly the kind of prejudice that Wittgenstein rightly stood against. Philosophy is not prior to or superior to politics. We write this article as philosophers; but also as engaged political animals. We believe that the Syrian revolution should be positively appraised by all who wish to take the side of freedom and democracy against vicious authoritarianism. We believe that one can tell that there is a revolution going on in Syria *by listening to the people there*.

Finally, it is not in the end that important what one *calls* it. We suspect that those who refuse to call this a revolution see many differences between their model of revolution and the Syrian revolution, and on the basis of these differences object to calling it a revolution. However, these kinds of objections ignore the realities on the ground. They make the daily massacres in Syria look like a fate for those "un-civilised Muslims". This is the view of those who say, shamefully, that the Arab Spring has come "too soon" for the Middle East and North Africa, that people there are "not ready" for it. As long as all these prejudices, which are the roots of refusing to call what is going in Syria a revolution, are put aside, it doesn't matter what you *call* it.

To conclude, the question of deciding how to relate to the Syrian revolution is not an easy

task. The world is complicated, and hard to know. Relations between the West and the Arab world are tense; the motivations of Western governments uncertain. We think that the Syrian people plainly need help, though not invasion. Help in terms of humanitarian assistance, help in terms of expressions of solidarity and a determination to bring the junta to justice, and help in terms

Engage with the startling realities of the Arab Spring

of applying severe diplomatic and economic pressure.

All of us have to be ready to open our eyes (and our hearts) to what is actually happening in Syria. The regime hasn't allowed the media to enter the country for 20 months, with some few, very strictly controlled exceptions. All the opposition groups, including the Free Syrian Army, ask for the media to come in, and allow media to accompany them. The contrast is clear. We must try to know more, in spite of the regime's attempt to obscure our vision. Being satisfied with one's own pre-existing model of how revolutions should work, and refusing to deal with what is happening otherwise, is a deadly sin. What we ask for is for you, reader, to leave prejudices aside, and engage with the startling realities of the Arab Spring. Realities that are sweeping the old "certainties" aside, across North Africa and the Middle East – and closer to home, too.

Odai Al Zoubi is a PhD student in philosophy at the University of East Anglia. **Rupert Read** is reader in the University of East Anglia school of philosophy, chair of the Green House thinktank, and lead Green Party MEP candidate in the East of England in the 2014 European elections.