

The Arab Tyrant's Manual

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Part 1: Introduction

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How this Started

It was the night of March 24rd, 2011. I was sharing and discussing the events of the Arab Spring with several thousand wonderful people, all across the world, in real-time on Twitter. My follower count was climbing by the hundreds daily, as more people turned their eyes to the Arab world, fascinated by one of the greatest revolutionary waves in recent history – perhaps in all history.

A mere three months earlier, the Arab world was considered a stagnant pond of retardation and tyranny, inhabited by what appeared to be a complacent populace toiling fatalistically under the yoke of their dictators. Most observers thought this status quo to be stable, if not permanent. What's worst, many Arabs thought it so too. Boy, look at us now!

Today you see a people on fire – youths as passionate about liberty as they are about the peacefulness of their protests. You see a people more willing to die than to live another day without their rights or their dignity. In the dizzy three months since Mohammad Bouazizi set himself aflame in that sleepy town in Tunisia, the fire has touched over 20 countries.

Spotting Parallels

I arrived to the Twitter scene on January 25th – too late to tweet Tunisia's revolution, but just in time to follow & report on Egypt's revolution, and the subsequent protests and uprisings that touched almost every Arab country since. In particular, I was fascinated by the official government response, both in words and in actions.

Soon, striking parallels started to glare at me – Arab tyrants seem to adopt the same patterns of response, as if they have a standardized “operations manual” with instructions on how to assert their own authority, how to deal with demonstrations, how to discredit and delegitimize the revolutionaries, and what to say in public statements.

So on that night on March 24th, in a flash of brilliance spanning several continents, my Twitter followers and I put together a rudimentary “Arab Tyrant's Standard Revolution Response Manual”. The list we compiled consisted of just over a hundred tweets, and has been more or less stable since. It seemed comprehensive enough to cover the behavior of a tyrant facing a popular revolution.

Every Friday since, we've seen one Arab tyrant or another apparently pull items straight out of the “manual”. Some tweeters even quipped that we may have inadvertently given a few tyrants some ideas! Others remarked that the list we had put together applied to all tyrants, not just “Arab”; and that it applies as much to tyrannical institutions as to tyrannical rulers.

Ever since, I started to seriously consider compiling the “manual” into book form. Exposing the “official line” the tyrant would take provides the people with a peak into his mind and a “heads up”. I hope the “Arab Tyrant’s Manual” can simultaneously be a survival guide for revolutionaries looking to outmaneuver a tyrant, and an acid test to expose tyrannical tendencies.

I apologize in advance for the quippy tone the book may sometimes take. The behavior of a tyrant in trouble would indeed be laughable were it not so sinister, and so willing to shed innocent blood.

A Personal Note

It takes some recklessness for an Arab living in the Arab world to write about tyranny during the Arab Spring. This is especially true for a stateless Palestinian refugee who never had, let alone exercised, any political rights. If I should think of this in terms of profit & loss alone, I’d go back to running my business instead of risking life, liberty, and livelihood.

But two factors encourage me to forge ahead. First, this is history in the making; this is a civilization awakening to its potential. Some may see a revolutionary wave, but I see the rumblings of a renaissance, and I am dedicating my life to making it so. To be cautious and play it safe at such a historic juncture is to be a shamefully gutless coward. To abandon the call of liberty for safety is to deserve neither.

The second factor is that I am writing from Dubai. The UAE was one of two Arab countries (along with Qatar) to see no protests of any kind during the Arab Spring – neither is it likely to see any. To understand why, one must look past the statistics and studies citing living standards and unemployment figures, and delve into the not-too-distant history of this nation.

Between November and December 2010, I was involved in creating e-material to be used in government schools in a subject called “Patriotic Studies”. For about three weeks, I lived & breathed UAE – its history, culture, and social & economic issues. I came out with an overwhelming realization – that you cannot appreciate where this country is today without looking at where it was a few decades ago.

For what it’s worth, the leadership of the UAE used the oil wealth very wisely, lifting the nation from desolate oblivion to the forefront of the world stage in under 40 years (comparison to Gaddafi’s Libya is both apt and depressing). A true achievement is the forging of a unified national identity and a modern federation out of what once was a cluster of feuding sheikhdoms.

To truly comprehend such figures as infant mortality, female literacy, and life expectancy, you must compare them to pre-1971 numbers. To truly understand the urban achievements of the country, you must take a look at aerial photos from the 50s and 60s. It takes a before-and-after shot to see a marvel instead of just tacky towers.

No country is perfect, and the UAE has its share of problems. It has a small native population and a majority of migrant workers, mostly Asian. It has a loosely regulated employment market in which

companies and labor brokers often exploit unskilled workers. It faces the threat of a belligerent and resurgent Iran, which occupies some of its territory and rejects talks or arbitration.

But tyranny, corruption, and kleptocracy is nowhere on the list of problems. The UAE has never had a Mubarak, a Gaddafi, or even something remotely close. Its political system evolved out of its traditional social and cultural makeup, and was not enforced through military coups, civil wars, rigged elections, or foreign intervention. Its leadership has created and catalyzed social change, rather than stand in its way.

The winds of change will shift our entire Arab world. Some states will move gently, maneuvering skillfully towards reform. Others will try to fight the waves and hence face the wrath of revolution. I have lived in the UAE all my life, and I have little doubt that its path to reform will be as unique as was its path from obscurity to glory.

How this book is organized

I don't know how many tweets made it to book form, but perhaps a bit of a background about the Twitter format is apt here. Twitter is a micro-blogging tool that forces a maximum size of 140 characters per post. The entire original "manual" consisted of around 80 items, each posted as a separate "tweet".

After analyzing the items of the original manual, I found them to fall into one of six categories. I dedicate a chapter of the book to each category – listing the relevant items of the "manual", analyzing them, and citing instances to how it was used by tyrants during the Arab Spring, but also it was countered or preempted by revolutionaries.

I have tried to include a cartoon on each page, commenting or poking fun at the item in question. Most have been contributed by the talented and prolific cartoon artist _____, who almost converts the book into a comic strip. Who knows, perhaps one day the Arab Tyrant's Manual will go from tweet to book to animation!

A Short Study of Tyranny

Anyone interested in liberty must spend significant time & effort studying tyranny (after all, doctors in training spend a lot of their time studying diseases). The behavior of tyrants may at times seem erratic, but it isn't random. It follows very specific patterns, because it's driven by primarily the same principles and towards the same aim: absolute power & control.

Only the stupidest of tyrants, however, seeks direct control. Smart & successful tyrants seek to control certain "puppet strings", and may be very generous otherwise, in ways that may seem confusing if you don't realize what these strings are. I have found these to be associated with no more than three drivers.

Absolute Ownership

The average citizen believes he belongs to a country, while the tyrant believes the country belongs to him. He truly believes the country to be "his", and he will not allow anyone to challenge his absolute property rights over it.

In benign cases this may apply to the "commons" – that which is not privately owned by anyone, including open unclaimed land and natural resources. You can say that the tyrant believes in the homestead principle, but only he can do the homesteading. It's "finders keepers", so to speak, the tyrant being the only "keeper" to anything "found".

In extreme cases, the tyrant reserves the right to confiscate private property. He may claim that you obtained your property by his own blessing, having granted you the privilege to build, trade, or homestead on "his" land. He may take your property claiming that you obtained it illegally in the first place. Or he may cite the "common good" that, of course, trumps your private property rights.

The tyrant's right to own it all entails full classical property rights. Therefore he may freely do whatever he wishes with his "property" – he may rent it, sell it, develop it, or even give it away. Heck, he can mess it up if it wishes, and he's answerable to no one on all counts.

Once secure in his absolute ownership, the tyrant may be very generous – giving grants, stipends, and pay raises – provided this is understood to be an act of generosity for which you should thank him, rather than a responsibility which you should demand of him. Try asking the tyrant for aid and he may show tremendous graciousness. Try demanding the same as being your right and you may end up in jail.

Where would a tyrant be without loyal & willing slaves? The perfect slave here may be well-off – even wealthy – but he attributes his livelihood neither to God nor to his own initiative, but to the

graciousness of his master, who allowed him to build, trade, or farm on “his” land. In this way, everything the slave owns becomes a confirmation of the tyrant’s lordship over him.

Absolute Lawmaking Powers

Owning everything is just the start. It cannot bring absolute power if the tyrant has to play by the same rules as everyone else. The tyrant’s “golden rule” reads: “He who makes all the rules, ends up with all the gold.” Hence the tyrant’s demand for an absolute right to make the rules, with no regards to any reference or higher power except his own expediency and interests.

This may be achieved in one of two ways. The “liberal” tyrant will establish a parliament or “legislative branch”, which would be constitutionally responsible for making the rules. Of course, he will make sure that it is neither independent nor influential, and exists merely to lend a semblance of legitimacy to his whims & wishes.

The “traditionalist” tyrant will look towards the people’s classical reference for law & legislation, typically religion, and will seek to use it to his advantage. Hence the love-hate relationship between religion and tyranny – the tyrant will either fight it as an enemy that threatens his absolute right to make the rules, or will use it as a powerful ally in making rules tailor-made for him.

Religion or not, the tyrant will never accept any limitation on his absolute power to regulate and legislate, and interpret the law. He may well allow a “political process” and “civil institutions”; or a religious hierarchy – he will even bow his head in mock deference to these establishments, or pay lip service to them, so long they know who’s boss.

The smarter (or more insecure) tyrant won’t stop there, but will take it up a notch, defining not just rules but also values. Here too, he demands a monopoly, accepting no competition; hence his intolerance for intellectuals, philosophers, and moral teachers, and his exasperation with modern tools that threaten his control over communication with the public, such as social media.

Perfect slaves follow the rules set by the master, no matter what these rules may be. Be out of fear or conviction, the slave knows his place – it’s not to make or even suggest rules, but only to help the master follow through and implement these rules regardless of their intent. “Master knows best.”

Absolute Legitimacy

You’d think the tyrant would be satisfied owning everything and making all the rules, but all of that is at risk if someone can take it away from him. Hence he must have absolute and unchallenged legitimacy as ruler, and must have total loyalty from his people.

Legitimacy can be established using the same tools by which rules are created. It could be through a “political process” (employing the wonderful silver bullet of elections). Or it can be a “divine right”,

articulated by a very friendly religious establishment, and ratified by a grateful tribal leadership. One way or the other, the tyrant emerges as the “rightful” ruler.

Challenging the “legitimate ruler” is, of course, an act of political subversion or even treason. By defying him, you become an enemy of the people, of the nation, and of God.

Once secure in his absolute legitimacy, the tyrant may allow a hierarchy to grow beneath him, so long it pledges fealty to him at each level, through the party, the tribe, or the religious establishment. Being a jealous master, he tolerates no “leadership” outside of this hierarchy. No one can have people’s loyalty or give meaning to their lives. Hence charities, hospitals and schools must be run by the state.

The perfect slave, like a good dog, offers his master absolute trust and loyalty, regardless of his master’s character or conduct. If master does well, he should be commended. If he doesn’t, he should still be commended. It’s not that he messed up, it’s just that the world wasn’t ready for his genius.

This study as guide

We’re all familiar with Lord Acton’s saying: “Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The drivers above seem to describe the path a tyrant takes towards absolute power. They seem to apply equally to tyrannical individuals and tyrannical institutions. I invite you to keep them in mind while reading the “manual”.