

SGA Conference Report

on Wilton Park Conference (WP1032)

30th April – 01st March 2011

**Civil resistance: popular movements challenging oppression - policy issues for
the International community**by Fabian Hunold¹

Zurich, 18.05.2011

Prologue

On January 5th, 2011, I applied to attend a Wilton Park Conference titled “Non-violent civil resistance: why does it matter?”. Only ten weeks later, the world had changed. Rulers like Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Ben Ali in Tunisia, and Muammar al-Gaddafi in Libya – considered as political constants of the Arab World for decades – were forced to step down within days or had lost their legitimacy forever. Non-violent civil resistance movements had set North Africa and the Middle East on fire. From Morocco to Yemen, from Bahrain to Syria, no autocratic government still questioned if civil resistance mattered – it obviously did. The Wilton Park Conference on civil resistance took place in a period of accelerated history; a period highly driven by the very topic under discussion.

At Gatwick airport already, where several attendees gathered to take the shuttle bus to Wilton Park, the incredible timing and topicality of the conference was a convenient ice-breaker for participants to share opinions and knowledge about the ongoing events in North Africa and the Middle East. Hence, even before the exceptionally picturesque 16th century Wiston House came to sight amidst acres of rolling parkland, it seemed clear that this three-day conference would turn out to be an unforgettable experience.²

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² Attendance was made possible by the generous Wilton Park Grant provided by the Swiss Foreign Policy Association (SGA-ASPE). The grant holder would like to express his gratitude for this experience that will accompany him in his professional as well as personal life for many years to come.

Overall impression

The conference was co-hosted by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), an institution that has been providing knowledge and research on civil resistance for years. Apart from various researchers, the field of participants was completed by diplomats, former and current leaders of civil resistance movements, representatives of international organizations such as the African Union and OSCE, and relevant NGOs. The unique, open spirit at Wilton Park and the diverse background of participants provided an inter-disciplinary approach to the topic and controversial debates. The often quoted “magic of Wilton Park” indeed brings the participants close together from the very start, enables informal exchange, and allows to network in a – to the author – unprecedented atmosphere.

The first part of the conference was dedicated to thoroughly present the conference’s subject. Scholars and researchers held presentations on how civil resistance works and identified key aspects leading to the success (or failure) of a certain movement. On this footing, the subsequent sessions displayed a balanced mix of historical, contemporary, academic, and empirical findings on non-violent resistance. In-depth analysis of the current events in North Africa and the Middle East was completed by fascinating insights by former and current civil resistance leaders. Among the latter, key actors of resistance movements in Poland (Solidarnosc), South Africa (anti-Apartheid struggle), the US (civil rights movement), Serbia (overthrow of Milosevic), Ukraine (orange revolution), and Zimbabwe (ongoing struggle against Mugabe) shared their practical experiences. Last but not least, statements by high-level diplomats on the possibilities and limitations of international diplomacy and individual action when facing non-violent civil resistance in a foreign country contributed to a comprehensive assessment of the subject.

The knowledge shared and the perspectives exchanged proved to be of great value and inspiration to every single participant. Utterly positive conclusions were drawn, but the main question discussed – “what is civil resistance and how does it work?” – still needs extensive research and respective awareness among politicians, media, and civil societies will have to be further raised. Regarding the ongoing chapter added to the history of civil resistance in the Arab world, three days of intense discussions and thrilling presentations were simply not enough to tackle all the pending questions with regard to civil resistance movements in detail.

Non-violent civil resistance – an underrated phenomenon

The most valuable lesson drawn by the author from this conference is how well organized, strategic, informed, and determined non-violent civil resistance has to be to succeed – and that its rate of success is remarkable. Empirical research leads to the same conclusions that have been emphasized by former civil resistance leaders: non-violent resistance has a considerably higher ratio of success than violent movements. Furthermore, non-violent resistance leads to a more sustainable change and to more democratic governments. The audience was more than once stupefied by reports on how extensively nuclei of civil resistance movements shared knowledge in the forefront of uprisings. E.g. how Serbian student leaders visited Kiev to learn from experience and how Egyptian resistance leaders gathered information and improved their techniques and structures for years to be ready when a window of opportunity was to appear.

However, the conference also demonstrated that non-violent civil resistance is most often subject to misperception. Seemingly spontaneous uprisings are predicted as chaotic and a threat to public order. Accusations often define them as alien exploitation, alleged destabilization of societies and political regions, and cause for violent turmoil, maybe even civil war. Furthermore, non-violent resistance is perceived as the instrument of the weak, those who are not capable or brave enough to fight for their rights with a rifle in their hand and who show a lack of necessity and willingness to choose violence as ultimo ratio.

Appropriate reaction by the international community to future and ongoing non-violent uprisings will decisively depend on how adequately the concept of civil resistance is understood by all protagonists involved. If this conference and its speakers' main concerns had to be reduced to a coherent message to the international community, it would most certainly be to get over the "conventional wisdoms" described above. The key to success of non-violent resistance is not a strong pacifist conviction. On the contrary, non-violence can be a rational strategy of escalation when facing a conventionally superior opponent. In this case, it can be an even more effectual and comprehensive approach than armed struggle. Or as one speaker put it: non-violent civil resistance is not a method of resolving a conflict; it is a method of fighting one.