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To cite this article: Shadi Mokhtari (2023) Human rights as *mockery of morality, manifesting morality, and moral maze*, Journal of Human Rights, 22:5, 660-680, DOI: [10.1080/14754835.2023.2249931](https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2023.2249931)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2023.2249931>



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Published online: 26 Sep 2023.



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Human rights as *mockery of morality, manifesting morality, and moral maze*

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ABSTRACT

The article develops and applies a typology of marginalized non-Western populations' experiences of and engagements with human rights, drawing from Egyptian and broader Middle Eastern experiences of human rights over the last three decades. The experiences laid out are of human rights as (1) mockery of morality encompassing practice flying in the face of human rights' emancipatory promise, (2) manifesting morality encompassing practice embodying human rights' emancipatory promise, and (3) moral maze, the morally fractured space in between where human rights politics increasingly play out. Through the typology and its application, I argue that popular dispositions toward, and meanings accorded to human rights in marginalized contexts are varied, complex, and stem not just from popular evaluations of the human right framework's content (the values, moral claims, or rhetorical promise), but also from these populations' experiences of, judgements on, and emotional reactions to the morality of the practice of human rights unfolding around them. The research presented demonstrates that contrary to assumptions underlying both mainstream and critical scholarship, the content of human rights can be highly resonant to marginalized non-Western populations, yet they may choose to keep a distance from the framework because in its practice, it is not persuasive to them.

Introduction

Visiting the Middle East in the 1990s and 2000s, one was likely to find that local populations rarely used the term “human rights” on their own, despite harboring deep-seated grievances taken up by the human rights paradigm. Similarly, notwithstanding the grandiose missions they espoused, local human rights NGO activists largely spent their days in empty downtown offices talking to each other and foreign partners, rather than local populations. However, when the words “human rights” were uttered by a foreign visitor, impassioned responses often ensued. While some constituted culturally rooted challenges to the content of human rights norms, overwhelmingly, the responses were simply indignant objections to Western hypocrisy and lamentations of how far removed their lived realities were from the rhetorical promise of human rights, best captured by the retort “What human rights? Human rights do not exist.” With the arrival of the 2011 Arab uprisings, however, this palpable popular reluctance to broach the framework gave way to the emergence of human rights discourses and activists at the fore of contentious politics.

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Neither the norm dynamics and human rights scholarship exploring human rights' appeal to non-Western contexts through an almost exclusive focus on the resonance of the *content*—the values, moral claims, or rhetorical promise of human rights norms—nor critical scholarship that assumed human rights' irrelevance to non-Western populations adequately explained or captured these complex and varied popular interactions with the framework. I argue popular dispositions toward and meanings accorded to human rights often stem not just from marginalized populations' evaluations of the human right framework's content, but also from these populations' experiences of, judgements on, and emotional reactions to the morality of the *practice* of human rights unfolding around them.

This article makes two key contributions. First, it develops an innovative typology of how marginalized non-Western populations experience human rights, and how these experiences impact their willingness to engage with the framework. Second, it demonstrates the explanatory power of the typology by applying it to varied popular experiences of and interactions with the human rights framework in Egypt and the broader Middle East over the last three decades. The three experiences put forth are of human rights as (1) *mockery of morality*, (2) *manifesting morality*, and (3) *moral maze*.

As mockery of morality, human rights are experienced as so co-opted and morally corrupted by powerful actors (local authoritarian leaders, Western governments, and depoliticized NGOs) in ways that exclude them from its emancipatory promise, that the framework is rendered meaningless, unpersuasive, and alienating, even farcical to them, breeding widespread cynicism and a reluctance to engage with the framework.

The article then lays out the diametrically opposed experience of human rights as manifesting morality in which marginalized populations collectively experience a key element of the practice of human rights unfolding around them as patently principled and morally aligned with both the framework's emancipatory rhetorical promise and their prevailing aspirations, prompting them to engage with human rights and place faith in the notion that they should fight to obtain its emancipatory promise despite their longstanding exclusion.

Finally, the article presents the increasingly dominant digital age experience of human rights as moral maze, in which—bombarded by a flurry of human rights claims and counterclaims, many of which are strategically deployed by powerful actors to muddy the waters but are not readily identifiable as such—popular dispositions toward human rights are marked by fragmentation and ambiguity around the morality of its practice. Parts of the population may adopt competing hyper-partisan human rights stances whereas others find the muddled terrain produced by a whirlwind of accounts of human rights violations and challenges to their credibility or the human rights activists posing them, too difficult to collectively evaluate as either manifesting morality or morally corrupt, prompting them to frequently disengage with the framework.

Through this grounded typology, the article aims to provide a more complex analytical prism through which non-Western and marginalized populations' interactions with human rights can be explained and understood. In this way, it also aims to add to the burgeoning literature highlighting the complexity, dynamicism, and hidden forms of popular agency exercised through local interactions with human rights norms.

Looking beyond norm content and revisiting human rights' resonance in marginalized non-Western contexts

To explain why human rights norms are or are not popularly embraced in non-Western contexts, a range of human rights scholars have assumed social or cultural resistance to the content of human rights norms (Hopgood, 2013). As Goodhart has observed, the extensive treatment of universalism versus cultural relativism in the human rights field stems from the assumption that the biggest point of contention around human rights surrounds disputes over the moral validity of specific human rights norms (Goodhart, 2015), resulting in significant attention to ways of overcoming this

resistance. The ensuing emphasis on norm content and its resonance has prevented adequate consideration of the legitimacy of the practice of human rights, even when the content was resonant.

Within international relations, early constructivist works treating human rights held that norm diffusion strategies, consciousness-raising, and processes of persuasion and socialization could result in the adoption and, ultimately, the internalization of human rights norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Ropp et al., 1999). This literature considered how particular international norms emerged, the characteristics of more robust norms, and the processes of and barriers to international norm diffusion with some focused on the resonance, salience, and legitimacy of international norms at the domestic level (Checkel, 1999). The adoption of human rights norms was thus a function of norm diffusion strategies, consciousness-raising, and other processes of persuasion and socialization, such as shaming or devising resonant frames, to prompt the adoption of norms. Despite its many contributions, this scholarship took a top-down, state-centric approach in which the persuasiveness of human rights norms was squarely placed in their content, without considering the potential delegitimizing effects of and the (un)persuasiveness of their practice.

A more critical wave of IR literature subsequently emerged highlighting local interactions with and contestation of international norms in non-Western contexts. By highlighting processes of localization, Acharya, for example, challenged the prevailing literature's assumptions of good international norms overcoming bad local cultures, highlighting both the existing literature's skewed picture of the operation of international norms and the agency exercised in non-Western contexts (Acharya, 2004). Other norm contestation scholarship similarly attuned to the ways power can be embedded in international norm dynamics increasingly took a "practice turn." Notably, Wiener demonstrated how norms can be constituted and contested through practice, mapping different types of contestation at varying stages of norm development and highlighting their "meaning in use" (Wiener, 2018). This literature prompted increased recognition of the agency of marginalized and non-Western actors, moved beyond top-down understandings of how norms operate and highlighted the power relations embedded in both the practice and study of international relations. Yet, even when considering practice, this literature has also remained primarily focused on the content of norms—namely, how they are contested or reconstituted—without treating practice as a factor that can more independently shape rejection or acceptance of international norms.

A parallel expanding critical scholarship has emerged within a variety of disciplines ranging from history to anthropology highlighting the abundant ways power is embedded in contemporary human rights politics and practice, for example, by serving as "a regulatory discourse—a means of obstructing or co-opting more radical demands" (Brown, 1995, 87), being neoliberal through a propensity to overlook economic inequalities coupled with an inability to challenge market logics (Godoy, 2013) and being readily co-opted to justify violence while creating new forms of subjugation (Mokhtari, 2009). Although providing many illuminating and potent critiques integral to understanding the mockery of morality experience of human rights, many critical scholars have traditionally adhered to a "a deep-seated skepticism about human rights" (Goodhart, 2015, 39), generally understating and sidestepping the potential popular appeal of the content of human rights norms in non-Western contexts (Kennedy, 2005; Moyn, 2010). Thus, while norm dynamics scholars overlook experiences of practice through a virtually exclusive focus on norm content, critical scholars across disciplines tend to focus on problematic practice while discounting the potential popular resonance of the content of human rights.

A few recent works have begun shedding light on some of these blind spots. For example, Anthony Chase has called for taking the "lived realities" of human rights seriously (Chase, 2022), and in their new study using Google searches, Dancy and Fariss have demonstrated human rights' global resonance and concentrated interest in the Global South, with additional findings that the discourse is "most resonant where people face regular state violence" (Dancy & Fariss, 2023, 1).

This article contributes to this nascent literature by demonstrating the broad potential appeal of the human rights framework while centering the practice of human rights, and popular evaluations of the morality of that practice, in understandings of why marginalized populations gravitate toward or away from human rights.

The field

This research draws from empirical observations from time spent in various Middle Eastern and North African locales over a span of 22 years.¹ Although the article draws heavily from fieldwork conducted in Egypt (2011, 2012, and 2013), Tunisia (2013), and Washington, D.C., when interlocutors were visiting or exiled (2012–2020), the empirical observations underlying its theoretical claims also arise from human rights collaborations and fieldwork in three other Middle Eastern contexts: Iran (1998, 1999, 2000, and 2002), Jordan (2006), and Yemen (2007). Cumulatively, the fieldwork in all six contexts encompassed more than 84 interviews with human rights activists, government officials, Islamists, and secular opposition figures, as well as observations from a variety of events such as human rights dialogues, training workshops, and protests.² Finally, the fieldwork afforded opportunities to gauge the “the political street,” Bayat defined as the “the collective sentiments, shared feelings, and public opinions of ordinary people in their day-to-day utterances and practices that are expressed broadly in public spaces—in taxis, buses, and shops, on street sidewalks, or in mass street demonstrations” (Bayat, 2010, 13).

The ideal types formulated are empirically grounded in that they provide “formal representations” of accumulated thoughts and empirical observations over time and space (Jackson, 2017). At the same time, the typology is also being applied to and used as an analytical lens to make sense of and better interpret complex dynamics in a specific case: that of the trajectory of popular engagements with the human rights framework in contemporary Egypt and the broader Middle East.

Middle Eastern populations are referred to as “marginalized non-Western” populations in this research. Here, marginalization is not necessarily societal and socio-economic but geographic and special (Dangschat, 2009). Specifically, these populations’ marginalization stems from living in a region where the operation of entwined local and global power structures significantly limit their power and agency over their own lives and the effects of these structures of power can extend beyond ordinary people to societal elites such as activists. Relatedly, despite the human rights framework’s widely recognized limited impact, the Middle East is a region particularly unprotected by the framework (Allain, 2004). This article does not intend to treat marginalized and non-Western as synonymous categories; rather, the reference to “non-Western” populations is adopted because the “non-West,” a widely-adhered to yet problematic artificial construct, has traditionally been imagined as particularly resistant to the content of human rights. Thus, although the typology is derived from empirical observations from the Middle East, its analytical insights can be employed to shed light on and interpret core dynamics around the interactions of populations subject to differing forms of marginalization(s) with rights frameworks in a variety of contexts, both Western or non-Western.

A typology of marginalized popular experiences of human rights

This section lays out Egyptian and broader Middle Eastern experiences of human rights as mockery of morality, manifesting morality, and moral maze, along with both the practice of human rights giving rise to each and the implication of each for understandings of the resonance of human rights. Although it puts forth a typology, the empirical research presented clearly also has a temporal dimension, following the trajectory of political developments and human rights dynamics in Egypt and the broader region. The differing eras and their varying domestic and international political contexts, including the regime types of ruling governments, are among a variety of contingencies that contribute to the emergence of the different experiences of human rights laid out.

Human rights as mockery of morality

For many marginalized populations, the dominant experience of human rights in practice has been that of a mockery of morality. Here, cumulatively a power-laden politics and practice of human rights is widely experienced as flying in the face of the framework's moral promise. As a result, human rights talk is collectively judged to be a light and patently corrupted instrument deployed disingenuously by various elite and powerful actors in ways that not only fail to challenge abuses of power and injustice, but instead primarily bolster and reproduce them. Human rights activists and the discourse they employ thus become associated with the absence of integrity, genuine moral commitments, and a real will to disrupt the status quo enough to bring about substantial change. At the same time, marginalized populations are highly conscious of their exclusion from the framework's emancipatory promise. Human rights are, as a result, experienced as unmistakably performative and imbued with appalling moral contradictions, the operation of power in plain sight rendering its asserted moral vision a farce. When experienced as a mockery of morality, human rights is alienating and fosters a sense of injustice exacted not only by abusive actors but by the human rights framework itself, producing widespread cynicism.

The power-laden practice of human rights in the Middle East

Although the practice giving rise to popular experiences of human rights as mockery of morality can take different forms, at its core, it is characterized by a practice that readily compromises with, acquiesces to, serves, or furthers existing structures of power. In what follows, the contours of the Egyptian and broader Middle Eastern practice prompting popular experiences of human rights as mockery of morality are laid out.

First, this power-laden practice is marked by the state's adroit co-opting of human rights. In Egypt, the Mubarak regime carefully choreographed human rights deployments to ensure the framework had as little impact on its power and repressive means as possible (Hanny Megally, 2006). It conspicuously declared vague commitments to human rights, signed human rights treaties with little intent to implement them, designed a National Council for Human Rights to serve as window dressing (Cardenas & Flibbert, 2005), and vied for seats on UN human rights bodies to join forces with other states simultaneously regurgitating human rights scripts and undermining the framework. Domestic rights "campaigns" were designed to exact the least cost to the regime while providing Western governments and audiences with enough tokenism to proceed with hegemonic arrangements. Women's rights campaigns such as "Suzanne's Law," named after the first lady pointing to discrimination in Islamic family law, constituted "state feminism." In these ways, human rights practice legitimated and stabilized Mubarak's regime more than posing real costs or challenges to it.

Second, Western governments asserted rhetorical commitments to human rights while maintaining an ally-status relationship with Egypt's repressive regime, providing foreign legitimation through smiles and handshake photo ops in lavish settings alongside billions of dollars in arms, military cooperation, and economic dealings, while funding depoliticized initiatives with minimal structural impact focused on women's rights, religious minority rights, or promoting the rule of law. Again, instead of upending it, the dominant practice of human rights helped perpetuate Western hegemony in the region.

As an expanding literature on "ngoization" (Abdo, 2010; Choudry & Kapoor, 2013) has put forth, the work of many domestic and international human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) was replete with their own contradictions as they slid into cycles of self-preservation and largely depoliticized token achievements to showcase in the next round of grants rather than catalyzing meaningful change (Allen, 2013; Choudry & Kapoor, 2013). In Egypt, while an array of advocacy initiatives dedicated to promoting human rights sprang up like a cottage industry, particularly in the 9/11 era, most NGOs failed to offer much hope for the meaningful realization of

the core emancipatory promise of human rights (Hanny Megally, 2006). One activist described the Egyptian human rights community as having been “complacent,” arguably “ossified.”³

We are all based in Cairo. We are all working on policy levels. We don't have grassroots. One hundred percent of our funding comes from the West. If you had asked a leader of the human rights movement to list the agenda of the human rights movement in 2000 and again in 2010, he would have given you exactly the same list of problems and concerns. Not only had things not changed, there were no attempts at changing them. That's what I mean by complacency. ... There were no efforts to push the margin, diversify the funding, establish a movement at a grassroots level, even at a time when social movements were rising, labor strikes were sweeping the country, when young people were organizing for 6 April or El Baradie campaign or others, the human rights community was still doing the report, the press release, the conference, the training.⁴

Furthermore, in the Middle East, all of the problematic ways critical scholars have identified human right being entwined with power existed alongside geopolitics facilitating “savages, victims, saviors” (Mutua, 2001) human rights discourses serving Western military, political, and economic hegemony before and particularly in the years following 9/11 (Mokhtari, 2009). Within this landscape, Western governments and international nongovernment organizations (INGOs) became the primary force defining the Middle East's human rights predicaments and prescribing remedies, through both their own initiatives and their funding of local NGOs. The human rights talk generated was heavy in its emphasis on women's rights and other violations for which backward cultural and religious belief were designated as the key culprits (abu-Lughod, 2013) and light on its emphasis on the political rights violations and the authoritarian-hegemonic pacts, neoliberal arrangements, and human toll of military interventions implicating Western governments (abu-Lughod, 2013; Mokhtari, 2012). Human rights were enlisted in this way to sustain depoliticized explanations for the population's suffering, in effect, placing the blame for people's suffering exclusively on the population itself while obscuring and justifying Western powers' political, economic, and military interventions. Even when meaningfully put forth, local activists' and populations' articulations of human rights violations were at once drowned out by these louder Western interventions and stifled by local governments' repression.

Cumulatively, these dynamics resulted in minimal Middle Eastern agency in defining the nature and scope of its own predicament vis-à-vis the human rights paradigm. It also shed light on a key paradox of rights frameworks: No matter how universal or liberal their claims, rights regimes regularly exclude marginalized groups and the terms of entry are set by dominant groups (McCann, 2014). This practice rendered Middle Eastern populations among the most excluded from the human rights regime's grandiose emancipatory promise (Allain, 2004).

Significantly, within this practice, the operation of power vis-à-vis human rights was largely unconcealed. The Western hegemony dabbled in human rights but made little effort to hide the glaringly contradictory and disingenuous dimensions of its deployments. Similarly, as with the requirements of their populations offering exaggerated exaltations of them described by Wedeen (Wedeen, 1999), local autocrats' patently ludicrous statements of “we have no political prisoners” or “nowhere else is human rights respected more than here” are (and are understood as) merely conspicuous demonstrations of these regimes' power to co-opt the human rights framework and exercise power over their populations.

“What human rights?” Experiencing human rights as a mockery of morality

Situated in the middle of and observing this power-laden politics play out around them, marginalized populations take note that the prime actors using human rights discourses, from domestic and foreign government officials to local and international human rights activists, seem to be co-opting, corrupting, or instrumentalizing the value-based framework, these populations can accordingly become highly conscious of their exclusion from the human rights' asserted universalism. Experiencing the power-laden practice of human rights thus encompasses marginalized

populations' collective sentiment or judgment that, despite putting forth grandiose emancipatory promises, human rights operates primarily as a corrupted tool of the powerful, particularly when it comes to them and, as such, is a mockery of the morality it espouses.

Prior to the 2011, in many Middle Eastern contexts, a shared understanding of the widespread immorality and corruption of human rights by the powerful prevailed. As Allen captured in the Palestinian case, there is a "collective recognition ... of human rights as performance," punctuated by "a sense that concern for human rights was a pretense, a facade that everyone recognized as such but was feigning to keep up nevertheless ... [a] shared charade" (Allen, 2013, pp. 2–9).

In many parts of the region, these sentiments were best captured in a common refrain almost reflexively put forth with a shake of the head and unmistakable moral indignation, upon hearing the term "human rights" mentioned: "What human rights?" "There are no human rights," "Human rights do not exist here," or, "Human rights are just an illusion." I first encountered the refrain in a taxi in Iran's impoverished Khuzestan province in 1998. After I uttered the words "human rights," the driver responded, "What human rights ma'am? Look at these children playing in running sewage. ... There are no human rights." During the 2000s, in Yemen and Jordan, the "what human rights?" rhetorical question was followed by references to America's post-9/11 wars, Abu Ghraib, and Guantanamo.⁵

At the same time, despite being largely aware of the human rights framework (Chase, 2012), Middle Eastern populations are also highly conscious of the ways the operation of power renders the promise of human rights "available, but not accessible" (Khosravi, 2017, p. 3) to them. Instead, they adhere to the notion that, in the practice of human rights that applies to them, the framework is so circumscribed by structures of power that it cannot bear fruit for them, even as it can be meaningfully realized elsewhere, as reflected in another common popular refrain, "Dogs have more rights in the West than we do here."

In Egypt and throughout the region, popular consciousness of how Western hegemony produced their exclusion from the promise of human rights was ubiquitous, especially in relation to the erasure of Palestinian rights in American political discourses and the inescapable racial, ethnic, and religious hierarchies underlying American post-9/11 violence (Sedgwick, 2010). Egyptians widely understood that their government had a client–patron relationship with the United States (Jamal, 2012) and that any odes to human rights by the regime were strictly meant for Western audiences' consumption toward the end of maintaining the appearances necessary for that relationship, a view akin to that expressed by a Saudi teacher who, when asked about women being granted the right to vote, responded, "It's just to impress the West."⁶ An Egyptian participant's comments in a 2004 *BBC Arabic Dialogue* on human rights captures widely held Arab views of Western governments' human rights practice as morally corrupt and infuriatingly hypocritical.

It is not new nor surprising ... that violations are widespread by Arab regimes. What is surprising and sometimes disgusting is that those who benefitted from these regimes on the shoulders of their people for more than fifty years and provided them with all forms of support and methods of repression and terrorism and helped them to crush any popular movement, demanding political, or social rights, under the pretext of fighting destructive ideas. They are glad to tell us today about our crippled democracy and weep over the human rights they have already trampled on with the heavy shoes of their followers.⁷

Finally, there was a widespread sense that human rights NGOs and their staffs created and personally benefited from "a human rights industry," which acts like "a kind of treadmill, spinning and rolling out projects, representational forms, funds and jobs" but produces little real change (Allen, 2013, p. 15). In this way, human rights activists and NGOs were seen (sometimes in exaggerated ways) as perpetuating the farce and contributing to the corruption of human rights by playing along and depoliticizing it. Although some activists were seen as deploying human rights with integrity, they were thought to be rendered irrelevant by the broader power dynamics at play. Thus, despite their efforts to translate "rights discourse into locally relevant

language,” Egyptian human rights groups “struggled with questions of local legitimacy,” enjoyed “limited clout,” and experienced popular rejection (Morayef, 2015, 11).

Taken together, these dispositions toward human rights produced a collective judgment or “definition of the situation” (ball-Rokeach, 1973, 380) that, in its prevailing practice and politics, the human rights framework has been largely corrupted and was plagued by glaring moral contradictions. Significantly, the operation of power was understood to be overt and largely unconcealed, and the judgment that the human rights framework has been morally corrupted was a widely shared source of the framework’s delegitimization.

The resonance of human rights and the emotional register of human rights as mockery of morality

Large segments of Middle Eastern populations endured mass repression, poverty, and injustices constituting what Khosravi described as “the multiple precarities” of life (Khosravi, 2017, 5) at the hand of both domestic and international actors. In Egypt prior to the 2011 uprising, there was “pervasive discontent due to unemployment, corruption, inequality, police brutality, rigged elections, crumbling infrastructure, and the specter of an octogenarian president’s succession by his son” (Pearlman, 2013, 396). The population increasingly viewed the state as corrupt, failed, and responsible for the widespread suffering of its people, while popular support for its patron–client relationship with the United States was dwindling, as it seemed to only be benefiting the regime and its cronies while facilitating the morally reprehensible treatment of Palestinians, Iraqis, and other Arabs and Muslims (Sedgwick, 2010).

Human rights’ recognition of and rhetorical promise of accountability for these injustices and indignities could capture and overlap with Egyptians’ grievances, while also fulfilling a desperate need to appeal to a higher order when virtually all other avenues for seeking recourse seemed fully closed off. One Egyptian activist wrote of receiving “thousands of complaints from the poorest and least educated segments of society, many ... written in halting, broken prose, and often with spelling mistakes ... looking like appeals for help sent out to sea in a bottle” (Hassan, 2011, 24). Another activist interviewed similarly reported “people writing letters ... asking what is the address to the international human rights organization and we have to explain to them there is no one mother organization.”⁸ Similarly, the widespread indictments of the United States’ post-9/11 policies demonstrated that, although charged with relativism, Middle Eastern populations longed for the “universal application” of the human rights framework’s core principles (Mokhtari, 2009).

Yet, experiencing a systemized global discourse claiming to uphold moral values they seek as overwhelmingly corrupted and off limits to them in the face of its moral promise and professed universal application can give rise to strong feelings of injustice, morally rooted indignation, and even disgust or outrage as well as resignation, despair, powerlessness. The fact that the framework’s corruption is so unconcealed can itself foster disbelief and indignation, rendering it alienating, and ultimately insulting (adding insult to injury). These emotions in turn produce “a state of cynicism” that unites “human rights defenders, abusers, victims, critics and observers alike” (Allen, 2013, p. 2).

This cynicism stems from more than just cost–benefit assessments of the framework’s utility. It is also related to a what Vaclav Havel termed the desire “to live in truth.” At certain moments, ordinary people become aware of their complicity in perpetuating the own subjugation (Wedeen, 1999), feeling that by submitting to and remaining silent in the face of authoritarian arrangements, they are upholding a farce (Al-On, 2015). Accordingly, “individuals defy authority due to the inherent benefit of actualizing their convictions or sense of self, sometimes regardless of the ability of protest to actually effect change” (Pearlman, 2013, 389), fulfilling inherent needs for “dignity, self-respect, and recognition” (Varshney, 2003, 85). Human rights, when experienced as a value-based framework prescribing principled action but producing its opposite, fails to uphold

such a need for morally consistent behavior. If they seek to escape the farce of their own political orders, it follows that the framework they deploy to do so cannot itself be experienced as farce.

Because “in practice, the governed decide whether and how human rights norms connect to their lifeworld,” and their agency vis-à-vis human rights includes the capacity to judge their “options in practical as well as normative terms” (Draude, 2017, p. 577), ordinary people in Egypt and elsewhere in the region largely kept their distance from the human rights framework (Azzam, 2017) as a means of exercising moral agency and maintaining a sense of dignity, amid the dual indignities of their predicament and the corrupted practice of human rights around them. Human rights became a discourse primarily deployed by government officials, intellectuals and activists. Emphasizing the lack of popular trust, an Egyptian activist interviewed stated that before the 2011 uprisings, their audience was composed of the United Nations, foreign embassies, occasionally the media, and select government officials willing to meet with them, but they did not have an audience among the population.⁹

On the other hand, as much as they are conscious of their marginalization and exclusion from the promise of the framework, underlying their widespread cynicism, indictment of human rights in practice and the “what human rights?” refrain, is an aspiration for the rhetorical promise of human rights one day being accessible to them. Cynicism toward human rights is not just “a way that power is reproduced and political stasis maintained” (Allen, 2013, p. 27) or a manifestation of apathy or “simply a normative judgment on the stance of people who use the human rights system for their own purposes” (Allen, 2013, p. 188). Rather, it should be understood as “a critical stance by which those who are displeased with choices available in the present hold on to the belief that such limited options are not all that there should be” and “part of how people continue to critique and search, or at least hope, for something better” (Allen, 2013, pp. 189 and 27). This sentiment was explicitly articulated in another response to the 2004 *BBC Arabic Dialogue* on human rights:

The problem is not human rights, but the problem is that it is a language used for ill. Does anyone think we do not wish that one day we enjoy equal rights of the people under the Israeli Occupation? ... Is not what is happening in Iraq under the slogan of democracy, and is there a person in the world that resembles Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden more than President Bush and his followers? We want human rights but not from America and the global Zionism movement because it is like honey mixed with poison. We hope that you will teach us to grow and overcome the problems of poverty and unemployment and to rehabilitate ourselves and our institutions and to share our worries, not with shiny slogans, but rather in a practical way.¹⁰

Such statements speak to the ways in which, despite being weary of the immoral practice of the framework, marginalized people aspire for and retain hope that they can one day be freed of its corruption, and its emancipatory promise can be accessible to them.

In the end, although key parts of the human rights framework’s content could be highly resonant in a vacuum, the lightness, corruption, and indignity its practice encompassed meant that, taken as a whole, the human rights framework lacked the legitimacy to garner their engagement. As one Egyptian human rights activist interpreted average Egyptians’ predicament, “On the one hand, they saw Iraq and Afghanistan and on the other hand, they wanted their rights,” adding, “They wanted their rights, but they didn’t want their rights by these methods.”¹¹

Human rights as manifesting morality

Marginalized populations can also experience human rights in a diametrically opposed form, that of manifesting morality. In this form, human rights is experienced as a politics of conviction imbued with moral weight, epitomizing pure, genuine, faithfully moral action and intent. As such, human rights can be adopted as an idiom that lays bare and articulates a meaningful challenge to the immorality and injustices of the status quo. Key deployments of human rights could be widely experienced as being born out of and attuned to the local populations’ various

struggles. While those performing human rights persist, a human rights practice embodying ethical commitments and challenging structures of power in ways widely recognized as genuine and honorable moves to the fore. The coherence in human rights' emancipatory promise and moral practice in turn renders it a compelling avenue for articulating a desire for greater justice, dignity, and new morally guided social, political, and economic orders.

The manifestly moral practice of human rights in the Middle East

A manifestly moral practice of human rights can also take many shapes, but at this core, it encompasses a genuine pursuit of emancipatory aims and intent to take on the underlying structures of power producing suffering in marginalized contexts. Here the human rights practice that emerged in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East in the lead up to, apex, and immediately following the 2011 Arab uprisings is laid out.

In Egypt, beginning in the years leading to the 2011 uprising, social movements adopted the language of human rights and deployed it when publicly arguing that living under authoritarianism facilitated by repression was a morally corrupt form of political organization,¹² while challenging economic structures, for example, through the 2008 Mahalla Kubra strike. Concurrently, the rise in new media coupled with the US war on terror brought local and Western human rights activists to the ubiquitous cable news shows of the era, where they unequivocally condemned American wars and torture and denials of detainee rights within them before bringing the conversation back to the region's own repressive regimes.

Finally, notable transformations took shape within the Egyptian human rights NGO sector. Although some human rights activists remained depoliticized and disconnected from their populations, increasingly, a new generation of activists emerged who were introspective, attuned to problematic human rights politics, and believed they should step outside of their Cairo offices, insular conferences at high-end hotels, and international forums to connect with their communities and better align their work with local notions of justice.¹³ Some began centering social and economic rights while others organized protests against the Iraq war and US war on terror abuses or in solidarity with Palestinians.¹⁴ These human rights activists' worldviews and politics increasingly mirrored those of social movements demanding structural change than those of the traditional NGO actors inclined to play it safe with minimal impact and by working through the state.

With the arrival of the Egypt's dramatic 2011 uprising, local human rights activists' entry into Tahrir Square demanding the fall of the regime was the culmination of this new form of human rights activism. Virtually indistinguishable from the social movement activists leading the "leaderless" uprising, they participated in strategizing, drafting lists of protestor demands (many formulated as rights), facilitating legal and medical assistance to targeted protestors, and representing protests to the media.

Once Mubarak was ousted and the transition began, these human rights activists continued practicing a transformed human rights politics. As one activist described it, they began placing

much more emphasis on community activism and community organizing and public mobilization but not in a sort of messianic way where we are trying to preach the issues, but ... as part of a movement for social change. That was never the case before. Before we wanted to change some laws, end some violations, establish some judicial precedents, spread awareness. But now it is like, ok how does this ... project contribute to social change ... in a meaningful, genuine way?¹⁵

Human rights activists lent strategic and discursive support to the deluge of strikes and protests demanding social and economic rights, such as those by squatters claiming rights to housing and rural farmers seeking unionization (Bayat, 2021). When military leaders requested meetings with them, many refused, so to not to be co-opted.¹⁶ Finally, human rights practice not only increasingly moved beyond Western actors' preferred focus on rights attributed to depoliticized notions of backward culture and religion, it went beyond procedural rights such as due process

for a tortured political prisoner by insisting on the upending of the political structures that produced the detentions, torture, and other suffering to begin with.

Through these dynamics, rights claims increasingly became deeply political, “joined with transformative visions of justice” (McCann, 2014, 256). At the same time, the center of gravity of the politics of human rights in the Middle East moved from the West to the region itself, increasingly reflecting the agency of its population at that historical moment.

“When the sky is clear”: Experiencing human rights as manifesting morality

Conclusions about the human rights framework as a morally based normative framework can emerge from judgments about the sincerity, intentions, motivations, and integrity of actors deploying the discourse (Danković & Pickering, 2017). Observing human rights being practiced as outlined above can lead marginalized populations to judge activists’ commitments to advancing the emancipatory promise of human rights and as not feigned or superficial, but as real, genuine, honorable, born out of pure intentions, and driven by righteous indignation over the suffering they witness and the structures of power which sustain it. The weight of activists’ morally rooted practice can in turn move marginalized populations to a collective assessment of the human rights framework they deploy as being similarly rooted in moral integrity, defined as “a lack of hypocrisy in the context of consistency” (Monin & Merritt, 2012, 169) and, as such, a meaningful and compelling moral project.

Furthermore, when experiencing human rights as manifesting morality, the sense of being permanently confined to the framework’s “zones of exemption” (Khosravi, 2017) can give way to a sense of the possibility of inclusion. Although they understand that those wielding power, setting the terms of inclusion, or serving as gatekeepers have no intention of including them, experiencing human rights as manifesting morality can prompt marginalized populations to increasingly begin thinking that either inclusion is possible or, at the very least, there is some intrinsic worth in fighting for it (Pearlman, 2013).

In Egypt, many who participated, experienced the 2011 uprisings as expressed by Mohamed Yousry Salama as “the most beautiful, the most pure, and the most noble event in my life.”¹⁷ Through their presence in Tahrir Square, the social movement and human rights activists became inextricably tied to the ethos of the uprising, and similarly viewed as pure and sincere. A key indicator of this was the emergence of an unprecedented popular embrace, moving them from unmistakable obscurity to becoming among the most sought-after actors of the transition, recognized and thanked in the streets. Activists interviewed repeatedly spoke of a drastically altered public opinion of them and a public “trust” they had never experienced.

After the revolution the human rights issue became so mainstream that not a day passes without one or two human rights activists being on TV on a lot of the big talk shows. And people watch these talk shows more religiously than before. We became mainstream. The human rights community used to be fringe; we became very much mainstream. Then people began to identify names of organizations or activists and to trust them.¹⁸

He went on to describe:

[T]here was this embrace and we started to travel freely around the country as a human rights organization. I visited Aswan. I went to Nuba and the community, the local community would basically open the cultural palace of the village or the youth center ... the state-owned institutions. They opened them, hosted us and had banners to discuss human rights. There was so much demand all over the country for seminars and lectures and discussions and events.¹⁹

At the same time, his social media followers had climbed to more than 40,000, a figure he noted was exponentially greater than his NGO’s several-hundred-name mailing list acquired over 10 years. “For the first time, we have an audience,” he said, observing that they were “influencing public opinion” as the “human rights position” was sought by youth activists and a population trying to chart a path through a precarious democratic transition.²⁰

The principled practice of human rights gave human rights a different hue at the beginning of the Arab uprisings. In this, what one Egyptian activist called the “honeymoon” period, there was a broad public consensus that human rights in the form being practiced in the uprisings was morally rooted, principled, and aligned with emancipatory aspirations. As a Yemeni human rights activist interviewed in 2012 described in relation to similar dynamics of the Yemeni uprising, at the moment of the uprising “the sky was clear,” and for the first time, no one publicly criticized human rights or human rights activists.

Similarly, each instance of the principled practice of human rights that transpired moved Middle Eastern populations closer to experiencing a semblance of inclusion and imagining more real prospects of the framework’s promise being real for them. Paradoxically, inclusion in the promise of human rights began with the US war on terror. Although the torture and denials of due process to Arabs and Muslims laid bare their exclusion from the protection of the human rights framework, seeing human rights increasingly invoked in relation to American action in ways that challenged rather than facilitated the operation of international power dynamics, not only reflected their agency, it provided the novel experience of the framework being, to some degree, available to them.

The possibility of inclusion was most dramatically experienced in the apex of the uprisings, when activists wielding rights claims (among other discourses) overthrew four entrenched dictators. That previously improbable feat, accomplished at least in part through deployments of rights, suggested that the framework’s emancipatory promise could be realized, or at least that it was no longer “unrelentingly foreclosed” (Allen, 2013, 22) to them. Experiencing human rights practiced in ways that departed from its past mockery of morality experience enabled Egyptians to place more faith in the possibility that the promise of human rights could be fought for and attained by them, reclaimed from those who instrumentalized it, and ultimately rendered meaningful and true to the moral vision it professed.

The resonance of human rights and the emotional register of human rights as manifesting morality

If experiencing human rights as a mockery of morality breeds alienation and cynicism, human rights experienced as manifesting morality can inspire its opposite: hope, dignity, and a sense of recognition, enabling faith in the framework’s rhetorical promise. Manifesting morality is accompanied by a considerable expansion of hope. Hope produces horizons of possibility and potentialities (Khosravi, 2017, pp. 13–14; Kleist & Thorsen, 2017, pp. 1–2), while uncertainty and yearning serve as its core elements (Lazarus, 1991). Furthermore, a sense of dignity, a key tenet of human rights’ rhetorical promise, can emerge when experiencing the framework as manifesting morality, even if its outcomes are unknown, because a morally righteous call for values in and of itself can serve as a means of self-actualization and thus of reclaiming dignity. Reclaiming individual and national dignity (often in conjunction with rights claims) was such a central discursive frame of the Egyptian uprising, it was sometimes referred to it as “the revolution for dignity,” with a designated “a day of dignity,” while new post-uprising political parties incorporated the word dignity into their names. Similarly, “despite recognizing the uncertainty of the outcomes,” the uprising and early transition period produced a wellspring of hope for the change Egyptians now envisioned (Pearlman, 2013), a key component of which was an order that would guarantee their rights.

As one activist observed, “When change came, it used rights-based language” and, “the 2011 uprising suddenly brought human rights center stage in public discourse” (Morayef, 2015, p. 12). In the absence of a grand ideology, the language of human rights and concepts such as “dignity,” “freedom,” “citizenship,” “social justice” and “rule of law” were everywhere, used to frame a range of political and economic grievances against Mubarak, providing a key rationale for challenging his rule. Activist Asma Mahfouz described “demanding our rights, our fundamental human rights” as a primary reason why Egyptians should join protests on January 25, 2011.²¹ Egyptians

who participated in the 2011 protests “did so not only to challenge the regime, but also to rebuild society on better values” (Pearlman, 2013, 398).

As they entered the transition, ordinary Egyptians used rights to make sense of their lives and political predicament, constituting themselves as “rights-baring citizens” and the contentious politics they engaged in as claiming their basic rights. As one activist observed, even as their understandings of “human rights” differed from her own, just after the revolution, “If you [went] down the street ... [you would find that] people think they have rights and they see authorities as people who should serve their rights.”²² Rights talk and claims appeared on the signs in the hundreds of strikes and protests spurred by the uprising, on the influential evening talk shows, in satirical comedy routines, on the radio programs turned on in taxis, and in the discourse of virtually every old and new political figure. The number of (mostly middle-class) youth interested in doing “human rights work” expanded exponentially. A human rights activist elected to the post-uprising parliament interviewed found that even Salafist MPs expressing reservations about human rights being a Western discourse could be convinced of the framework’s merits. Finally, Egyptian activists interviewed discovered that, even in less resonant rights arenas, experiencing human rights broadly as manifesting morality opened tremendous space for consciousness-raising.

The Egyptian case suggests that as marginalized populations seek to make sense of and find a path to transcend a slew of experiences of injustice and suffering, the rights claiming prescribed by the human rights framework, if experienced as meaningful, can be highly resonant. Once they are exposed to the framework’s animating argument that all human beings are morally entitled to certain rights, they can increasingly adopt rights subjectivities and rights consciousness (Merry, 2006), allowing the frame to enter their everyday identity constructions, discourses, and “stories they ... tell to make sense of their lives” (Engel, 2012, 427). It is important to note that the core *content* of human rights had not changed. Nor, had there been “a profound shift in values. ... When they demonstrated, it was in the name of principles they had long cherished” (Pearlman, 2013, 388). What had changed vis-à-vis the human rights framework was the emergence of its principled practice, rendering the framework more legitimate, meaningful, and aligned with the population’s moral sensibilities.

Human rights as moral maze

Although mockery of morality and manifesting morality can serve as ideal types occupying opposite ends of a vast spectrum of human rights practice, most human rights practice plays out somewhere in between, with different configurations, circumstances, or episodes moving experiences of human rights farther to one direction or the other, often being constituted by elements of both. Here, following the trajectory of the Middle East’s human rights experiences, the article lays out the contours of one increasingly prevalent middle experience that demonstrates both how the typology sheds lights on reality and how reality can depart from or evolve away from key features of the typology.

In the experience of human rights as a moral maze, ordinary people are bombarded by a flurry of human rights claims and counterclaims, many of which are strategically deployed by powerful actors to muddy the waters but are not readily identifiable as such, fragmenting popular dispositions toward human rights claims. Parts of the population adopt hyper-partisan human rights stances, whereas others find the muddled terrain produced by a whirlwind of accounts of human rights violations and challenges to the credibility and sincerity of those accounts or the activists posing them too difficult to evaluate as either manifesting morality or morally corrupted. Thus, the moral maze experience departs from the other two experiences in that human rights politics, while ubiquitous, is endlessly contested, often preventing a broad consensus among the population on the moral positioning of its practice. While hardly new, human rights experienced as moral maze has grown exponentially with the rise of social media and the polarized, post-truth, misinformation, and disinformation political sphere it is both a product of and for which it can be a catalyst.

The morally fractured practice of human rights

The practice of human rights giving rise to the framework being experienced as a moral maze is marked by various actors producing and becoming entangled with human rights claims and counterclaims that are hyperbolic, sensationalist, selective, saturating, and polarizing.

First, groups of political elites, often self-describing themselves as human rights devotees (or even activists), use the language of “human rights” and disseminate images and accounts of violence, repression, discrimination, and suffering as a means of adding moral legitimacy to their political agendas and generating moral outrage against, delegitimizing, and weakening a rival political actor. Such practice is longstanding in the Middle East (Carapico, 2006, pp. 147–148) and elsewhere, such as deployments of “human rights as war by other means” in the politics of Northern Ireland (Curtis, 2014), yet disinformation and misinformation amplify its impact. In Egypt, following their overwhelming post-uprising electoral victories, the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood deployed human rights rhetorically,²³ selectively (e.g. when its members were victims), based on political calculations, and often (although not always) in bad faith. Secular political figures, in turn, mobilized human rights discourses against Islamists, painting them as the gravest threat to rights facing Egypt and vowing to never compromise with them on rights. Despite contradictions in their own principled commitments, protecting women’s and Christians’ rights became secular forces’ means of catalyzing support and delegitimizing the Brotherhood. In allied media outlets and on social media, valid criticisms of Islamists’ rights positions turned into hyper-partisan, sensationalized, caricatured, and alarmist discourses on the existential threat they posed to human rights, the narrative taking on a life of its own and eventually serving as a justification for supporting the military coup against Islamist President Morsi (Whitson, 2021), dismantling Egypt’s democratic experiment.

Furthermore, while actors sitting atop existing power structures continue to undermine the human rights idea and activists, they do so in ways that are increasingly more savvy, veiled, and difficult to conclusively attribute to them. Latching on to actual or fabricated political motivations, ethical contradictions, or human right violations of actors invoking human rights, they undertake “the deliberate sowing of doubt” (Wedeen, 2019, 78), using old and new media to muddy the waters around the morality of human rights practice. Many Middle Eastern states used veiled political messaging discrediting activists and propagating conspiracies via bots and autonomous accounts on social media (Jones, 2020) or by entwining state and opposition discourses in cultural productions (Bajoghli, 2019).

In Egypt, government disinformation surfaced in the uprisings’ earliest days and was a constant throughout the transition (Greenberg, 2019). Early on, while itself receiving billions in American aid, the military quickly turned to the tried-and-true methods of manufacturing a scandal tying local human rights NGOs to US funding and agendas. Through an elaborate media and judicial campaign, the military was effective in (re)casting doubt on the motives and ethical commitments of Egyptian human rights NGOs, a strategy it combined with co-opting human rights discourses, purporting to offer protection against the Islamists’ threats to rights, and repression. Post-coup, Sisi’s regime intensified social media attacks against human rights activists using their personal photos and information, creating thousands of fake social media accounts and “electronic trolling committees” to distort and cast doubt on them and their rights claims (Dangerous Liaisons, 2020, pp. 5–6).

Human rights activists both fell prey to and contributed to furthering the moral maze. They could sometimes find themselves drowned out by it, getting drawn into competing with the self-styled “human rights activists” by putting forth more hyperbolic, sensationalist, or embellished claims themselves (Wedeen, 2019). Furthermore, activists who may have once been widely hailed as heroic principled actors at the height of the uprisings found their credibility questioned in ways that were considerably more damaging and difficult to dispose of than the canned “traitor” or “Western” labels of the past, forcing them to spend considerable time simply defending past and present statements or a slew of mostly manufactured charges of immoral or hypocritical stances, behavior, or associations.

Finally, traditional human rights activists themselves used human rights as an auxiliary device to fight political and ideological battles (Curtis, 2014; Salime, 2011), their actions mirroring those of the political activists co-opting human rights, but better packaged in signature global human rights discourses. In Egypt, a significant cadre of human rights activists instrumentalized human rights by focusing almost exclusively on condemning and raising incessant alarm bells about Islamists' human rights stances. Women's rights activists of this persuasion refused to meet with Morsi's Islamist administration on the grounds that there was no need to dialogue with people whose "position was already clear,"²⁴ and when the only legislation pertaining to women passed by the democratically elected Islamist-dominated parliament was one that provided female heads of households healthcare, they did not credit Islamists for it. Most gravely, by the time of the coup, some dabbled in the military's association of Islamists with "terrorism," a key discursive tool the military used to justify the repression and eventual massacre of Brotherhood members. Even activists challenging Islamists' human rights stances in balanced ways blended in with and became hard to distinguish from more hyperbolic voices of their colleagues, political activists, or the military, all speaking of the rights threats posed by Islamists.

Human rights discourse quickly evolved to fuel polarization, accompanied by othering and dehumanization. This could be seen by a pre-coup video circulated on social media in which a 12-year-old Egyptian boy articulately indicts Islamists' intentions to curtail women's rights.²⁵ Immediately following the 2013 coup, supporters referred to the mostly Islamist protestors challenging the coup as *khirfan* (sheep), aiming "to dehumanize and deny agency, much in the same way the Muslim brotherhood dismiss their opponents as *kuffar* [infidels] or *feloul* [Mubarak regime beneficiaries or loyalists]" (Carr, 2013).

In this practice, human rights becomes an amalgamation of accounts of actual abuses; fabricated, exaggerated, or sensationalized human rights claims constructed to influence audiences for a range of political ends; and efforts to highlight and conflate the political agendas and moral contradictions of politicized deployments with more legitimate human rights claims. Even the most morally sound human rights claims can drown in this sea of contestation.

Although the uprising and transition produced gains in the population's agency (El-Ghobashy, 2021), the moral maze practice of human rights fractured and diminished the collective power and agency of Egyptians through polarization and confusion. This in turn diminished their capacity to mobilize formidable challenges to the sources of their subjugation (El Kurd, 2019).

"I cannot wrap my head around it anymore": Experiencing human rights as moral maze

When each time a human rights claim is made, its validity and veracity are challenged through competing truth claims, rumors, and conspiracy theories, over time nearly all human rights deployments can appear riddled with moral contradictions, virtually every image or account potentially fabricated, and every apparent act of courageous defiance potentially staged. In the environment of "pervasive ambiguity" (ball-Rokeach, 1973), disentangling and identifying the moral positioning of the flurry of human rights claims and counterclaims becomes an arduous task, inhibiting consensus on which actors are principled and which are not. Although those aligning with partisan camps may adhere to an unshakable moral clarity, the barrage of human rights messaging can leave others concluding that human rights is another facet of "the fictionalization of reality" (Greenberg, 2019) and that the moral positioning of the human rights practice around them is "unknowable" and "impossible to adjudicate," leading them to "suspend judgment," finding and opting for "a potent rationale for inaction in contexts in which action might have otherwise seemed morally incumbent" (Wedeen, 2019, p. 80).

In relation to inclusion and exclusion from the framework, past experiences of exclusion can lead some within marginalized populations to attribute their subjugation to continued exclusion, whereas others may move beyond thinking in terms of inclusion or exclusion and instead adopt

the view that human rights is a mirage for everyone rather than a value system available to some but from which they are excluded.

In the (global) Middle Eastern context, the disorienting state of the moral maze experience was best captured in an exchange with an Iranian Uber driver I encountered some 22 years after encountering the “what human rights?” retort in the taxi in Iran. The Uber driver, who had recently immigrated to the United States, inquired about my line of work. When I uttered “human rights,” he immediately referenced a veteran human rights activist who had recently been subject to a barrage of online accusations of improprieties by diaspora-based opponents of the Iranian regime and fellow activists. With a shake of his head signaling regret and exasperation, he said:

I don't know ma'am. I cannot wrap my head around these things anymore. I used to like her. With this Twitter though ... they say she took money from an unknown entity. I just don't know what to think anymore.

In Egypt's late transition, 2014 coup and post-coup periods, accounts of human rights violations were routinely denied by partisans. An Egyptian journalist described the challenges to her account and photo of the body of an Islamist shot by the army in 2013.

They were disputing that a man had died even when the photo was uploaded. One man responded: “he doesn't have Egyptian features.” Others suggested it was an old photo. When a video appeared ... attention turned to his injuries. ... The most popular conclusion was that the MB (Muslim Brotherhood) themselves had killed Sobhy to incriminate the army. The outpouring of outrage in response to a suspected army killing of a civilian that usually characterizes such events was completely absent. (Carr, 2013)

Such incidents were emblematic of a shift from a relative moral consensus on certain acts of state violence in the mockery of morality and manifesting morality experiences of human rights to the lack of such a moral consensus among partisans and challenges it posed for the rest of the population to adjudicate human rights claims with moral clarity.

Moreover, the fact that significant segments of the population accepted the military's accounts in the NGO foreign funding scandal and later charges of American support for Islamists spoke to the population's attribution of their predicament to their global marginalization. When reflecting on the success of the military's manufactured scandal, one activist offered:

Like the rest of the Global South, we are a nation still struggling with a history of colonialism and we haven't made peace yet because colonialism continues in our region and so that makes people predisposed to believe that these Western powers are not angels that are trying to democratize. There must be an interest.²⁶

In the end, the fact that accounts of human rights abuses no longer carried the mobilizing power they had in the uprising era was (among other factors such as heightened repression) a product of large segments of the population once again finding it difficult to place faith in the promise of the human rights framework.

Resonance and emotional register of human rights as moral maze

Accounts and images of “moral offenses” such as repression, violence, and poverty can serve as a moral shock or stimulus “that sparks visceral reactions against a reprehensible reality” (Pearlman, 2013, 393). However, when bombarded by such accounts from all sides in conjunction with rumors, conspiracy theories, and accusations of falsified testimonies and doctored photos, “collaborative unknowability” and doubt generated can “modulate affective registers like anger and disgust along with the political judgements that might ensue” (Wadeen, 2019, p. 95).

As with the mockery of morality experience, the absence of trust in human rights accounts or actors produces the sense that power is all-encompassing and, with it, hopelessness, alienation, and a “pervasive sense of futility” (Pearlman, 2013). Nonetheless, also mirroring the mockery of morality experience, the moral maze experience does not result in a rupture with hope. For the polarized segments of the population, gravitation toward disinformation and polarization can be

a manifestations of hope, the shift in peoples' "focus from lived realities to emotional registers" serving as their last hope for achieving "the good life" in the face of ever-growing precarity (Young, 2021, 3).

Furthermore, as with the mockery of morality experience of human rights, their disengagement does not speak to the lack of resonance of the content of the normative framework. Partisans latch on to it more vigorously, even if in highly problematic ways. Those who step back from it do so largely due to the indeterminate moral positioning of its practice, not because they reject the values the human rights paradigm espouses. Thus, when marginalized populations find their way out of the fractured moral maze and find moral clarity in the practice of human rights around them, they can once again pass judgment, a process aided by past manifesting morality experiences.

In Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran, a new wave of contentious politics and social movements reemerged in 2018–2020. Although varying in degree and dynamics, rights claims, an ethos of rights, rights consciousness, and/or human rights activists were integrated into these movements in many of the same ways they had been in the decade's initial wave of popular protests. Similarly, human rights activism around several episodes involving Israeli violence against Palestinians produced manifesting morality dynamics.

In Egypt, experiencing human rights as meaningful in practice had enduring effects, remaining a part of the accumulation of popular experiences with the paradigm that could be drawn upon. As Bayat argued, memories of episodes of significant segments of the urban and rural poor "feeling free," demanding rights, and challenging entrenched hierarchies "and the moral resources they generated have become part of the popular consciousness" (Bayat, 2015). This has allowed human rights to remain a key idiom of protest and opposition politics. Finally, Egyptian and other Middle Eastern activists (many exiled) have increasingly found ways of "reopen(ing) possibilities for judgement" in the significantly more complex environments they now operated (Wedeen, 2019, p. 82).

Conclusion: The significance of mapping the multiplicity of human rights experiences in practice

This article argues that the legitimacy and moral persuasiveness of the practice of human rights constitute a core dimension of how human rights norms are popularly evaluated and ordinary people in marginalized contexts arrive at decisions about whether or how to engage with the framework. By focusing almost exclusively on the content of norms, the existing scholarship fails to make the necessary connections between marginalized populations' realities vis-à-vis the practice of human rights unfolding around them and their proclivity to engage with the framework. In all three experiences presented, the content and moral claims of the human rights framework were broadly resonant, but the legitimacy and meaning popularly accorded to human rights stemmed not only from that content but also from judgments about the morality of its practice, which together constituted their moral substance.

Three caveats are in order. First, human rights' resonance is not a given and can change over time as societal norms shift. Second, although this article treats the content and practice of norms as analytically distinct categories, the line between the two is a fluid one—namely, because the constitution and interpretations of the content of norms can also be a form of their practice. Finally, a host of shifting and contingent factors—such as domestic political contexts, including regime types, the policies of foreign actors, and characteristics of social movements and human rights NGOs—clearly contribute to how human rights is experienced in different contexts and temporalities. In fact, the multiplicity of human rights experiences in many respects stem from the multiplicity of the politicization of morality.

By adopting a “psychologically inflicted conceptualization of individuals as guided by both cognitive appraisals of information and emotional experiences,” (Pearlman, 2013, 400) another contribution made by this article lies in the links between human rights as a morally based framework and felt emotions it makes. Because morality constitutes a key form of meaning-making (Kurzman, 2008) tied to a wide range of emotions, there are affective dimensions both to the appeal of the content and to perceptions of the morality of the practice of human rights. Although recognizing the latter can broaden human rights and norm dynamics scholars’ analytical lenses, recognizing the former can broaden critical scholars’ analytical lenses. As Patricia Williams has argued, it is precisely their condition of precarity and marginalization that render even the thin protection offered by rights regimes and discourses so appealing to marginalized populations (Williams, 1987). Critical scholars’ discounting of rights overlooks how they can serve as “a fiercely motivational ... source of hope,” how experiences of “rights-assertion has been one of both solidarity and freedom, of empowerment of an internal and very personal sort ... a process of finding the self,” and how the turn to rights can be born from “the desire to heal a profound existential disillusionment” (Williams, 1987, 414–415).

Finally, the typology contributes to the greater recognition of marginalized non-Western populations’ agency. Moving beyond culturally essentialist assumptions that non-Western populations are particularly shaped by culture to recognize that there are instances in which human rights norms are desired but populations choose to keep their distance due to assessments of its power-laden practice provides a fuller picture of how marginalized populations exercise agency vis-à-vis human rights while also showcasing the multiplicity of their agency. This allows a shift in focus from depoliticized perceptions of these populations to the structures of power fostering their subjugation as the key obstacles to the realization of human rights’ emancipatory promise. Finally, recognizing that choosing to engage with human rights is just as much an act of agency as choosing not to engage with the framework (a blind spot of many critical works) further illuminates the agency of marginalized populations.

Notes

1. In other parts of this article, I use “Middle East” and “Middle Eastern” as shorthand for “Middle East and North Africa” and “Middle Eastern and North African” while acknowledging the problematic aspects of the shorthand as well as the term “Middle East” itself.
2. These 84 interviews were conducted under IRB protocols from American University (2011–2018) and York University (2006–2007). The research is also informed by field observations and interviews conducted while engaged in advocacy initiatives in the regions prior to that time.
3. Interview with Egyptian activist (June 2012).
4. Interview with Egyptian activist (June 2012).
5. For example, “حقوق الإنسان في العالم العربي” (Human Rights in the Arab World), BBC Arabic (January 11, 2004) and “Arab anger at Iraq torture photos,” BBC, May 4, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3683067.stm.
6. *Ladies first: Saudi Arabia’s female candidates*, Mona El-Naggar, producer, *New York Times* (2016).
7. “حقوق الإنسان في العالم العربي” (Human Rights in the Arab World), BBC Arabic (January 11, 2004).
8. Interview with Egyptian activist (June 2013).
9. Interview with Egyptian activist (June 2012).
10. BBC Arabic.
11. Interview with Egyptian activist (May 2011).
12. “عصر الحرية. حركة شباب 6 أبريل. حركة شباب 6 أبريل” Sept. 27, 2011, <https://shabab6april.wordpress.com/%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%86%D8%AD%D9%86-%D9%88-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D9%86%D8%AD%D9%86-%D9%87%D9%86%D8%A7-%D9%88-%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81%D8%9F%D8%9F%D8%B9%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-6-%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%84/>
13. Interview with Egyptian activists (May 2011 and June 2012).
14. Interview with Egyptian activist (June 2011).
15. Interview with Egyptian activist (June 2012).

16. Interview with Egyptian activist (June 2012).
17. Mohammad Yousry Salama, *يوميات إجهاد الثورة* (Diaries of Revolution Exhaustion). (Dar Al Shorouk, 2014) <https://www.shoroukbookstores.com/books/view.aspx?id=5ba4-7661-02932d69-a7b8527-2d2e22309>.
18. Interview with Egyptian activist (June 2012).
19. Interview with Egyptian activist (June 2012).
20. Interview with Egyptian activist (June 2012).
21. *Meet Asmaa Mahfouz and the vlog that helped spark the revolution*, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgjIgMdsEuk&feature=youtube_gdata_player.
22. Interview with Egyptian activist (June 2011).
23. "Founding statement of the Freedom and Justice Party," (June 1, 2011), <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=28662>.
24. Interview with Egyptian activist (February 2013).
25. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/07/06/video-meet-the-12-year-old-egyptian-boy-who-wonderfully-explains-his-countrys-crisis/>
26. Interview with Egyptian activist (Feb. 2013).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Egyptian activists who so generously shared their visions and experiences with me at a time of so much uncertainty, anxiety, and exhaustion. I would also like to thank Micheal Goodhart, Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, Elizabeth Thompson, Daniel Levine, Christoph Steinert, Amitav Acharya, Todd H. Hall, and this article's anonymous reviewers for their truly invaluable feedback on various drafts of this work.

Funding

Field research presented in this work was supported by the School of International Service at American University and the George Washington University's Project on Middle East Political Science.

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