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## Staring Down the Mukhabarat: Rhizomatic Social Movements and the Egyptian and Syrian Arab Spring

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Staring Down the Mukhabarat:  
Rhizomatic Social Movements and the Egyptian and Syrian Arab Spring

by

Stephen M. Strenges

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Political Science  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father, Michael Strenges. Without your support and guidance throughout my life I would not be where I am today. You have always given me a deep appreciation for and curiosity about the world around me. Thanks for everything, Dad.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>List of Figures.....</b>                                | <b>iii</b> |
| <b>Abstract .....</b>                                      | <b>iv</b>  |
| <b>Chapter One: Introduction .....</b>                     | <b>1</b>   |
| Potential Causes of the Arab Spring.....                   | 2          |
| Research Question and Theory .....                         | 4          |
| Methodology .....  | 6          |
| Outline of Chapters.....                                   | 8          |
| Notes .....  | 8          |
| <b>Chapter Two: Literature Review .....</b>                | <b>9</b>   |
| Collective Behavior Approaches.....                        | 11         |
| Chicago School .....                                       | 12         |
| Mass Society .....   | 17         |
| Relative Deprivation.....                                  | 18         |
| Resource Mobilization Theory.....                          | 22         |
| Political Process Theory .....                             | 25         |
| New Social Movements .....                                 | 27         |
| Framing .....  | 30         |
| Collective Identity .....                                  | 33         |
| Emotion.....   | 34         |
| Social Networks Approach .....                             | 36         |
| Theoretical Framework.....                                 | 39         |
| Rhizomatic Movements .....                                 | 41         |
| Argument .....   | 44         |
| Notes .....  | 45         |
| <b>Chapter Three: Egypt.....</b>                           | <b>46</b>  |
| Economic Conditions .....                                  | 47         |
| The Rise of Contentious Politics: A Decade of Action ..... | 50         |
| Anti-War Movements .....                                   | 51         |
| Prodemocracy Movements.....                                | 53         |
| Youth Activism .....                                       | 56         |

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| Labor Movements.....  | 58         |
| The Digital Realm of Contention .....   | 59         |
| We Are All Khaled Said .....  | 62         |
| 18 Days: From the Streets to Tahrir .....                                       | 65         |
| The Call to Action & January 25 – The Day of Revolt.....                        | 66         |
| Navigating the Chaos: January 28 – The Day of Rage.....                         | 69         |
| Conclusion .....  | 73         |
| Notes.....  | 75         |
| <b>Chapter Four: Syria.....</b>   | <b>77</b>  |
| Economic Conditions .....   | 78         |
| A Tripartite of Control: the Assad Regime, the Alawites, & the Mukhabarat ..... | 80         |
| Ethno-Religious Dimensions & The Rise of the Alawites .....                     | 83         |
| Restraining Activism through the Mukhabarat .....                               | 86         |
| Decades of Strained Activism .....  | 88         |
| The Damascus Spring .....   | 89         |
| Activism & Civil Society after the Damascus Spring, 2001-2005 .....             | 91         |
| 2005: The Revitalization of Activism & the Assassination of Hariri .....        | 93         |
| The Damascus Declaration & the Opposition Underpinning the 2011 Uprising.....   | 94         |
| The 2011 Uprising .....   | 98         |
| The Spark: Daraa.....   | 99         |
| Movement Proliferation: Opposition Efforts & Groups .....                       | 105        |
| The Militarization of Nonviolent Resistance .....                               | 108        |
| Conclusion .....  | 110        |
| Notes.....  | 112        |
| <b>Chapter Five: Conclusion .....</b>   | <b>113</b> |
| <b>References.....</b>  | <b>120</b> |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Figure 1.1: Overview of Arab Spring .....               | 2  |
| Figure 3.1: Political Map of Egypt .....                | 46 |
| Figure 4.1: Political Map of Syria.....                 | 77 |
| Figure 4.2: Ethno-Religious Demographics in Syria ..... | 86 |

## ABSTRACT

Unable to enact change through the existing political institutions of their authoritarian regimes, and consistently repressed by state security forces (the *mukhabarat*), activists in Egypt and Syria relied on street activism to challenge their conditions. This study analyzes the Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt and Syria through the conceptual lens of a rhizome. Rhizomatic movements are horizontal, grassroots, and allow for the networking of local community-specific grievances, into larger national movements. This networking allows opposition members groups to build solidarity, construct collective identities, and develop a set of shared goals, strategies, and tactics. Furthermore, it provides for the transcendence of existing societal divides (such as religious, ideological, political, socio-cultural, and class), allowing participants to unite as a single force. Since a rhizome is horizontal and lacks a fixed structure, they are significantly more difficult to dismantle, as there is not a set leadership or hierarchy to target. Importantly, this rhizomatic logic integrates itself within the notion of viewing movements within larger cycles of protest or waves of contention. Rhizomatic movements are built through the *praxis* of networking, rather than through ideological networking. As such, the conditions and history of opposition movements provides important analytical considerations. This study, using process tracing, argues that the Egyptian revolution was rhizomatic in nature and thus able to pose a significant enough force to challenge Mubarak's regime. Although faced with brutal repression, activists remained coordinated, interconnected, and continued to mobilize. Conversely, the Syrian opposition, plagued by years of in-fighting among activists, was unable to develop as a rhizomatic force. Activists failed to sufficiently network, build collective identities, and develop common tactics.



This hindered their ability to appeal to and mobilize large segments of the population that were discontent with Assad but still viewed him as the best option for their own interests. When faced with systematic suppression by Assad's regime, the opposition faltered, returning to their own respective individual self-interests and goals, allowing the regime to fragment their attempts at mobilization.

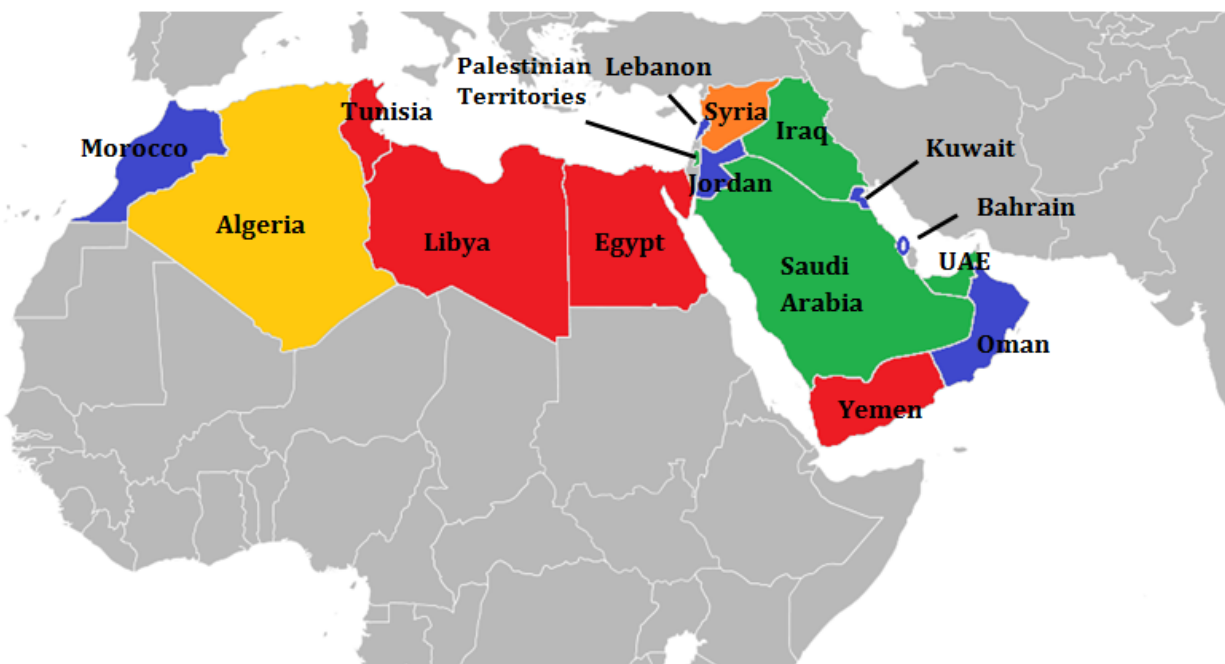
## CHAPTER ONE:

### INTRODUCTION

On December 17, 2010, Mohammad Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit vendor, self immolated himself in front of the local governor's office in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, following the confiscation of his fruit cart after his inability to pay bribes. Bouazizi, crippled by poor economic conditions and corruption, was like many Tunisian citizens. However, what would happen after his death made his story unique and one which would reverberate throughout the region in ways never before thought possible. His death would spark thousands to enter the streets of Tunisia, protesting these widespread and devastating conditions.

Within one month, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in almost every country in the Middle East and North Africa. The protests chanted in the streets were largely the same, calling for the overthrow of their regimes (see Al-Saleh, ed. 2015; Gelvin 2012). This widespread collective and contentious action sweeping the region would soon be known as the Arab Spring. What makes this era unique is that while contentious politics in the region had been drastically changing over the previous decade, this new wave was massive and nearly simultaneous. In just 28 days, Tunisia's president, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, would flee the country on January 14, 2011. Protests spread with such a rapid pace throughout the region; many were questioning *which* leader would be next, rather than *if* another would fall. Egypt's leader, Hosni Mubarak, would be removed from power after a relatively peaceful resistance in February 2011. Yet, others would cling to power, refusing to step down. Brutal repression occurred in Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria; with the latter three erupting into massive protracted

conflicts. Ultimately, protestors would remove the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya's leader, Muammar Gaddafi, would fall with the assistance of NATO airstrikes and a no-fly zone. Other states would make massive concessions to their citizens including the removal of various officials, early elections, and increased public assistance.<sup>1</sup> Still, some states would only experience minor and short-lived protests. Figure 1.1 below provides an overview of the various initial outcomes of these movements.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1.1:** Overview of Arab Spring



### Potential Causes of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring has been a topic of intense scholarly focus in the few years since its emergence, with many scholars emphasizing the underlying conditions in an effort to determine what fueled these movements. Interestingly, the fervor, motivations, and violence underlying these movements varied as much as the outcomes themselves. While in many regards the Arab

Spring represented a collective series of movements throughout the region, the importance of these underlying factors and conditions varied in their significance depending on the state.

The underlying economic conditions of the Arab Spring are crucial to understanding the popular discontent that permeated these societies. Some have emphasized the lack of economic opportunities (Campante and Chor 2012), while others have looked at the lack of an independent and competitive private sector (Malik and Awadallah 2013). Many have emphasized other factors such as the existence of a large youth population and increasingly educated middle class, rising inflation and food prices, high levels of corruption, and high unemployment rates (Haas and Lesch, eds. 2013; Moghadam 2013; Salih 2013; Springborg 2011). Indeed, many of these factors were important and created widespread discontent among citizens. Kamal Eldin Osman Salih (2013) provides a synthesis of economic and political factors, arguing that while deteriorating economic conditions and rampant corruption provided a catalyst, the regimes themselves galvanized citizens through their brutal suppression of individual liberties. Others have emphasized the importance of post-Arab Spring states rebuilding a free economic system in order to promote stability and prosperity (Martin 2012). Indeed, the region has experienced a fundamental shift in increasing education, a large youth-bulge in population size, and rampant corruption. These set the stage for popular and widespread discontent; however, the conditions do not provide an adequate explanation of the variations in these movements themselves, particularly within the context of why some succeeded and others failed. They raise more questions than answers.

Much commentary on the Arab Spring has referred to these movements as ‘Twitter or Facebook revolutions,’ representing the power of tech-savvy disenfranchised youth. Understandably, many have turned to examine the role of digital media and social networking.

This approach includes both digital media and social networking, which encompasses media and news outlets, mobile phones and SMS's (short message service, i.e., text messages), and social networking platforms (blogs, Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Proponents and supporters note the importance of digital media and social networking on mobilizing collective action (Howard and Hussain 2013; Valenzuela 2013). Many scholars have emphasized the benefits of this technology including increased coordination and communication (Bennett 2012), access to information (Tufekci and Wilson 2012), and the creation of collective identities and stoking of emotions (Howard et al. 2011). Yet others have challenged the importance of social networks and technology, arguing that much of the consumption occurred outside of the region (Aday et al. 2013; Bruns, Highfield, and Burgess 2013) and that this media activity typically followed protest events, rather than preceded it (Wolfsfeld, Segev, and Sheafer 2013).

As James Gelvin (2012, 50-52) observes, these views can be divided into two camps: "cyberphiles," which emphasize the essential role of technology; and "cyberskeptics," which challenge the importance of social networking and digital media. Critically, digital media and social networking were used to varying degrees and in different ways depending on the country; they likely supported mobilization efforts but did *not* cause the uprisings nor act as the sole determinant of their success. They were complementary in nature and served as innovative means of supporting mobilization. The utilization of digital media, technology, and social networking will be discussed in further detail in chapters three and four.

### **Research Question and Theory**

This study examines how and to what extent new social movements may develop and promote the mass mobilization required for substantive political change in repressive states that brutally restrict political activism. Egypt and Syria provide for an interesting set of cases for a

comparative study as they had similar underlying economic conditions, long-standing authoritarian regimes that ruled for decades, massive corruption, unresponsive political and public institutions, and a widespread and systemic *mukhabarat* security apparatus that repressed attempts at public activism.

This study seeks to answer the following question: Given the similar conditions motivating protestors and the similar circumstances surrounding their uprisings, why did the Egyptian uprising succeed, while Syria's failed? This study hypothesizes that the Egyptian uprising succeeded because its movement was rhizomatic in nature and thus more powerful. A rhizomatic movement lacks a hierarchy, set leaders and decision-makers, and operates through grassroots mobilization and consensus building. In the absence of an effective way to promote change in their political systems, combined with brutal repression against activism, these opposition movements were unable to operate freely and publically, thus grassroots mobilization provided a way to network localized community-specific grievances into an overarching national movement. This method of mobilization allowed activists to resist brutal attempts at repression, as they were significantly more difficult to target due to their lack of a fixed structure.

Rhizomatic movements allow individuals and local communities to network, build collective solidarity, and communicate. As this type of movement develops and activists become aware of each other's struggles, these points of contention yield into an overarching grievance that varying segments of society can rally behind. A connected and rhizomatic movement will be more powerful and thus more able to challenge their regime, while sustaining their efforts despite brutal suppression. This connectivity limits in-fighting among activists and allows the opposition to present a unified front from which to challenge the regime based on shared goals, strategies, and tactics. Furthermore, these networks incorporate and account for collective

memories, emotions, and mindsets associated with contentious cycles of protest. In other words, activists and their methods are also shaped, in part, by the history of activism and the regime in which they are operating.<sup>3</sup> This allows for a widespread networking of various types of discontent. Collective action does not simply happen, nor does it occur through the same methods. A regime's repertoire of action (i.e., their methods and means to counter contentious activism) and the history of activism are important considerations when studying the development of movements. Both Egypt and Syria expressed similar, yet distinct methods, of suppressing activism. As will be discussed, the Assad regime in Syria had a much higher proclivity towards violent suppression than Mubarak's regime in Egypt. The power, structure, and development of rhizomatic movements will be discussed further in chapter two.

## **Methodology**

Many authors note the importance of incorporating multiple variables within their underlying context, depending on the particular state. In other words, different variables or factors mattered differently, that is, to varying degrees of importance, depending on the state (see, e.g., Benski et al. 2013). As such, the following study will draw on and discuss multiple factors of importance. This qualitative study utilizes process tracing in order to illustrate a causal chain or mechanism, which is a series of interconnected events, circumstances, conditions, and structures that ultimately bring forth a particular outcome (see Little, 1998: part III). Our socially constructed world, which lacks regularities, is a, "complex of processes subject to various causal influences, conveyed by individual agency, onto diverse and rarely predictable outcomes." (Little 1998, 255). Although inductive regularities may be discovered they provide little explanatory power and do not provide a profound basis in which to analyze future events or circumstances. To show causality it is better to have a theoretical focus that accounts for the underlying causal

mechanisms that produce the social phenomena in question (see George and Bennett 2005, 21-22). By accounting for an underlying causal mechanism, a study would not need to account for a representative sample because in similar conditions this mechanism would lead to the same outcome. Simply put, the identification of a causal mechanism allows one to determine the cause-and-effect linkages that illustrate the underlying causality of conditions.

Because our social world contains many grey and overlapping areas, examining and searching for regularities in the social realm will fall short of any predictive and strict laws of proving causality (as what may be found in the natural sciences). Thus, in order to show this causal relationship, this study will analyze the causal powers of underlying social events, conditions, and structures, which collectively represent what Daniel Little (1998) refers to as a “causal realism.” Through process tracing, which, “attempts to trace the links between possible outcomes and observed outcomes” (George and Bennett 2005, 6), this study examines how this causal realism shaped the opposition’s rhizomatic development; providing for a more powerful movement. As such, the scope of this work will be limited to the recent history of contentious street activism in each respective state and the initial onset of the uprisings. A comparative case study of Egypt and Syria was selected due to the similar underlying conditions, relatively close temporal proximity, and the starkly different outcomes of these movements. Both states had longstanding brutally repressive intelligence and security systems (referred to in Arabic as the *mukhabarat*; see Kandil 2012), which limited attempts at activism; widespread economic issues, and high levels of corruption, yet their movements saw dramatically different outcomes. Egyptians, through largely nonviolent tactics, were able to mobilize and successfully remove their leader, Mubarak. As such, this study conceptualizes Egypt as a case of a successful



movement. Conversely, Syria's movement, which failed to remove Assad and led to a protracted civil war, will be conceptualized as not successful.

## **Outline of Chapters**

Following the overview provided in this chapter, chapter two discusses trends within the literature, including major developments within the study of social movements. The chapter concludes with an in-depth discussion of rhizomatic social movements and the theoretical framework employed for the following analysis. Chapter three discusses the uprising in Egypt including the past decade of contentious actions. This chapter also discusses the role of digital media and social networking in building contention and collective solidarity before the uprisings and its effect on mobilization efforts after demonstrations began. Chapter four addresses the initial uprising in Syria, looking at the history of public activism and the regime's repertoire of containing opposition. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the movement's proliferation, eventual militarization, and subsequent descent into civil war. Chapter five provides a conclusion of this study, a restatement of the key findings, and a discussion of how this rhizomatic logic affected opposition efforts after these uprisings.

## **Notes**

1 For an interesting analysis of how incumbent political leaders remain in office through the use of public goods and democratization efforts, see Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2013).

2 This figure shows the initial outcomes of the uprisings. As such, it does not illustrate subsequent revolutions or uprisings after the 2010-11 period (e.g., the removal of Egypt's Morsi). Some analyses of the Arab Spring include other states which had related, albeit minor protest movements including Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, and Mauritania. These have not been included due to their relative separation from the main Arab Spring movement.

3 For an analysis of how the underlying domestic conditions (including economic, political, and social) and recent history of public activism shaped the uprisings in the Arab Spring states, see Khatib and Lust, eds. (2014).

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The study of social movements and more broadly, contentious politics, is marked by several distinct approaches, each with their own analytical focus and argument. In order to analyze the recent Arab Spring movements in Egypt and Syria, it is first important to understand the trends in social movement literature. In doing so, this chapter aims to illustrate the development of studying social movements, particularly within the context of how they emerge, function, and generate power.

Early approaches to social movements emphasized how conflicts would emerge through the structure of society. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were classical structuralists who emphasized that collective action was not an individual choice; rather, it was an unstoppable force that emerged because of problems within society's structural development (see Tucker, ed. 1978). The basis of their argument involves the condition of *class*. They saw collective action as a by-product of the proletariat (the working class) coming into conflict with antagonists. Thus, conflict was inevitable due to the exploitation of the average working-class person. Marx attempted to answer the question of why people who "should" revolt when provided "objective conditions" fail to do so, by arguing that individuals failed to recognize their conditions and exploitation (see Tarrow 2011, 17). Ultimately, Marx and Engels' approach overemphasized structural dynamics and lacked an incorporation of the political opportunities, leadership, and resources required for mobilization.

Vladimir Lenin (1929) introduced the importance of leadership in understanding collective action. Lenin replaced Marx's proletariat with his own conceptualization, the vanguard. He argued that the vanguard would serve as the protector of workers' "real" (i.e., revolutionary) interests (Tarrow 2011, 18-19). Lenin viewed this organization as the solution to working class issues. Thus, better organization would restrain the appearance and necessity of collective action. However, his adjustments on Marx's theory were done so within the context of Czarist Russia, which actually inhibited the development of a workers' consciousness and the emergence of collective action (see Tarrow 2011, 18-19). As such, his approach saw organization as a means to overcome this exploitation, though he lacked an incorporation of how people were to mobilize despite these repressive elites. He brought forward the importance of organization when mobilizing but centered this within the vanguard as opposed to the masses.

Antonio Gramsci (1971), a European Marxist, took issue with Lenin's conceptualization of the vanguard, arguing that it was inadequate to lead revolutions in Europe. Thus, Gramsci looked at the individuals themselves, arguing that workers movements were a "collective intellectual," which promoted working-class culture (Tarrow 2011, 19). In order for the workers to challenge the elites, a countercultural consensus was necessary which would provide opportunity for cultural and social exchanges. For Gramsci this process took significant time and interaction between these two parties. Yet if these interactions are based on a long-term dialogue between the working class and bourgeois, what would prevent the latter from exerting their influence and subsequently changing the power dynamic once again? Ultimately, Gramsci's approach failed to incorporate any theory of political mobilization and did not differentiate circumstances in which opportunities or constraints would be strong or weak (Tarrow 2011, 19-20).

Charles Tilly, influenced by Marx, developed a “polity model” that emphasized political conditions and interactions (Tilly 1978). This model moved beyond the dichotomy of regime-opposition dynamics, and instead looked at the interactions of a variety of actors, including the government, challengers, members of the polity, coalitions, and outsider actors (Tilly 1978, chap. 3). However, he would ultimately revise this model, as it would prove to be overly static (Tarrow 2011, 20-21; Tilly 1990).

As Sidney Tarrow (2011, 17-34) delineates, these four areas provided a basis in which various social movement approaches would develop. Marx’s emphasis on class led the collective behavior school in their analysis of structural strains and deprivation. Similarly, Lenin’s focus on leadership and the vanguard as an organization through which to promote the interests of the workers, led to the focus of resource mobilization theorists on leadership and the structure social movements as organizations (SMOs). The later cultural turn in the 1980s built on concepts identified by Gramsci, leading to various emphases on collective identity and framing (i.e., the micro level). Likewise, Tilly’s works would be fundamental to political process theorists who analyzed the structural conditions and political opportunities underlying mobilization.

### **Collective Behavior Approaches**

Collective behavior theories find their origin within a broader field of collective action, which typically includes other similar broader areas of study such as riots, crowds, crazes, and revolutions. The study of crowds, or crowd theory, dates back to nineteenth century Europe when early scholars of social movements viewed crowds, and subsequently public collective action, as irrational, violent, and something to be prevented (Le Bon 1896; see also McClelland, 1989, 196-198). Perhaps, the most widely referenced work on crowd theory is that of Gustave Le Bon (1896), who studied crowd behavior from a psychological standpoint, emphasizing the

apparent irrationality and abnormality of those engaged in this behavior. “Civilisations as yet have only been created and directed by a small aristocracy, never by crowds” Le Bon continues, “Crowds are only powerful for destruction. Their rule is always tantamount to a barbarian phase” (Le Bon 1896, 19). McClland provides a strong critique of crowd theory, particularly Le Bon’s work, arguing that this theory supposes that elites, which are threatened by a crowd, can learn about a crowd and subsequently manipulate them in order to serve their own respective values and aspirations (McClland 1989, chap. 7, 200-202; see also Riesman, Glazer, and Denney 1989).

Many collective behavior theorists are often incorrectly grouped into the shared belief that views protestors as irrational. While the umbrella of collective behavior theory incorporates many theories and sub-fields of study, there are some common characteristics. Collective behavior theories are sometimes referred to as ‘strain’ theories because they see collective behavior as connected to social disruption, as opposed to being a standard component of political processes (Jenkins 1981; Marx and Wood 1975; McAdam 1982; Morris and Herring 1984; see Staggenborg 2011, 13). Some shared assumptions within collective behaviors, as Morris and Herring (1984, 10-11) find, include the existence of collective behavior outside of institutionalized structures, their formation as a result of a structural or cultural breakdown, and the importance of shared beliefs among participants (see also Staggenborg 2011, chap. 2). Nonetheless, the broad range of collective behavior approaches includes multiple sub categories with their own analytical emphases.

### ***Chicago School***

The Chicago school approach emerged in the 1920s by sociologists at the University of Chicago (Blumer 1951; Lang and Lang 1961; Park and Burgess, [1921] 1969, 311-315; 865-952;

Turner and Killian 1957, 1972, 1987; Staggenborg 2011, 13). For Chicago school scholars, normal behavior is guided through existing social organizations and cultural norms, whereas collective behavior is not. Subsequently, these theorists are interested in studying collective behavior that arises due to an absence of these overarching and guiding icons. This approach emphasizes “symbolic interactionism,” focusing on how social movement actors develop meanings through social interaction (Staggenborg 2011, 13-14). As such, these theorists argue that collective behavior develops when there is a breakdown in the pre-existing systems of meanings, forcing actors to adopt new meanings that subsequently guide their behavior (Morris and Herring 1984, 11-17).

As Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (1969) and Herbert Blumer (1951) argue, people reconstruct their fragmented social structures through various methods, which are often seen through erratic and disorganized actions. When these binding social organizations and cultural guidelines breakdown, movements begin to formulate a new shared understanding through, as Park and Burgess ([1921] 1969, 32-39, 887-934) argue, crude communication processes (Morris and Herring 1984, 11-17). Once an individual is isolated, in the absence of guiding social organizations and cultural guides, a social contagion (i.e., these crude communication processes) spreads causing individuals to sacrifice their own personal self-interests to a collective interest (Park and Burgess [1921] 1969, 891). Being part of this collective action in which “a crowd being anonymous and in consequence irresponsible” creates an environment where “the sentiment of responsibility which always controls individuals disappears entirely,” ultimately making them no longer conscious of their acts (Park and Burgess [1921] 1969, 891).

Continuing on work from Park and Burgess, Blumer (1951) argues that, “Where group life is carried on satisfactorily in accordance with rules or cultural definitions, there is clearly no

occasion for the emergence of any new forms of collective behavior. The wishes, needs, and dispositions of people are satisfied through the ordinary cultural activities of their groups” (Blumer 1951, 171). However, he continues, in the event of a disturbance in this status quo of ‘established ways of acting’ or due to the emergence of new dispositions “which cannot be satisfied by the existing cultural definitions, elementary collective behavior is likely to arise” (Blumer 1951, 171).

For Blumer, these impulses, which cannot be satisfied by existing cultural and societal definitions, are the cause of a state of unrest. Unable to channel this unrest, people organize, in a heavily emotional state. Externally, he discusses, this appears to be erratic and lacking consistency, while internally it is “disordered imagination and disturbed feelings. In its more acute forms it is characteristic of neurotic behavior” (1951, 171). As Lewis Killian states, "the situation becomes unstructured, the people don't have their usual sources of information and then they know something is wrong, but they don't have any clear guidelines as to what. They have got to start reconstructing a picture of reality to enable them to act" (as quoted in Morris and Herring, 1984, 12-13).<sup>1</sup>

Yet Blumer (1951) introduces a concept in which those engaged in this emotional turmoil can channel their energies into effective organization, what he refers to as *esprit de corps*. He conceptualizes this as the organization of feelings on behalf of or for a movement. Thus, while agitation motivates and arouses the interest of the populous, “by itself it could never organize or sustain a movement” (Blumer 1951, 205). Since Chicago school theorists focus on how individuals act in the absence of guiding social organizations or cultural guides, the introduction of *esprit de corps* allows for a renewed emphasis on the individual. As Blumer argues, this allows individuals to reinforce their conception of themselves and how it has changed through

involvement and participation in a movement (see Blumer 1951, chap. 22). It is a way in which individuals reinforce their decision to participate while developing solidarity, and thus, in return, providing solidarity to the movement (Blumer 1951, 206).

While Park and Burgess, as well as Blumer, viewed protestors as irrational and emotional, Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian (1957) attempted to move beyond this. Instead, they argued that collective behavior during this breakdown of structure is guided by what they refer to as a 'norm.' For them, the basis of group cohesion is normative order, that is, "consensus as to the behavior that is expected of the group members by each other" (Turner and Killian 1957, 21). Movements, as they see, generate new rules or revise those for societal reform, that, at their core, contain the "vital sense that some established mode of thought is wrong and ought to be replaced" (quoted in Morris and Herring 1984, 13-14; Turner and Killian 1972, 258). Furthermore, they place emphasis on the role of communication in facilitating collective behavior. Following a breakdown in the structure, individuals require a shared image or idea of what is to be attained through collective action and it is through communication that they develop into collective action. It is these underlying communication processes, they argue, that makes this approach similar to other methods of collective action, particularly organized collective action (see Morris and Herring 1984, 13-14).

Although organization and communication are important aspects of consideration for Chicago school theorists, they are not fundamental as they view spontaneous mass mobilization as occurring through contagion after a breakdown of socially constructed meaning. Although important considerations, for Kurt Lang and Gladys Lang (1961, 497), this spontaneity must be coordinated by a core group. They argue that organized aspects of social movements never completely encompass it, that is, "they reside in a core group whose role in relation to the social



movement is, in itself, never planned. There is no completely organized social movement” (Lang and Lang 1961, 495). This core does not dominate the movement itself, rather it provides a vague direction in which “unrest crystallizes” (Lang and Lang 1961, 495). However, as Aldon Morris and Cedric Herring (1984, 15) note, they lack a connection in which to assess what constitutes effective organization. These approaches do not illustrate how this emerging and loosely organized collective action is related to social organization beyond its separation from any existing structure.

In *Theory of Collective Behavior*, Neil Smelser (1962) attempts to explain collective behavior by proposing a value added model of six factors. This model incorporates various factors (social conditions) that when taken together and discussed within their relation and context to one another, provide a more comprehensive analysis of collective behavior. These six factors include the structural conduciveness permitting collective behavior, structural strains and deprivation, the growth and spread of a generalized belief, the presence of a target for collective action, effective mobilization, and the absence of social control that may prevent collective behavior (e.g., security forces) (see Smelser 1962, 15-18). While many have found factors discussed by Smelser to be important, the theory retains its utility only at an abstract level (Eckstein, ed. 2001, 5-6). This approach has been critiqued on the basis that it overly emphasizes structural elements, it tends to treat factors influencing protest movements as exogenous variables, and that there will always be some strains on society (Staggenborg 2011, 14-15; Useem 1975, 9; Wilson 1973, chap. 2), thus, it leaves many factors unexplained (Eckstein, ed. 2001, 6). The critiques of Smelser’s theory and other collective behavior approaches challenge the assumption that societies are normally stable and that the strains that appear are unusual.

## ***Mass Society***

Mass society theory views collective behavior as the result of social instability due to the collapse of common values across society and increased isolation. This theory is rooted in the Emile Durkheim's (1933) notion that social instability occurs when large numbers of individuals are separated from their social values, through rapid social change (as seen with industrialization, massive economic changes, or urbanization, for example) (Kornhauser 1959, chap. 7; see Staggenborg 2011, 15-16). A mass society, as defined by William Kornhauser (1959, 39) is "*a social system in which elites are readily accessible to influence by non-elites and non-elites are readily available for mobilization by elites*" (emphasis in original). In this view, community groups, such as religious institutions or other organizations, bind a society together. A society that lacks strong secondary groups such as these is referred to as a *mass society*. At the base of this approach is the notion that the presence of these groups mitigates or otherwise restrains the irrational behavior of those that would engage in collective action. Kornhauser (1959) argues that rapid industrialization and urbanization disrupt the normal connections of people and society, thus causing social alienation. This social alienation resulting from weak social and community organizations allows for the cooptation of these organizations by mass movements, thus furthering mobilization (Kornhauser 1959, 177-182).

Eric Hoffer (1951) finds that alienated individuals participate in social movements in order to find a new identity. In his view, movements appeal, "to those who crave to be rid of an unwanted self" (Hoffer 1951, 12). An important distinction Hoffer makes is that the driving force that separates participation in political organizations versus mass movements rests with the latter providing the opportunity for self-renunciation. Conversely, the former provides for self-advancement (Hoffer 1951, 12).

Because of the emphasis on the socio-structural aspects of what constitutes a mass society, these theorists tend to focus more on society and less on social movements themselves. Many critics argue that this theory does not explain mobilization and note that it is not isolated individuals who are more likely to join social movements (Jenkins 1981; Morris and Herring 1984, 24, 52-53). Rather, those that are more connected or integrated into existing networks are more likely to participate (Jenkins 1981, 92-93). Mass society theorists view organizations as pushing individuals away from engaging in collective action; whereas, critics of mass society theory find that pre-existing organizations play an important role in mobilization (Morris 1984, 96-97; Staggenborg 2011, 16). Aldon Morris (1984, chaps. 3-4) finds that “movement centers” such as churches and other community organizations played a pivotal role in mobilizing people during the civil rights movement in the United States. Maurice Pinard (1968) furthers these critiques arguing that, “under severe strain, and given that no other institutionalized channels for the redress of grievances are available, conformist components of the intermediate structure can become elements which encourage rather than limit the growth of a new movement” (quoted in Oberschall 1973, 106). Thus, these entities may just as easily support the growth of movements rather than suppress them.

### ***Relative Deprivation***

Relative deprivation emerged as a popular theory in the 1960s and 1970s with its roots in earlier theorists such as Durkheim (1933), Mosca (1939), and Pareto (1935) (see Morris and Herring 1984, 24-27). Its argument rests on the interesting observation that people often rebel not when conditions are worsening but when things are improving (Davies 1962, 1971; Freeman 1975; Gurr 1970; Morrison 1973; Tocqueville 1971). Indeed, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed during his study of the French Revolution, “Revolutions are not always brought about by a

gradual decline from bad to worse. Nations that have endured patiently and almost unconsciously the most overwhelming oppression often burst into rebellion against the yoke the moment it begins to grow lighter” (quoted in Davies 1971, 135; see Tocqueville 1856). Relative deprivation, as defined by Ted Gurr (1970, 24), is, “actors’ perception of discrepancy between their value expectations and their value capabilities” with expectations referring to goods and conditions of life and capabilities as those they think they are capable of obtaining. This theory posits that it is not the most deprived that engage in collective action; rather, it is often those that are the best off, comparatively, within a deprived group (Morrison 1973; Staggenborg 2011, 16).

James Davies (1962) finds that revolutions are most likely to occur when preceded by a period of rising expectations and a succeeding period of frustrations, supporting Marx’s argument of “progressive degradation” preceding revolutions and Tocqueville’s argument that revolutions occur when conditions are improving (see also Davies ed. 1971; Tocqueville 1971, 95-96). As Davies (1962, 7) observes, “It is when the chains have been loosened somewhat, so that they can be cast off without a high probability of losing life, that people are put in a condition of proto-rebelliousness.” He places particular emphasis on measuring the mood of people, particularly in how they view their conditions, when analyzing potentially revolutionary conditions.

Through an analysis of women’s movements, Jo Freeman (1975) finds that support for these movements increased following their access to education and their inability to achieve equal access to high-paying jobs, particularly as the nation saw an increase in industrialization and urbanization. She clarifies that this relative deprivation occurs due to the existence of what is referred to as a “reference group,” which is a person, idea, or standard that people compare against their own attitudes and rewards (Freeman 1975, 15). Subsequently, contention and

dissatisfaction builds as people judge a growing disparity between what they are receiving versus what they believe they deserve.

Although popular in the 1960s and 1970s, relative deprivation theory has been critiqued on several bases (Gurney and Tierney 1982; Jenkins 1981, 98-106). Joan Gurney and Kathleen Tierney (1982, 35) analyze classical relative deprivation theories finding that virtually all conceptualizations lack a clear delineation between objective conditions and perceptions. Furthermore, the authors take issue with several empirical shortcomings of relative deprivation theories, including its oversimplification of the relationship between deprivation and subsequent behavior, a lack of measuring relative deprivation at an individual level, and an overall failure to demonstrate the connection between relative deprivation and social movements, among others (Gurney and Tierney 1982, 39, 41-42). The basis of relative deprivation theories' explanatory power rests in its ability to connect objective conditions thought to bring about relative deprivation and incidences of disorderly events. However, as Craig Jenkins (1981, 100) argues, this does not actually measure relative deprivation and instead measures conditions that are theoretically thought to bring about this deprivation. Thus, the main issue is that, "these objective conditions are taken as proxy measures for the subjective experience of individuals, given the absence of information bearing directly on the perceptions of those individuals engaged in political disorders" (Jenkins 1981, 100). Furthermore, he argues that while participants of movements may have been or are currently experiencing deprivation, this deprivation is not necessarily a precondition. Rather, this deprivation is a product of the movement itself and its efforts to mobilize participants—the deprivation does not cause these movements (Jenkins 1981, 103).

These challenges to relative deprivation theory represented a pivot towards another pillar in the study of social movements: resource mobilization. As a concept, the incorporation of deprivation continued within the larger framework of resource mobilization, albeit with different distinctions (Isaac, Mutran, and Stryker 1980; Useem 1980; Morris and Herring 1984). Michael Useem (1980, 11-15) discusses the concept of “subjective deprivation,” contending that while it may play a role in developing discontent, it is not a necessary precondition. Still, others view relative deprivation as only one form or type of strain that may underlie social movements (Marx and Wood 1975, 379-381).

The concepts put forth by relative deprivation theorists led to a focus on the mobilization of various movements, rather than focusing on the connection between deprivation and civil unrest. Broadly, this marked a turning point in social movement theories in which the emphasis on social psychology yielded to political, economic, and societal conditions. Two major groups of theories that emerged were resource mobilization and political process, which some theorists have grouped under one overarching umbrella or school. Collectively, both emerged out of the inability of prior theories to explain collective action. A focus on the strains within society failed to provide an adequate explanation as to how widespread societal strains or high levels of deprivation among individuals led to mass mobilization, and why this mobilization failed to occur despite the presence of deprivation. Furthermore, mass society theories were inadequate; as scholars found that it is often individuals that are *more* socially connected that engage in collective action. Both resource mobilization and political process theorists challenged the idea that there is a sharp distinction between ‘normal’ or institutionalized actions versus collective action, which was typically seen as disorderly (see Meyer and Tarrow, eds. 1998). They began to see social movements as political phenomena, in which collective actions and institutionalized

overlapped, thus social movements were an extension or continuation of the normal political process, although through disorderly and extra-institutional methods (Gamson [1975] 1990, 139; McAdam 1999, 11-19; see Staggenborg 2011, 17).

### **Resource Mobilization Theory**

The 1960s saw a heavy emphasis on rational choice, which viewed individuals as inherently rational and acting in their own self-interests. Social movement literature took on an economic focus with resource mobilization theories. This approach emphasizes societal conditions including the resources required for mobilization, the connections with third party groups and organizations, and the methods used by authorities to control or incorporate movements (Fireman and Gamson 1979; Freeman 1979; Gamson [1975] 1990; Jenkins and Perrow 1977; McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977, 1979; Oberschall 1973).

The basis of resource mobilization theory rests in the idea that social movements require resources in order to sustain their action and that the availability of this positively influences their likelihood (see Edwards and McCarthy 2004). The availability or access to resources is not enough in and of itself, however. As Bob Edwards and John McCarthy (2004, 116) argue, when coordinated and strategically used for collective action, movements that are successful are often related to their availability of resources. As Suzanne Staggenborg (2011, 17) notes, these resources include both *tangible* (e.g., funding) and *intangible* (e.g., commitments) assets (see also Freeman 1979). Because movements are goal-oriented, they require leadership and organization in order to make strategic decisions and utilize resources to support their mobilization efforts (Foweraker 1995, 16). Still, others have noted the limits of solidarity, particularly to what extent and why individuals participate in collective action (Gamson [1975] 1990, chap. 5).

Some scholars have emphasized the variety of resources, which support the growth and development of movements (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977; Morris 1984; Jenkins and Perrow 1977). John McCarthy and Mayer Zald (1973, 2, 12-18) argue that while grievances exist and the aim of particular movements is important, the resources underlying their mobilization affects their ability to assemble and sustain contentious action. For individuals to engage in collective action, as rational actors, they would have to weigh the costs and benefits of participation, which often outweighs the benefits of engaging in collective action.

In the *Logic of Collective Action*, Mancur Olson (1971) questions why and under what circumstances people, as rational actors who weigh the costs and benefits of their actions, would engage in collective behavior (see Goodwin and Jasper, eds. 2009, 6). Since collective action seeks a common good or benefit, which everyone will benefit from, people (as rational actors) have little incentive to participate as the action of one individual is unlikely to determine the outcome and the benefit is still available to all, regardless of participation. This concept is often referred to as the *free-rider problem*. However, Olson does not completely discount the idea of rational people engaging in collective action. Indeed, he argues there are two circumstances in which rational individuals will decide to engage in collective action. The first occurs if individuals are offered what he calls “selective incentives,” which are exclusive benefits for participants. The second occurs when individuals are in a “small group situation,” during which a person may be incentivized to pay the entire cost of obtaining this collective good or when their involvement has the potential for a significant difference (Olson 1971, 22-36, 51). This is based on the assumption that since organizations are made up of individuals (which are rational actors), then they will subsequently act in their own best interests. Bruce Fireman and William Gamson (1979, 8) make an important distinction by clarifying that Olson’s work intended to account for



the mobilization of long-standing organizations, such as unions and interest groups, rather than popular mass mobilization.

In an effort to challenge or overcome the free-rider problem, scholars soon turned to the structure of movements themselves, finding that they function more like professionalized formal organizations that operate like businesses (what they term “social movement organizations”) (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977). Because movements (as organizations) require resources to operate, this approach looks at how resources, both *tangible* (e.g., goods, food, money) and *intangible* (e.g., organizational support, physical space), contribute to mobilization.

Professionalization, as they argue, allows movements to rely less on large masses of people and instead refocus on the support of “paper members,” which are supportive but often inactive (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 20-22). McCarthy and Zald (1977, 1216) provide several bases of resource mobilization including the aggregation of resources and its affect on movement activities, the necessity of some minimum organization to provide resource distribution, the recognition of the required involvement of outside individuals and organizations, and a sensitivity of the costs and rewards for the involvement of both individuals and organizations. Craig Jenkins and Charles Perrow (1977) take a similar approach, finding that the resources provided by organizations to farm workers movements provided the necessary catalyst for the movement’s political environment.

Building upon the structural aspects of social movements and social movement organizations, McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1988, 707-709) identify structural conditions that increase the likelihood of an individual’s participation including prior contact with a movement member, membership in organizations, a prior history of activism, and an individual’s biographical ability. Yet others have emphasized intangible incentives that would explain why

participants would engage in collective action. John Wilson (1973, 124-134, 156-159) identifies two primary incentives: solidary and purpose. Through an analysis of religious organizations, Wilson places heavy emphasis on the importance of ideology in mobilization and the ability of leaders to shape and develop movements. Rejecting the structural-functionalist approach, he views social movements as “organizations in process” and constantly in-flux.

### **Political Process Theory**

Emerging around the same time as resource mobilization theories, the political process approach looks at social movements through their interactions with the state, emphasizing the importance of political opportunities on mobilization efforts (Eisinger 1973; McAdam 1982; Tarrow 2011, chap. 8; Tilly 1978). The basis of this theory rests in the notion that long-term social processes indirectly restructure existing power relations, subsequently promoting mobilization (McAdam 1982, 41). As Tocqueville ([1856] 1955, 176-177) observes, because people act on opportunities, “the most perilous moment for a bad government is one when it seeks to mend its ways” (as quoted in Tarrow, 2011, 157). Underlying the emergence of this approach was that movements, such as labor and civil rights, made direct demands of the state, with the state being in the unique position from which to address or ignore these grievances (Goodwin and Jasper, eds. 2009, 6). Thus, the emphasis on interactions between the state and movement became paramount. Protestors were seen as rational and pursuing their own political agenda but through extra-institutional methods (Gamson 1990, 139; McAdam 1999, 11-19; see Staggenborg 2011, 17).

In his work *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Tilly (1978, chaps. 3-4) lays out a framework of the preconditions for mobilization, including the opportunity/threat dynamic to challengers. For Tilly (1978, 133), opportunity refers to the extent which other groups (i.e. the

government or organizations that are the target of the movement) are “vulnerable to the new claims which would, if successful, enhance the contender’s realization of its interests,” while threat refers to the “extent to which other groups are threatening to make new claims which would, if successful, reduce the contender’s realization of its interests.” It is shifts within this dynamic that affects how members of the polity and those in power react, “An asymmetrical response to threat and opportunity is more plausible than a symmetrical response,” he continues, “Assuming equal probabilities of occurrence, a given amount of threat tends to generate more collective action than the “same” amount of opportunity” (Tilly 1978, 134-135). Likewise, he notes that responding to opportunities often requires a more significant alteration or adjustment in a group’s organization and mobilization, than it would in responding to a threat.

In *Power in Movement*, Tarrow (1998, 77-80; 2011, 160-167) provides an analysis of what constitutes political opportunities including increased access to participation, the presence or appearance of shifting political alignments (such as that seen with electoral instability or the increasing of political opposition groups), the division or fracturing of elites, and the presence of influential allies (in support of the non-elites) (see Goldstone and Tilly 2001). Although the presence of opportunities promotes mobilization, the relationship is, as Peter Eisinger (1973, 15-23) finds, curvilinear. Thus, the intensity of protests is greatest in neither completely accessible nor completely closed systems.

Scholars have also noted that while opportunities may provide for mobilization, they may not be as easily recognized, just as some threats may be overlooked (see Tarrow 2011, 164). Thus, as some comment, these opportunities are not simply a given, they must be both perceived and acted on in order to affect or otherwise enhance mobilization (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, chap. 2; Meyer and Minkoff 2004; Tarrow 2011, 163-165). Further, threats provide just as

powerful an incentive for mass mobilization. The negative circumstances and outcomes surrounding threats provide a strong emotional or rapid reaction in which supporters, alarmed by sudden and unfavorable changes, are more likely to mobilize (Staggenborg 2011, 19). Still, others have emphasized how structural components lead to the breakdown of state organizations, leading to the construction of new revolutionary ones (Skocpol 1979).

Ultimately, this approach lacks an ability to account for the dynamics in which social movements often occur. This conception is unidirectional because it takes the regime or the state as an institution as a static entity. As Tarrow (2011, 179) posits, it also assumes that states are not affected by outside factors, that is, transnational actors or global trends. Importantly, this approach does not answer questions as to why some movements develop, nor why some succeed while others fail (see Tarrow 2011, 28). As McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1988, 1996) discuss, aspects of the resource mobilization and political process approaches are often combined into one theoretical framework (see Staggenborg 2011, 20-22; see also Tarrow 2011, 28-33). While these approaches often ignored the psychological and individualistic aspects of mobilization, scholars would begin to address these during the 1980s and 1990s as the field of social movements took a cultural turn, analyzing ‘new social movements.’

### **New Social Movements**

While past theories have emphasized political and economic issues, the new social movements (NSMs) approach emphasizes social, cultural, and identity issues. The ‘new’ aspect of these movements is based on the premise that these theories do not emphasize a strong traditional base of labor, agrarian, or economic conditions. Rather, they contain a variety of issues and factors, subsequently making the approach “too various to be represented by a single tendency” (Foweraker 1995, 14, 40, see also chap. 3; Tarrow 1988, 2011).

In many ways the various issues associated with the dichotomy of resource mobilization and political process led to a focus on cultural aspects in NSMs (Johnston and Klandermans, eds. 1995a). Broadly, social movement theorists began to recognize the importance of culture including the use of symbols, values, and icons in which to project or further a movement's aims (Johnston and Klandermans 1995b, 9-12; Tarrow 2011, chap. 7). Importantly, the NSMs approach developed as scholars began to distinguish between these 'new' social movements appearing in postindustrial countries, emphasizing issues such as environmental, LGBTQ, student, and women's rights movements, and 'old' movements, which tended to revolve around labor issues (Calhoun 1993; Carroll and Ratner 1995). NSM theorists argue that this distinction appears within the structure, constituency, focus, and ideologies of these groups. As some have conceptualized, NSMs focus on explaining social movements along two bases: at the macro level, they connect the rise in movements to economics, modernization, and culture; on the micro level, they focus on personal issues such as identity (Pichardo 1997). However, many differences and varieties exist under the umbrella term of NSMs (Buechler 1995; Foweraker 1995; Pichardo 1997 see Staggenborg 2011, 22; Tarrow 1988).

Within the context of modernization, Jürgen Habermas focuses on the new goals of NSMs in these post-industrialist societies, arguing that social movements have moved beyond the traditional areas of institutionalized economic concerns. As money and power continue to dominate social life, movements turn to defend what he refers to as the 'lifeworld' (*Lebenswelt* in German), a sphere of life typically beyond political and economic institutions, wherein debate and communication forge normative consensus (Habermas 1984, 1987; see Buechler 1995). His argument represents a shift towards postmaterialist issues and a separation from the dominance of economic considerations in understanding social movements. While economic issues remain

important, they are somewhat mitigated as new issues arise, particularly those concerning quality of life issues. As discussed by Ronald Inglehart (1990), the focus on 'postmaterialist' values (i.e., quality of life issues) are paramount to NSMs. For Inglehart (1990, chap. 11), although social networks and political organizations facilitate participation, they would not have an effect in the absence of a value system or ideology, which motivates people towards action.

The earlier approaches to social movements, which heavily focused on economic and political factors, dominated the scholarship until the late 1980s when scholars began to analyze the power of symbolism and association, the crafting of shared and collective grievances and identities, and the establishment of senses of solidarity (Goodwin and Jasper, eds. 2009, 6). Broadly, this pivot into NSMs also marked an increase in the importance of various cultural aspects, such as framing, emotions, and collective identity.

However, NSMs are not without criticism. Scholars such as Tilly (1988) have questioned how 'new' these new social movements are. While these 'new' movements represent a shift towards an increasing emphasis on the importance of seizing/occupying space, the use of symbols, and the incorporation of third parties, such as the state and sympathetic members of the public, Tilly (1988) finds they remain similar to nineteenth-century social movements. These 'new' movements still contain the same fundamental characteristics as earlier movements including associations, protests, marches, symbols, and declarations (see Calhoun 1993). Other scholars argue that the central aspects of NSM theories lack a defensible basis as a theory or paradigm (Pichardo 1997). Nevertheless, the NSM approach includes useful analytical concepts (framing, collective identity, and emotions), which were always present in previous movements but often ignored in analyses.

Steven Buechler (1995) provides a comprehensive overview of NSMs, finding that while they mark a clear distinction from other approaches, they better explain the “why” than “how” of social movement activism. He argues that the approaches and concepts introduced through NSMs are most effective when combined with other levels of analysis. Thus, NSM theory is most analytically effective when combined with other aspects towards a synthetic approach, such as those that incorporate both macro (e.g., organization and strategy) and micro levels (e.g., identity and grievances).

### ***Framing***

For David Snow and Robert Benford (1988, 198), social movements frame, that is, assign meaning to, and interpret events and conditions in order to mobilize potential new members and demobilize opponents. Framing focuses on an often-understudied aspect of movements, in which, “grievances or discontents are subject to differential interpretation, and the fact that variations in their interpretation across individuals, social movement organizations, and time can affect whether and how they are acted upon” (Snow et al. 1986, 465). Adopting Erving Goffman’s (1974) concept of framing in order to study collective action, Snow and Benford (1992, 136-138) find that collective action frames, or categories of cognitive understandings, affect how social movements created meanings in order to stimulate action (see Tarrow 2011, chap. 7). These frames may underscore or embellish the severity of injustice of a particular condition and subsequently reshape or redefine it as unjust or intolerable, whereas it was previously seen as permissible (Snow and Benford 1992, 137). Thus, frames serve as a unified interpretation of a collection of events and experiences. As they note, it is not necessarily the particular ideological elements of these frames that give them their novelty, rather it is how

activists articulate them (Snow and Benford 1992, 138). This in turn shapes people's perceptions and contributes to either increased mobilization or accelerated demobilization.

One concept of particular importance to understanding framing within larger protest cycles, involves what Snow and Benford refer to as "master frames" (1992, 138-142). Master frames perform the same functions as collective action frames for movements but they do so on a larger scale. They provide an interpretative medium that spreads across those engaged in collective action in different movements within a given protest cycle (see Tarrow 2011; Tilly 1984). The authors argue that one particular characteristic of master frames involves their ability to resonate or prove relevant to its adherents but also bystanders. Subsequently, the greater this resonance, the more potent a particular master frame.

While Goffman's (1974) original conception of framing regarded how individuals constructed reality, some social movement scholars have focused on how movements and their actors frame specific grievances in order to dignify their claims, network, produce collective identities, and stimulate others to action (Tarrow 2011, 144). Bert Klandermans (1997, 44) defines framing as "a process in which social actors, media, and members of a society jointly interpret, define, and redefine state affairs" (quoted in Tarrow 2011, 144). The conceptualization of framing as a process is important because it affects different levels of society through different mediums, and can be used by all entities, that is, by the opposition (the movement) and their opponents. McAdam et al. (2001, 44-45) take framing a step further by viewing it as part of a larger process or dynamic interaction between participants, opponents, and significant third parties that determines mobilization efforts. Subsequently, framing is a dynamic interaction in which not only the message but also the actions affect how individuals and organizations frame



particular situations. This dynamic process is contextual and thus includes the political environment, the role of media and communication sources, and cultural considerations.

Since framing refers to the redefinition and reconceptualization of social and cognitive things, scholars have focused on how this relates to injustices. William Gamson (1992a, 68, 73; 1992b, 32) uses the term “injustice frame,” in which he describes these injustices as a catalyst that manifests itself as “the righteous anger that puts fire in the belly and iron in the soul” (quoted in Tarrow 2011, 145). Similarly, Barrington Moore Jr. (1978, 88) argues that opposition movements must develop and propose a remedy for existing suffering, which creates new moral standards that “constitute the core identity of any opposition movement” (Tarrow 2011, 144-146). Simply put, for people to engage in collective action they must come to two conclusions: 1) that they collectively view their situation as unjust and, 2) that it can be changed through group efforts (McAdam 1982, 51). The role of the media and the accessibility and viewability of injustices is particularly important when focusing on frames. For an injustice frame to be collectively adopted, it must be shared publicly by potential challengers in a public way not only so that individuals know the frame exists but so that others are aware that it is shared (Gamson 1992a, 73). This may spur additional action as potential participants are aware of each other’s existence. This public aspect is particularly important as Tarrow (2011, chap. 7) views framing, the developing of collective identities, and emotion as all overlapping aspects that help create movement solidarity.

Although framing provides an important perspective on mobilization, it is not enough in and of itself to explain social movements. The various members of both challengers and movement participants operate on ‘uneven playing fields’ in terms of their leadership, organization, structure, and resources, among others (Ryan and Gamson 2009, 168-171). Thus,

framing strategies and methods should be incorporated and analyzed within the context of broader social movement-building efforts (see Ryan and Gamson 2009).

### ***Collective Identity***

Some scholars under this umbrella have emphasized other issues associated with this societal transition from industrial to post-materialist, focusing on the role of identity (Aronowitz 1992, 2014; Melucci 1988; Mueller 1994) and the desires and needs of individuals (Inglehart 1990; Melucci 1989). While frames create a shared sense of injustice, the development of a collective identity often serves to unite individuals in their mobilization efforts. The power of a movement's collective identity was even observed by Gustave Le Bon (1896, 9) when he stated, "Crowds, doubtless, are always unconscious, but this unconsciousness is perhaps one of the secrets of their strength." Collective identity, as defined by Alberto Melucci (1989, 34), is "an interactive and shared definition produced by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientations of their action as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their actions take place."

For Melucci, the altering of a collective identity provides a basis in which actors can shape their expectations and the cost/benefit implications of their actions. Importantly, collective action does not rest solely on the calculations of an individual's cost/benefit of participating, nor is collective identity completely negotiable (see Melucci 1989, 35-36). Why individuals choose to participate in collective action depends on multiple factors including emotions and their access to networks, resources, and information. Involvement in networks makes a given individual's participation in collective action less costly (Melucci 1988). Thus, the focus of collective identity, as Gamson observes, "is how individuals' sense of who they are becomes engaged with

a definition shared by coparticipants in some effort at social change—that is, with who “we” are” (Gamson 1992a, 55).

### ***Emotion***

NSMs are unique in that they politicize a variety of everyday issues, such as environmental concerns, women’s rights, and student issues. For those involved in various movements, there is often a strong emotional message, which is used to promote recruitment. Yet the study of emotions is difficult and they cannot be as easily determined or analyzed, as one would read text on a wall, for example. One important aspect of emotion is that it can promote mobilization and the construction of an overarching collective identity (see Polletta 2006, chap. 2). As Verta Taylor (1995, 227) writes, emotions are the “site for articulating links between cultural ideas, structural inequality, and individual action” (quoted in Tarrow 2011, 153). Put differently, emotions provide the passion, which distinguishes social movements from the structural and dominant institutions. As Arlie Hochschild (1990) has discussed, various groups often form their own “emotion cultures,” in which existing cultural or societal “rules” or “norms” guide how people should act depending on the context.

The role of emotion in social movements spans a variety of areas and many scholars have studied its effect in areas such as religion, gender, and nationalism, among others (Aminzade and McAdam 2001; Goodwin, Jasper, Polletta, eds. 2001; Gould 2009; Jasper 1998; Polletta 2006). Importantly, the study of emotion associated with protests does not mean protestors are irrational (Jasper 1998); rather, this is another medium of consideration in which to look at how movements are mobilized. Thus, the emotional considerations of movements are often interconnected with other areas of study that affect mobilization including institutionalized practices, emotion and language, and cultural symbols (Aminzade and McAdam 2001, 50).

The emotional emphasis of various movements largely depends on the base of the movement and the culture of the society from which it emerges (Tarrow 2011, 154). While often ignored or not explicitly discussed, emotions are often present in many aspects of social movements including identity construction, development of frames, and the mobilization of activists (Goodwin, Jasper, Polletta, eds. 2001, 6-10). As Deborah Gould (2009, 17) discusses, this turn towards emotion challenges the dichotomy of placing feelings and emotions against reason, logic, and cognition. For Gould, emotions describe a particular affect—that is the intensity or force—which follows a given experience. While an affect is unfixed, unstructured, and not pre-determined, an emotion is an expression at the individual level, which is structured by one's culture or “social convention” (Gould 2009, 20-21).

What then is the importance for emotions on social movement mobilization? If emotions are intrinsic and unique to us as humans, what makes them more than just an “epiphenomenal” aspect of contention, as Aminzade and McAdam posit (2001, 16-19)? As Randall Collins (2001) argues, emotions ultimately manifest themselves externally. For example, supporters may have preexisting sympathies, which may predispose them to agree or support a particular movement. This connection with individual experiences accounts for moral concerns and emotional energy, which can lead to further action and activity within a movement (Collins 2001, 31-32).

Francesca Polletta (2006) provides insight into the importance of emotion in social movements, noting that it is through a combination or a lens of shared values and understandings in which people ultimately decide to act. George Katsiaficas (1989, 8) discusses a concept known as the “eros effect,” which argues that collective mobilization is stimulated through a “collective sublimation of the instinctual need for freedom.” The emotional aspects that motivate

people are not synonymous with irrational and erratic behavior. Rather, this collective action is stimulated through what Katsiaficas refers to as fundamental levels of social solidarity.

As Tarrow (2011, chap. 7) illustrates, the turn towards focusing on emotion, identity, and framing marked an important turn in the study of social movements; however, theories based on these aspects risk becoming as deterministic as the structural approaches before them. The study of these aspects must be connected to the greater dynamics of social movements; that is, how they relate to the political aspects, such as identity politics and contentious politics (see Tarrow 2011, 155-156, chaps. 9-12). Subsequently, social movements are dynamic and involve complex interactions, which incorporate these aspects to varying extents.

### **Social Networks Approach**

The social networks approach builds on various factors discussed within previous literature, particularly in NSMs, including the role of collective identity and framing. This approach seeks to explain how movements recruit and mobilize throughout society at the individual or micro level (see Tarrow 2011, chap. 3). Specifically, it looks at the networks that lead to an individual's decision to engage in collective action. A social network refers to social ties that link or connect various individuals and organizations. An individual's network often includes friends, family, work colleagues, and those from community or religious organizations, among others. Because an individual's actions are largely reinforced by their respective social network, scholars have looked at how these influence mobilization and growth of movements (Castells 2009; Fox 2010; Freeman 2009; see Goodwin and Jasper, eds. 2009, part II).

Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998, 8) define networks as “forms of organization characterized by voluntary, reciprocal, and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange.” The importance of communication and the exchange of information is further emphasized by

Manuel Castells (2009, 19-24) who views networks as communicative structures which help to spread messages across time and space. These networks are complex and embody interests and values within themselves. They are both programmed and self-configurable, dynamic in nature.

For Castells, it is within networks that power is generated, “power is not located in one particular social sphere or institution, but it is distributed throughout the entire realm of human action” (2009, 15). A network society is multidimensional and the networks within each have their own respective logic of value-making. The greater the size of a network, the more powerful it is; it is the inclusion within a network that increases its power, rather than the size of its exclusion. However, internally, the power of a network is determined by the rules between its components and the communicative structure it embodies (Castells 2009, 43). While states inherently contain and exercise power through a variety of means (i.e. the monopoly on violence, the function of institutions, etc.), a counterpower exists within the populous themselves. Castells sees this power manifesting as the capacity of social actors to challenge the power embedded in institutions (2012, 6). Ultimately, networks favor or represent the interests of a specific set of “social actors at the source of network formation and of the establishment of the standards (protocols of communication)” (Castells 2009, 43). Thus, networks not only exude power, they are selective and represent specific interests. Critically, different networks will vary in their importance depending upon the movement and its goals. For example, while Black churches served a crucial role in mobilizing African Americans during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (Morris 1984), this particular network would likely be less successful in mobilizing for financial reforms, for example.

While various issues can bring forth contentious masses, these do not form movements. A preexisting communications structure or social network is necessary for this “spontaneous

activity” (Freeman 2009, 25; see also Fox 2010). Through an analysis of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the United States, Freeman (2009) finds that in order for movements to move beyond small and localized events they require the facilitation of pre-existing organizations and social ties. However, as others have noted, Freeman’s analysis lacks an incorporation of the emotional considerations that affect those within networks (see Goodwin and Jasper, eds. 2009, 12). Polletta (2006) illustrates a similar scenario when discussing “sit-ins” that occurred in the 1960s during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. While the stories of students engaging in spontaneous and unplanned protests throughout the country spread rapidly, they ignored the strategic planning that occurred through activists in the NAACP Youth Council (see Polletta 2006, chap. 2). The vision and story of spontaneous, unplanned, and rapid movements piques human curiosity and often romanticizes these movements. Yet, movements require careful strategic planning and the ability to communicate, which often occurs through communication and solidarity that is built and spread through social networks.

Jonathan Fox (2010) views networks, coalitions, and movements as existing along a continuum with varying degrees of organizational density and social cohesion. Thus, while these networks share certain goals, they do not necessarily cause or facilitate joint action. Networks require more cohesion in order to pursue joint action, which would then represent an upward shift in the continuum towards a movement. For Fox (2010, 488), the existence of a common target or enemy, shared ideologies, and shared expectations are critical factors when understanding the mobilization of a particular network and to what degree their connectivity is developed.

As discussed, scholars view and apply the importance of networks across different spectrums. Some see the importance of networks in their ability to have people view social

problems similarly. These networks provide for the identification of common social problems, allowing people to “align” their “frames” in order to develop an agreed-upon and collective method to solving social issues (Goodwin and Jasper, eds. 2009, 55-58; Snow et al. 1986). The structure of networks emphasizes the role of connections between nodes or central points. Indeed, the importance of networks and their ability to transcend various other identities is illustrated by Marc Edelman (2005, 36):

“Unlike electrical engineering diagrams, which typically indicate resistance to flows, formal network organograms imply agile and unobstructed movement of information between nodes and focal points. The network’s representation of itself erases political, historical, and personal forces that might, in practice, impede the social networking process”

As he observes, networks are dynamic and oftentimes facilitate the creation or development of other networks (Edelman 2005, 35). This approach takes both micro and macro level perspectives; micro in that it examines who is recruited and mobilized, and macro in the overarching broad networks that are created through societies. While existing social ties and networks are critical, these can be co-opted or built to suit an individual’s or organization’s own purposes (see Castells 2009; see also Edelman 2005). Thus, it is important to look at how these networks are utilized and how they connect within the broader factors of contentious politics. This is a critical consideration, given that movements often occur in waves or “cycles of protest” (Tarrow 1998, 2011; Tilly 1984).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The aforementioned discussion of social movement literature shows a plethora of potential factors of analysis, each with their own insights. The following theoretical framework of rhizomatic movements incorporates existing trends in literature (such as the role of economics, political opportunities, identity, framing, and emotions), while building on the



concept of networking through rhizomatic structure and logic. A fundamental issue in the study of social movements involves initiating and sustaining mass mobilization. One particular aspect of rhizomatic movements includes the incorporation of grassroots mobilization, which has experienced renewed emphasis, particularly in how these types of movements generate power and solidarity. Given the power and brutality of the repressive regimes, such as those in Egypt and Syria, political opposition groups must often operate underground. Public political opposition, free speech, and contentious marches and protests are often met with swift and violent repression from state-controlled security forces. The intelligence communities within these states are just as frequently turned on their own citizens as they are outside entities. This far-reaching security and intelligence apparatus, the *mukhabarat*, has restrained public activism and discontent for years (see Kandil 2012; Kamrava 2000, 71-81).

These opposition groups, alienated from the political system and unable to demonstrate or affect change in open political spaces (as seen with protests for example or public calls for reforms), must network and build their strength from below in order to avoid systematic repression from the *mukhabarat*. This is both an unconscious and subconscious effort. While there are well-known opposition groups, unions, and other organizations pushing for reforms in certain areas; the strength of grassroots movements rests in their ability to spread through society, spanning various areas and subsequently recruiting and mobilizing those that would otherwise not protest or act contentiously. In many regards, this is often discussed as a collective or sudden ‘awakening.’ However, this awakening is not immediate nor is it without proper strategic planning and oftentimes years of contentious actions. Subsequently, some scholars have turned to studying rhizomatic social movements, which are structurally similar to that of a rhizome (see, e.g., Funke 2012). While the existing characteristics remain important, this

rhizomatic logic allows for a deeper understanding of movement dynamics and development within cycles of protest, particularly within the context of extreme political repression. Under this framework, economic conditions are still important and provide a basis of discontent, the framing and identification of political opportunities assists with mobilization as does utilizing emotional reactions through social networks, and the dynamic relationship of interactions between participants and the state remains critical.

### ***Rhizomatic Movements***

Recently, many scholars have turned to focus on the rhizomatic or horizontalist nature of movements (Castells 2012, 140-155; Funke 2012, 2014; Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, and Becker, eds. 2014). In order to illustrate the power and structure of rhizomatic movements, I will utilize the concept of the rhizome as illustrated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980, 1983), which they use as an alternative lens or means for conceptualizing the world (see Funke 2014). Structurally, a rhizome is non-hierarchical, contains fixed borders, and fills all of the space within its borders. However, unlike other structures, there are not fixed focal points or nodes within a rhizome. As Peter Funke (2012, 29) describes, rhizomes “unlike a tree structure, with its “root node” or starting point and end-points, or “leaf nodes,” rhizomatic structures can be entered and exited from any point.” This is a crucial aspect of rhizomes as they are fluid in nature, with multiple entryways. As such, the characteristics of a given rhizome are dynamic and change according to the interconnectedness of its parts. Within the context of social movements, this may be seen through the changes in an individual participant’s fervor, the joining or fading out of various individual or organizational participation, changes in the sense and power of collective solidarity, and the sentiments and emotions permeating a movement’s participants. Just as a

rhizome is constantly changing within, based on its own connections, a movement changes based on the makeup and connections among its participants.

A rhizome may be fragmented or otherwise divided and any fragment or piece may again form the structure of which it was divided from. If taken within the context of nature, as Deleuze and Guattari discuss, viewing a rhizome as part of a plant, the fragments or pieces of the plant that are broken off may grow into a new plant. This is important within the context of social movements for as long as the collective identities, grievances, and targets remain within society, a new movement can begin, thus reinvigorating a cycle of protest. A demonstration or protest may be repressed but as long as these collective characteristics remain in the populace, the potential for a new or subsequent movement remains. This is not to say that this is *determinative* (as in a new movement will always form), rather the potential exists for renewed action. These movements cannot be easily crushed as there are no leaders or a fundamental structure in which to attack. The ideas and structure of the rhizome will continue to exist so long as the idea and identity of it remains within its various segments, that is, the people constituting its structure.

A non-rhizomatic movement may be conceptualized as that of a tree's root structure. As a tree grows, their roots continue to expand and separate, building off others. Thus, there is a clear hierarchy, particularly in the strength and proximity of these roots to one another. There is also a clear center point or node within a tree, which if removed would destroy the root structures below it. Within social movements, these are often seen in terms of heavily structured organizations, those that have leaders or ranks (such as union movements), or in other areas where there is a delineated hierarchy in leadership, decision-making, or other areas of mobilization. Conversely, a rhizome's structure exudes multiplicity, that is, it lacks a dominant core and is non-hierarchical. There are no clear ranks, leaders, or those pushing certain agendas.

Instead, these movements are guided by the collective consensus of the movement itself.

Understandably, these movements are considerably more difficult to dismantle as there is not one particular area in which to target. Yet, a disadvantage of these movements is that they often take considerable time in order to develop enough cohesion, coordination, and power in order to sustain significant contentious action, especially when faced with repression.

A key question in the study of social movements involves how they generate and sustain power. In *Power in Movement*, Tarrow (2011) provides a comprehensive overview and analysis of social movement structure and power. He provides key analytical areas including repertoires of contention (i.e., the methods in which people act contentiously) (see Tilly 2003), the structure and response of elites, and the role of identity. A key component of social movements is their ability to *sustain* their collective action, which requires them to continue their efforts despite repression or violence. For rhizomatic movements their power manifests itself in their ability to network throughout societies, turning localized community-specific grievances into larger and more focused movements that develop and target a shared grievance from a united front. As Funke (2012, 29-30) discusses:

“This rhizomatic logic is able to accommodate the considerable diversity and the multiplicity of struggles and possible futures, brining about amorphous sets of associated and loosely linked organizations, groups, and movements including anti-war, labour, environmental, feminist, peasant, indigenous, and student groups from the political Left...” (see Conway 2013).

These movements are able to network across various segments of society that would ordinarily remain divided or otherwise limited in their collaboration (e.g., race, religion, class, geography, ideology, tribal affiliation, gender, etc.). This networking allows these movements to develop considerable size, interconnectivity, and power. As such, the power a rhizomatic movement can be illustrated through the analogy of a spider web. A stronger, more powerful movement is

structurally similar to a larger spider web, that is, it connects, spans, and spreads across larger areas of society. Importantly, creating a larger web, as it would for a spider, involves significantly more time. Thus, rhizomatic movements do not simply just happen, there is often a long period in which contention builds, networks are built, solidarity develops, and communication spreads. A weaker movement, which may be envisioned as a smaller or less intricate spider web, is less connected, representing more of a patchwork. These types of movements would be similar to ones that occur after a flashpoint event, without significant networking and connectivity occurring beforehand. Indeed, this pre-existing activism or recent history of contentious action, serves as a catalyst for movement building. As Funke (2014, 32) asserts, these dynamics, which he discusses in terms of relays, serve as a “catalyst” or “amplifier” that activate established networks.

### ***Argument***

The following study of Egypt and Syria aims to show the power of rhizomatic movements in transcending localized grievances in order to build a unified front in which to engage in contentious mobilization despite extreme state suppression. The recent uprising in Egypt developed along this rhizomatic logic, allowing various community-specific grievances and localized groups to develop shared collective grievances, a sense of solidarity, and communication, which ultimately created a larger, more powerful national movement. Conversely, Syria’s movement was largely limited in nature and did not network or transcend various sects of society. Remaining limited in nature, the Syrian opposition, while able to sustain some contention, was not widespread, and proved unable to effectively challenge the regime or promote substantial political and social change.

A particular emphasis of this study involves the categorization of Egypt as a successful movement and Syria as an unsuccessful one. This conceptualization is based on the underlying goal of each movement, which was substantive political and social change oriented, including regime change. Thus, the successfulness of these movements rests in their ability to enact this substantive change.<sup>2</sup> This is not an uncommon goal, as Susan Eckstein (2001, 169) observes, “under dictatorships and highly repressive governments, the movements are aimed, explicitly or implicitly, at the termination of the regimes, and they are shaped by the institutional context, which prohibits or constricts their activity.”

### **Notes**

1 Based on an interview conducted by Aldon Morris and Cedric Herring with Lewis Killian in September 1983.

2 Paolo Gerbaudo (2012, 10) conceptualizes revolutions as, “the possibility of a rapid and profound change in the social and political structure.”

## CHAPTER THREE:

### EGYPT



**Figure 3.1:** Political Map of Egypt

*Source: Public Domain – CIA World Factbook (2014)*

Tahrir Square when translated means “Liberation Square,” a fitting name for a location that would serve as the gathering place for over one million nonviolent protestors, ultimately leading to the removal of a longstanding repressive regime in only eighteen days. What led to this movement’s success and what determined the outcome of this revolution? This chapter explores the rhizomatic nature of Egyptian contentious politics, arguing that these collective networks developed slowly over the past decade. Subsequently, community specific grievances yielded to an overarching national one in which protestors were able to develop a collective identity, sense of solidarity and a common purpose in which they united by calling for the

removal of Mubarak and his regime. This chapter also examines the role of digital media and social networks in coordinating mobilization efforts, disseminating information, and circumventing state suppression.

### ***Economic Conditions***

In Egypt, the economic conditions of the past decade were abysmal: food prices rose 37% in the two years prior to the uprising, inflation averaged 10% for the past decade, more than 40% of the population was living below the poverty line (less than \$2 a day), and in 2008 the unemployment rate of university graduates reached 25%. (Beinin 2002, 105; Gelvin 2012, 34-35; Rutherford 2013, 36-40). In the years prior to the uprising, the average Egyptian household spent over 40% of their annual income on food, with those in poverty spending more than half (World Food Programme 2013). Between 2009 and 2011, more than 15% of the population entered into poverty, twice the number of those leaving (World Food Programme 2013). Corruption was also rampant within Egypt. Transparency International's 2010 *Corruption Perceptions Index*, which measures citizens' perception of how bad corruption is within their country, ranked Egypt a 3.1 out of 10 (a lower score indicates a higher perception of corruption), placing Egypt as the twelfth most corrupt state in the region (out of nineteen).

Neoliberalism, a market-driven approach to economics that involves minimal intervention and a decreased role of the state, was championed by many Arab states seeking international investment, including Egypt, which began adopting neoliberal policies in the 1970s and 1980s. In December 1976, Egypt became the first Arab state to adopt Neoliberalism, receiving a \$450 million credit with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), along with the postponement of \$12 billion in foreign debt (Gelvin 2012, 16-17). However, as with all neoliberal policies, there are often reforms or other restructuring required of the state. In this



instance, Egypt was mandated to cut \$123 million in commodity support and \$64 million in direct subsidies, resulting in two days of violent ‘anti-IMF’ protests (see Gelvin 2012, 17).<sup>1</sup> The regime, at its peak in the early 1980s, was massive and the main driving force of the economy. Its public sector produced over 50% of the state’s GDP and consumed 75% of domestic fixed investment (Ikram 2006; Jreisat 2015; Rutherford 2013, 35). On its surface, Mubarak’s Egypt appeared to be a success story of a neoliberal-backed transition moving Egypt toward a global economy: privatization of state assets was accelerated, cuts to social programs were widespread and drastic, and the regime placed significant importance, often above all else, on attracting foreign investment (Gelvin 2012; Jreisat 2015). However, this masked growing inequality, popular discontent, and increasingly ineffective and unresponsive institutions (Gelvin 2012; see Jreisat 1997).

Although neoliberalism championed economic reforms with the intent of significant market reforms in an effort to promote greater equality, it did just the opposite. One such component, privatization, did not lead to thriving independent businesses in Egypt. Instead, it promoted ‘crony capitalism,’ in which the upper ranks or those in the ‘inner circle’ of the regime came to power over various large quantities of state assets (Gelvin 2012, 18; Rutherford 2013). One such example can be found in the friend of the son of the president who controlled 60% of the steel industry in Egypt, following privatization (Gelvin 2012, 18). Within Egypt, business executives holding government offices did not constitute ‘conflicts of interest.’ Subsequently, these profit-driven officials pushed for various initiatives promoting their own self-interests resulting in the further diminishment of workers’ rights and unions (see Hafez 2013). This would eventually lead to a strong disconnect between workers and the state, as the latter historically had

gained legitimacy through its social welfare programs and workers' protections, which it struggled to maintain.

In many ways, Egypt represented the dichotomy often seen with the rampant cronyism of authoritarian regimes; flourishing and lavish elites contrasted starkly with the majority of citizens living in poverty and facing high rates of unemployment. The *Economist* paints the following bleak picture of Egypt:

“The fact is that most of Egypt's 75m people struggle to get by, their ambitions thwarted by rising prices, appalling state schools, capricious judges, a plodding and corrupt bureaucracy and a cronyist regime that pretends democracy but in fact crushes all challengers and excludes all participation... Today, 44% of Egyptians still count as poor or extremely poor, with some 2.6m people so destitute that their entire income cannot cover basic food needs, let alone other expenses. Yet ranks of private jets clutter Cairo's airport. The flower arrangements at a recent posh wedding, where whisky flowed and the gowns fluttered in from Paris and Milan, were reputed to have cost \$60,000 in a country where the average wage is less than \$100 a month” (The Economist 2008; partially quoted in Gelvin 2012, 35).

Indeed, economic conditions have an important affect but they are not the *sole* causal factor when determining successful and sustained mobilization. While they set the stage for popular discontent, they did not determine a collective grievance, unify the population to the point of mobilizing an effective resistance, nor do they explain the successfulness of a particular movement. The Arab Spring is often discussed and conceptualized as a sudden awakening of middle class youths seeking democratic changes. However, as Rabab El-Mahdi (2014) discusses, this ignores a decade of building contentious actions and mobilization in Egypt, which ultimately paved the way for the 2011 revolution (see also El-Ghobashy 2012). Networking contention to the point of overthrowing a repressive state is a long and arduous process, which must capitalize on the small amounts of liberalization and ‘space’ afforded by repressive regimes.

## **The Rise of Contentious Politics: A Decade of Action**

Public activism, in general, and public political activism, in particular, was largely nonexistent in Egypt until 2000 as rallies and protests were banned and demonstrators risked arrest and oftentimes torture. Freedom of the press was particularly abysmal prior to the 2011 revolution. Freedom House ranked Egypt in 2010 as 65/100, earning a ranking of “not free,” in their global press freedom index (a higher score represents less freedom) (Freedom House 2011). The report notes numerous issues including the ability to try offenders (i.e., journalists) in military tribunals, multiple emergency laws restricting press coverage, among many others. Mubarak’s regime was a police state due to not only its brutality, but also its permeance throughout society (see Kandil 2012). The *mukhabarat* had become the “chief administrative arm of the state,” in which they permeated all levels of society from mediating local conflicts, overseeing elections and academic appointments, addressing worker-management conflicts, monitoring sporting events, and developing extensive networks informants to conduct surveillance across neighborhoods (see Abdelrahman 2014; El-Ghobashy 2011, 24; see also Kandil 2012).

In Egypt, mobilization and contention built across a variety of issues and societal sects including the Palestinian Second Intifada; protests against the wars in Iraq in 2003 and Gaza in 2008; various prodemocracy movements in 2004 and 2005, including initiatives organized by Kifaya; various youth movements originating in 2008; labor protests and strikes beginning in 2006, which ultimately mobilized over 3,000 wildcat (unofficial) strikes and 1.7 million Egyptians; among other movements covering a variety of issues (Abdelrahman 2014; El-Mahdi 2014, 53). These demonstrations politicized different groups and members of society over specific issues. However, what gave the Egyptian 2011 uprising its power was its ability to

collectively network and bind these groups and efforts into a single movement with a shared grievance that incorporated these issues while transcending various divides (i.e., gender, ideology, politics, religion, socioeconomic status, etc.). This overarching grievance would eventually be targeted at the regime and Mubarak himself, calling for his removal and the implementation of widespread reforms. The past decade saw the emergence of public street politics and public acts of contention, followed by a slow transformation from community-specific and local grievances to a unifying national one, culminating in the 2011 revolution.

### ***Anti-War Movements***

Public activism, such as street protests, had been virtually non-existent in Egypt for decades; however, this changed with the Palestinian Second Intifada in 2000. Nicola Pratt emphasizes the importance of the second intifada, observing that, it “triggered perhaps the largest and most radical spontaneous demonstrations in the Arab world since the first Gulf War” (quoted in El-Mahdi 2014, 54; see Pratt 2007, 170). Ariel Sharon’s, Israel’s then right-wing leader, visit to the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, would kick start the second intifada. His controversial visit sparked reciprocal escalations on both sides, ultimately leaving a wake of violent attacks and retaliations. Images of Israeli tanks and their often asymmetric military responses, enraged regional Arab states. Significantly different from the first intifada, this one was increasingly violent, brutal, and highly polarizing. The emotional dynamics across the region, fueled by intense coverage by Al-Jazeera, created a regionally momentous event. This intifada, like the previous one, prompted widespread protests against Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and widely held regional perceptions of excessive Israeli violence.

Thousands of Egyptians, including large numbers of students from the American University at Cairo and local high schools, took to the streets in protest. As El-Mahdi (2014, 54)

observes, this movement not only heralded the reemergence of collective political action back to Egypt, it facilitated and pushed activists into new means of collaboration. This desire to enact change spread to other sectors of society led twenty non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and various independent activists to form the Popular Committee to Support the Intifada (PCSI) in 2000. The PCSI represented the first time in modern Egyptian history in which rival political factions, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Nasserists, Socialist-Leftists, Revolutionary Socialists,<sup>2</sup> among others, united under a common cause (El-Mahdi 2014, 54-55). Importantly, this new initial resurgence of activism was somewhat accepted or otherwise permitted to exist, partly due to the regime's recent souring of relations with Israel (see Shehata 2009, 68-69). In many ways, the regimes of the region, including Egypt, were likely permissive of such mobilization as they focused discontent externally, rather than at the systems themselves.

Importantly, this committee did not exist as just an abstract idea or entity for channeling discussions with little tangible outcomes. In just under two years, it collected the monetary equivalent of \$400,000 in cash, food, and medical supplies destined for Palestine, while simultaneously gathering more than 100,000 signatures for a petition calling for Egypt to end its diplomatic relations with Israel (El-Mahdi 2014, 54). In the following six years, the group continued to organize annual conferences and social forums against American and Israeli occupation. Not only did this committee represent the beginning of a new era of Egyptian contentious actions, it showed the ability of collective action to mobilize thousands, while collecting a substantial amount of tangible resources in a relatively short period.

Anti-war efforts would appear again protesting the 2003 U.S.-led war in Iraq and the Israeli-Gaza conflict in 2008. The 2003 invasion of Iraq led to widespread gatherings and protests in Tahrir Square on March 20-21, 2003. The PCSI would serve as a model for multiple

other groups that sought to enact change outside of the existing political environment, including the Anti Globalization Egyptian Group, the 20 March Movement for Change, the Defense Committee for Labor Rights, and the Cairo Conference (officially the Cairo Conference against Zionism and Imperialism) (see El-Mahdi 2014, 55). These various groups cultivated the idea and praxis that cross-ideological collaboration was possible between both local and international actors. The various anti-war efforts in Egypt resulted in two fundamental changes. First, it allowed for various activists to network, creating an umbrella under which experiences and ideas could be shared. Second, these efforts incorporated and brought together three very distinct, and often opposing, political groups within Egypt: the Muslim Brotherhood, Nasserists, and the Left (Abdelrahman 2014).

### ***Prodemocracy Movements***

The movements, demonstrations, and conferences challenging the Israeli actions during the Palestinian Second Intifada showed that for the first time, ideological, political, and other divides within Egyptian society could be transcended in an effort to tackle larger issues. The anti-war movements led to another new form of collective action, one that would soon challenge Mubarak's regime itself.

The prodemocracy movements in Egypt emerged in 2004, a year before the presidential referendum scheduled for September 2005 that would determine whether Mubarak would be elected for a fifth six-year term (El-Mahdi 2014). The referendum was scheduled in order to amend the existing constitution to allow for the direct election of the presidential candidate (previously the Parliament selected a candidate, who was then confirmed by the public in a referendum). However, one year before the presidential referendum, protestors began demonstrating for political liberalization, arguing the proposed changes imposed too strict of

requirements for opposing candidates. The existing system only allowed the public to accept or reject a candidate, leaving Mubarak as the only option. Various groups began to form including the Popular Campaign for Change (Freedom Now), Women for Democracy (the Street is Ours), Youth for Change, Journalists for Change, Workers for Change, and the Egyptian Movement for Change, which rallied under the slogan *Kifaya* (Arabic for “Enough”) (see El-Mahdi 2014, 55). This movement spread to groups from other areas of society, which soon joined these efforts, calling on Mubarak not to seek another term, and rejecting the notion that Mubarak’s son, Gamal Mubarak, would ‘inherit’ power (El-Mahdi 2014, 55). The referendum would ultimately pass and the election was mired in controversies over voting fraud, voter intimidation, and ballot stuffing, among other allegations.

Kifaya would soon grow into a larger prodemocracy movement for collective action within Egypt. Indeed, the slogan itself, “Enough,” resonated with many Egyptians. Similar to the structure of a rhizome, Kifaya was horizontal, lacking any hierarchy or structured leadership apparatus. Within Kifaya, decisions were made by consensus within a steering committee, comprised of various political groups including Nasserists (al-Karama Party), Marxist-Socialists (Revolutionary Socialist Organization), liberals (al-Ghad Party), Islamists (al-Wasat Party and the Egyptian Islamic Labor party), as well as several independent actors (El-Mahdi 2014, 56). Importantly, none of these groups, with the exception of al-Ghad, was a “legal” political party officially licensed by the state (El-Mahdi 2014, 56). Thus, Kifaya’s organizational structure offered these alienated political groups a medium in which they could collaborate outside of the institutionalized political sphere that Mubarak’s regime dominated. The organization utilized social media, coordinated primarily in working-class neighborhoods (to establish a broad base of support), and utilized an innovative repertoire, including flash mobs,<sup>3</sup> in order to raise awareness

while occupying public spaces (Gelvin 2012, 48). Although limited through its incorporation of only political parties, Kifaya represented a turn towards widespread, horizontal organization and mobilization.

The inability of citizens to push for reform through their political process directly contributed to their participation in street politics. This sense of apathy and disengagement with the political process directly pushed citizens towards grassroots or unofficial political organizations and movements. As Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren (2013, 103) observe, “Votes were considered so meaningless that most Egyptians were no longer bothering to cast a ballot.” Furthermore, many were disenfranchised with their political system as many of the political organizations were banned or not officially licensed by the state. Groups like Kifaya offered an alternative, which would be wide reaching and accepting to a variety of political ideologies. This contributed to the development of a series of underground networks in which contention would build.

Other movements represented this overall disenchantment with the political process, and the regime at large, as well. These movements included protests against electoral fraud (2005, 2010), which focused at regime efforts to restrain the Muslim Brotherhood members while keeping the ruling NDP in power; those promoting women’s rights (2005), such as Black Wednesday, which was brutally suppressed; marches for academic freedom (2003); and the ‘Judges’ Uprising,’ which called for judicial reform and independence (2005) (see Abdelrahman 2014, 39-49, chap. 2; Bernard-Maugiron, ed. 2009; Castells 2012).

Before the emergence of Kifaya, many would agree with Jason Brownlee’s assertion that, “Mubarak has subdued Egypt’s Islamists, leftists, and human rights community to the point where little domestic impetus for reform remains” (Brownlee 2002; quoted in El-Mahdi 2014,



56). Perhaps Kifaya's greatest power was its overall success as a broader movement. Kifaya served as an umbrella for various specific movements and promoted the horizontal and non-ideological aspects of street activism. It provided a banner under which historically disenfranchised, marginalized, and persecuted groups could rally behind their local community or industry specific grievances (see Abdelrahman 2015, chap. 2). Indeed, this movement widely appealed to all three of the major sectors of contentious actors, as classified by Mona El-Ghobashy (2014), in Egypt: workplace/labor, neighborhood, and associational (e.g., April 6, youth activists). Importantly, it represented a new wave of activism in decades in which contentious actions and demonstrations were solely organized around political liberalization (El-Mahdi 2014).

### ***Youth Activism***

While the prodemocracy movement in Egypt only lasted for a short time (2004-2006), the organizational structure and the idea of shared cooperation across societal divides continued. Youth for Change (transliterated in Arabic as *Shabaab min agl al-taghyeer*), an offshoot of Kifaya, marked a new organizational effort within Egyptian contentious action (El-Mahdi 2014, 56-57). The group attempted to organize and unify along demographics (age), rather than ideology, class, and geography (El-Mahdi 2014, 56-57). Youth for Change, and another parallel organization, *Tadamon* (Arabic for 'Solidarity'), utilized grassroots activism in an effort to support labor activism emerging in 2007-2008 (see Hafez 2013). Comprised primarily of youths, students, unemployed graduates, and young professionals, the group stressed that it did not promote any particular ideology nor was it limited to any class; its mobilization and recruitment focused solely on age (El-Mahdi 2014, 56-57). This method of organization around nonpartisan and neutral ideological stances continued with the 'April 6 Group,'<sup>4</sup> which was founded in 2008

by former Youth for Change and Kifaya activists to support a textile workers' strike in Mahalla al-Kobra against low wages and high food prices (El-Mahdi 2014, 57; see Hafez 2013; see also PBS 2011). Importantly, the April 6 Group, like Kifaya, maintained high levels of youth involvement, which comprised of 60% of its members (Hafez 2013). Various members of the group attended nonviolent resistance workshops and studied the nonviolent tactics of Serbian and Ukrainian youth movements. In one example, in 2009, blogger and April 6 Activist, Mohammed Adel traveled to Serbia to study strategies for nonviolent revolutions (Castells 2012, 83; PBS 2011).

Kifaya, Youth for Change, and the April 6 Group, among others, represent an essential element of the prodemocracy movements within Egypt, in which they transcended existing ideological, political, and socioeconomic (class) divides. They were primarily comprised of youths but their widespread and accepting criteria led to the incorporation of all aspects of society, including the biggest political organization in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed the greatest strength of the Kifaya movement involved its loose definitions and restrictions, allowing it to serve as an umbrella for these multiple breakaway movements and organizations.

This discussion mirrors findings by Michael Hoffman and Amaney Jamal (2014), in which they find support for certain common beliefs regarding Arab youth including that on average they are less religious, more educated, more likely to be unemployed, more likely to protest, and less likely to vote. However, they find some surprising aspects such as them being more satisfied with their countries' economic conditions and generally happier regarding their regimes' efforts to promote economic prosperity. Significantly, their findings suggest that these youth were less likely to be mobilized according to economic or other *grievances*. Instead, they

are more likely to mobilize around perceived *opportunities*, which may be due, in part, to their interconnectedness at regional and international levels.

### ***Labor Movements***

Fueled by increasing marginalization, decreased wages and worker protections, and an increased cost of living, caused by neoliberal policies, the labor sector emerged as a pivotal force in the opposition movement. Following the decline of the prodemocracy movement in Egypt, workers at the Misr Textile Factory in the city of El-Mahalla in the Nile Delta began a strike in December 2006, initiating what would become the largest wave of labor protests in Egypt since the 1940s (El-Mahdi 2014, 59). This movement, spanning predominantly from 2006-2009, mobilized more than 1.7 million workers and conducted several hundred strikes a year (Abdelrahman 2015, 57). Significantly, the majority of strikes and demonstrations occurred outside of official union committees, mobilizing through grassroots efforts. These workers utilized various methods of contentious action ranging from street protests, sit-ins at government buildings, and occupations of factories (see El-Mahdi 2014). Without the formal structure of official unions, these informal organizations of workers operated by consensus, similar to Kifaya's internal operations.

These various labor movements, and their support by youth activist groups were in many ways a surprise to the regime. These youth not only connected with workers, but helped turn their grievances into a real threat, resulting in extreme losses in production. Further, these organizations utilized information technology and social media to publicize information, raise awareness and support, and connect likeminded supporters and activists, all of which was largely outside of the regime's immediate control (see Hafez 2013).

This movement reached its peak in 2009 when real estate tax collectors successfully formed an independent union, the first autonomous union to exist since the 1940s (El-Mahdi 2014, 59). These labor movements would prove to be a formidable force of growing contention in Egypt. Not only did they pose a significant threat through strikes, they were able to receive significant concessions from the government and created four independent unions (Abdelrahman 2015; El-Mahdi 2014). Labor movements would also prove a considerable force during the 2011 uprising as well. Just one day before the military ordered Mubarak step down from power, on February 10, 2011, tens of thousands of workers in both public and private industries went on strike (Gelvin 2012, 56). Subsequently, Cairo's airport and stock exchange were shut down. Eighteen thousand workers in the textile industry alone, walked off their jobs (Gelvin 2012, 56).

Although public political activism was highly repressed, the realm of the internet provided a forum in which Egyptians could communicate and discuss political issues. Furthermore, the youth population of the country heavily utilized this medium. Yet, as the regime would slowly discover, contention would also build over the cyber realm, in conjunction with the various street demonstrations. Although the security forces occasionally targeted some bloggers in the mid 2000s, online political engagement and dissatisfaction was largely tolerated, likely on the assumption that this contention would remain solely in the digital realm and would not develop into a substantial offline movement (see Howard and Hussain 2013, 118).

### **The Digital Realm of Contention**

In highly repressive states, opposition members and those sympathetic to various repressed causes must find a method or means by which to communicate, network, and share ideas. In Egypt, a large outlet for these groups involved the cyber realm. Egypt, both regionally

and globally, particularly Cairo, is well connected in terms of its communication and information infrastructure.

The role of digital media<sup>5</sup> and social networks are frequently mentioned when analyzing the Arab Spring and are heavily debated among scholars and analysts. Social and digital media played both a unique and important role in mobilizing protestors, sharing political views, and facilitating growing contention and grievances across societal networks. However, it is important to delineate under what conditions and to what extent digital media and social networking affected this movement. Most importantly, digital and social media provided a platform for civil society to flourish and organize political and social activities independent of the state (Diamond 1994; Howard and Hussain 2013, 5). Indeed, digital media and social networking has largely shaped the ways in which contentious actions are developed, initiated, and organized (Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl 2005; Howard 2010; Howard and Hussain 2013, 71; Still 2005). Khatib and Lust (2014, viii) refer to these social networks as “liberation technology,” emphasizing their importance in activating networks and mobilizing various organizations and groups.

Egypt has a long history of digital activism and its affect on the opposition efforts is unique as Cairo serves as both a cultural hub with a well-established information infrastructure (Howard and Hussain 2013, 37; see Khamis 2011). This digital realm represents an area for free-flowing information, which neither traditional political parties nor the state could control (Castells 2012; Dunn 2010; Howard and Hussain 2013, 38; Lim 2012; OpenNet Initiative 2009a). It allowed activists and citizens to explore new ways of thinking and provided a new arena for political discourse, often through a creative repertoire of actions (DeLong-Bas 2011; Howard and Hussain 2013, 39). It also allowed activists to share collective grievances, disseminate information, and discuss political issues. Importantly, the consequences of this

manifested itself outside of the cyber realm. In 2005, Egyptians uploaded videos from personal cell phones of electoral fraud to YouTube and other sites (Howard and Hussain 2013, 116-117). In another example, activists released video clips of security forces torturing detainees, sparking public unrest, leading to the arrest of two officers from the Giza Governate (see Amnesty International 2008; OpenNet Initiative 2009a). The regime did not frequently filter websites or information; although it used numerous surveillance tactics, monitoring all web traffic (see OpenNet Initiative 2009a).<sup>6</sup> Restrictions were also levied on internet cafés (a common source of internet access for many citizens), requiring that establishments record traffic and the names, email address, and phone numbers of patrons (OpenNet Initiative 2009a).

As bloggers became increasingly active in Egypt, the regime began to crack down on internet activism. One blogger, Abdel Nabil Suleiman (“Kareem Amer”), was arrested and sentenced to four years in prison for criticizing Mubarak and the state’s religious institutions (Howard and Hussain 2013, 38; OpenNet Initiative 2009a). Others, including many affiliated with the Kifaya and April 6 movements, were strategically targeted and arrested, as well as those organizing and covering protests regarding controversial events, such as demonstrations for constitutional amendments in 2007 (Howard and Hussain 2013, 38). In 2009, the state was listed as one of the ten worst places to be a blogger, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (OpenNet Initiative 2009a). Many of these arrests are conducted under the auspices of the state’s long-standing emergency laws. One such example involved the arrest of Mohamed Refaat on charges of, “offending the state institutions, destabilizing public security, and inciting others to demonstrate and strike via the Internet” (OpenNet Initiative 2009a).

### ***We Are All Khaled Said***

Internet activism took a pivotal turn in June 2010, when an internet blogger, Khaled Mohamed Said, was dragged from an internet café in Alexandria and beaten to death by plain-clothes police after allegedly posting a video showing officers dividing seized money and narcotics (Castells 2012; El-Mahdi 2014, 63-66). The official story, according to police, is that Khaled Said died after ingesting illegal drugs to avoid arrest. However, the viral photo of his beaten and bloody face would challenge this claim as it spread with a rapid fervor throughout Egyptian society, media outlets, and social and personal networks. Khaled Said became to Egypt as Mohammad Bouazizi, the fruit vendor who self-immolated, was to Tunisia; a rallying cry for the people against oppression. Local prosecutors would refuse to take up Said's case and the family turned to human rights advocates and the media, the former of which organized protests.

The Facebook page "We Are All Khaled Said"<sup>7</sup> was created by anonymous activists (later identified as members of the Mohamed El-Baradei campaign [named after the human rights activist and former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency] and Google executive Wael Ghoneim) in order to draw attention to horrific police abuses and corruption (Castells 2012; El-Mahdi 2014; see Ghonim 2012). Within a few weeks over 130,000 people would follow the page, reaching a total of 473,000 on the eve of the 2011 uprising (Gelvin 2012, 49-50). In many ways, the "We Are All Khaled Said" movement represented a larger turning point within Egyptian contentious politics. The Facebook page itself became a forum or community within Egypt and was largely used to disseminate protest related information and news. The activists partaking in this were representative of this new wave of activists in Egypt: middle-class, youth, lacking a political party, anti-ideological, technologically savvy, and often independent (El-Mahdi 2014, 64-65; see also Hoffman and Jamal 2014).

The importance of these social networks involves their ability to build solidarity around common understandings and grievances, and their ability to activate existing networks. Social media outlets, such as Facebook and Twitter, for example, can facilitate the mobilization and activation of a person's offline contacts (i.e., their network), allowing a social movement to reach a substantial size (Castells 2012; Howard and Hussain 2013; Lovejoy and Saxton 2012). These forms of media may also contribute to building a personal and group identity (Castells 2012; Dalton, Sickle, and Weldon 2009; Howard and Hussain 2013). Indeed, this collective identity would be critical to transforming these local and community-specific grievances into widespread national ones in which would unify people across various societal divides. The viral photo of Khaled Said stirred strong emotional reactions. The page gained considerable popularity and support, underscoring two important considerations. First, it emphasized the very real possibility that anyone (that is, the average Egyptian citizen) could have just as easily been Khaled Said. The *mukhabarat* were relentless and routinely arrested those suspected of political activism or supporting opposition movements (see Human Rights Watch 2011). Second, it stirred the emotional convictions of various personal social networks in which many people knew (to varying degrees of separation) victims of the repressive state security apparatus.

At the time of the 2011 uprising, the median age of Egyptians was 24 and 33% of the country's population of 83 million were under the age of 14 (Howard and Hussain 2013, 48). Furthermore, 70% of 'internet-savvy' Egyptians were youths (i.e., under the age of 34), with an estimated 80% of the population owning a cell phone (Castells 2012, 57; Howard and Hussain 2013, 48). Social media was particularly important for Egyptians as this is not only where they go to socialize but also it is also a major platform for their formal news (Howard and Hussain 2013). For example, as Howard and Hussain (2013, 56-59) find, political websites were also far



more likely to link to Facebook or western media sites (e.g., CNN) than to each other. While the availability of this technology is widespread and its use is innovative, these do not determine or facilitate particular political outcomes. Rather, these socio-technological devices “alter the matrix of opportunities and costs associated with intermediation, mobilization, and the organization of politics” (Bimber 2003, 231; excerpt of quote in Howard and Hussain 2013, 122). The specific and innovative utilizations of digital media and social networking by protestors ‘on the ground’ will be discussed in the following subsection.

This decade of building contentious politics and activism within Egypt, both on the streets and in the cyber realm, illustrates three fundamental changes. First, these movements challenged the state’s ability to control (i.e., brutally repress to the point of nonexistence) public activism. These protests and strikes illustrated real weaknesses in the regime’s ability to restrain activism, although it occasionally responded with heavy-handed suppression and violent tactics. Second, the innovation of these activists showed a fundamental lapse in the regime’s ability to dominate information. While Egypt remained a comparatively connected state and served as a media hub for the region, internet activism was supporting and fueling some of these emerging movements; something the regime was not prepared for. Lastly, these various movements illustrated a developing change in which mobilization no longer required strict ideological or political bases. These new social movements transcended traditional divides within society. Thus they were a considerable threat, and oftentimes larger and less predictable than their predecessors.

## 18 Days: From the Streets to Tahrir

“You don’t need to train every single protester, only a small group of activists well connected with people in their local areas. Ideas spread like a virus,”

—*Saad Bahaar, Egyptian Activist*<sup>8</sup>

Many analyses of the Arab Spring have focused on the poor economic conditions, the role of digital media and technology, or the recent removal of Tunisia’s leader Ben Ali at the start of the Arab Spring. All three areas provide distinct and important insights, with none necessarily being the single *causal* explanation. It is thus important to analyze the various underlying factors in terms of what Howard and Hussain (2013, 106) discuss as a “causal recipe,” in which multiple factors and their interaction with each other contribute to a more accurate and complete understanding of the phenomena in question. While, poor economic conditions and corruption set the stage for discontent, the past decade of activism provided opportunities for the opposition to hone their skills, become aware of other existing networks, and develop shared strategies, a common set of grievances, and a shared collective identity. Digital media and social networking provided an alternative avenue to communicate and Tunisia provided the spark that moved these groups into action, allowing the opposition to recognize the possibility of success. As the revolution in Tunisia unfolded, Egyptians saw the potential for real regime change and political reform. The citizens of Tunisia, a country one-eighth the size of Egypt, successfully overthrew their regime in a peaceful and nonviolent manner.

The opposition consisted of formal groups, independent activists, as well as everyday Egyptians. Importantly, although many participating groups and organizations issued demands or statements, the common overarching consensus of protestors was Mubarak had to step down. Though many organized groups participated, no one group made decisions on behalf of the movement. Indeed, one reporter covering the movement asked an activist if he had heard of the

Revolutionary Youth Council representing the interests of Tahrir Square, to which he responded, “Which one?” (PBS 2011; Topol 2011).

### ***The Call to Action & January 25 – The Day of Revolt***

On the eve of the 2011 uprising, the We Are All Khaled Said and April 6 Movement Facebook pages accumulated over 400,000 and 70,000 members, respectively (Gelvin 2012, 49-50; Rutherford 2013, 38-39). Youth activists from various groups including We Are All Khaled Said, the April 6 Group, among others, called for demonstrations, a “Day of Revolt,” on January 25 in Tahrir Square. Two days before the Day of Revolt, the April 6 Group, according to one of its founders Ahmed Maher, “organized cells of 30-50 activists; [in which] each cell was to regroup in a pre-selected spot in Cairo, but only one person in each cell would direct the cell to the “main rendezvous point”” (PBS 2011). Around the same time, Asmaa Mahfouz, a student, activist, and another founding member of the April 6 Group; posted a video on her Facebook page, which would soon go viral. The video, besides its powerful message, included her stating her full name, with her identity clearly visible. She states, in part:

Four Egyptians set themselves on fire...people have some shame! I, a girl, posted that I will go down to Tahrir Square to stand alone and I’ll hold the banner...I am making this video to give you a simple message: we are going to Tahrir on January 25<sup>th</sup>... If you stay home, you deserve all that’s being done to you, and you will be guilty before your nation and your people. Go down to the street, send SMSs, post it on the Net, make people aware.” (quoted in Castells 2012, 55; see PBS [2011] for full video)

The beginning of demonstrations and the choice for January 25 was not random. January 25 was a police holiday and thus was symbolically selected. Indeed, the holiday itself was not widely supported, though many political organizations participated out of fear for being deemed ‘unpatriotic’ or unsupportive of the state. Throughout the demonstrations, Friday became a key day for renewing protests in Egypt as people already gathered regularly for prayer. By many accounts, the numbers of protests swelling Tahrir Square were shocking and beat even the most

optimistic of estimates. People from all aspects of society attended, including the estimated 30% who were women (Gallup 2012; Howard and Hussain 2013, 48). It is important to note that much analysis focused on the mobilization and occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo. This was likely due to the city's unique characteristics as the nation's capital, the focal point of media and news outlets, and its large urban population; but many January 25 demonstrations occurred throughout the country, including twelve of the country's twenty-seven provinces and many municipal areas (Gelvin 2012, 45).

Planning and organization was crucial for activists. Many citizens, although angry and discontent, historically avoided public demonstrations for fear of arrest, torture, being unable to provide for their family if arrested, among other reasons. As Ahmed Salah, an April 6 activist, recounts, many would say the regime was too strong and would only come out 'if everybody else would' (El-Mahdi 2014, 58-59). Subsequently, activists began creating the illusion of large numbers by organizing small numbers of people in alleyways and central areas to appear as a larger group. As more people came, the groups would move to larger areas such as neighborhoods, eventually reaching a large enough size to march (El-Mahdi 2014, 58-59). They used both traditional and digital means to spread their messages to the population. They used SMSs (text messages), social networking, and paper pamphlets. They were calculated in their distribution and organization, attempting to reach all corners of society, particularly those that were often marginalized. One such example includes the distribution of pamphlets to residents of Cairo's Bulaq al-Dakroul slum, which called for a meeting point in front of a local bakery before marching on Tahrir (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 107). Organizers distributed maps of gathering points and routes, as well as instructions for marching on Tahrir Square in the following days after the Day of Revolt (see Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik 2014, 66).

False information of protest sites and demonstration routes were posted online in order to mislead and distract state security forces (Lynch 2012, 88). The real information was then distributed to demonstrators via text messages shortly before the event. The demonstrators also utilized multiple routes, thus making it more difficult to be stopped by police deployments and blockades (Lynch 2012; Noueihed and Warren 2013; Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik 2014). Those championing the use of digital media and social networking were not idealistic in the sense that they overlooked important aspects of protest. Indeed, even Asmaa Mahfouz illustrated the importance of mobilization in her viral vlog, urging participation and that, “Sitting at home and just following us on news or Facebook leads to our humiliation... If you stay at home, then you deserve all that’s being done to you” (PBS 2011). YouTube was frequently used to disseminate raw footage of protestors (23 videos alone received 5.5 million views) (Howard and Hussain 2013, 61-62). Another example that illustrates the popular and innovative means of mobilization, involved a music video, commonly called the “soundtracks for the revolution,” which accounted for 25% of the top-20 video views (Howard and Hussain 2013, 62). Demonstrators used mobile phones to upload videos directly to Al Jazeera, which created a live blog of citizen journalism consisting of hundreds of live feeds, images, and videos (Howard and Hussain 2013, 100; see Seib 2008). These examples highlight both the innovative and widespread means in which protest related information was shared and disseminated. Importantly, this information likely supported mobilization efforts. As Zeynep Tufekci and Christopher Wilson (2012) find, when controlling for other variables, people that used social media were more likely to engage in protests than those that did not.

### *Navigating the Chaos: January 28 – The Friday Day of Rage*

Faced with swelling numbers of protestors and calls for a Friday Day of Rage (January 28), with the aim of occupying Tahrir Square, the state shut down the internet in order to limit mobilization efforts on January 27 (see Castells 2012). However, this would have a limited effect as Fridays were already a day of community gathering at mosques. Additionally, those that were unable to access information, being uncertain as to what was happening, took to the streets, thereby causing the unintended effect of growing protest numbers (Howard and Hussain 2013, 22). Although much of the opposition was utilizing nonviolent tactics (crowds would often shout “Salmiyya, salmiyya!” Arabic for “Peaceful, Peaceful!”), the January 28 Day of Rage would be filled with violent clashes initiated by both sides, resulting in significant damage and several prison raids (Gelvin 2012, 53-54; see Lynch 2012).

The sudden shut down of the state’s internet piqued international attention as well, expecting a harsh security crackdown. Transnational corporations (TNCs) would soon respond in support of the protestors. Google and Twitter coordinated the development of an application, Speak2Tweet. This program automatically converted voicemails into a tweet (message) and posted to Twitter, thus circumventing the regime’s filters (Castells 2012, 64; Howard and Hussain 2013, 33). Telecomix, an international hacktivist organization, developed a program to retrieve recorded messages via telephone, convert them to text, and then forward them to every working fax machine in the country (Castells 2012, 64). A lynchpin of this shutdown was that the country needed to keep landline telephone systems active, thus allowing activists to utilize dial-up internet connections. Many universities retained the dial-up lines of earlier years and thus became communication hubs. Activists also distributed information on circumventing internet censorship (e.g., using anonymous routing systems, such as the Onion Router [TOR]), how to

use ham radios, and how to connect to dial-up internet access through a mobile phone, Bluetooth, and a laptop (see Castells 2012, 61-66). The regime was unable to maintain this severance of the internet, ultimately restoring access on February 1 (some estimate this shutdown cost the economy US\$90 million, not accounting for lost e-commerce) (see Castells 2012; Howard and Hussain 2013, 18; Noueihed and Warren 2013).

The activities of demonstrators represented the horizontalist nature of their organization. Tasks were divided with some protestors responsible for providing security during prayers and watching over the square, while others distributed food and medical supplies, and yet others spoke with the media (Gelvin 2012, 52-53). Salafis and Muslim Brotherhood members joined the protests, as well as labor groups, unions and the poor; drastically increasing numbers (Castells 2012, 76). Several estimates place the number of protestors at over one million on several occasions (see Rutherford 2012, 39).

The wide-ranging societal inclusion of demonstrators included an often unincorporated group, the ultras, which were a collection of various football clubs in Egypt that each supported various teams, such as the Ultras Ahlawy,<sup>9</sup> Zamalek's Ultras White Knights, Ismaily's Ultras Yellow Dragons, and a smaller regional club called Port Said's Ultras Masry (El-Mahdi 2014, 65). These groups historically clashed with police at stadiums and in many ways helped the wider population of activists to navigate the chaos of Tahrir Square once security forces began to mobilize (see Noueihed and Warren 2013). Perhaps the best way of explaining this phenomenon is illustrated by Ashraf El-Sherif:

“...imagine it as a way of life for these youth—for them, becoming a football fan became a symbolic action that was both joyful and a means of self expression. But the broader social, psychological, and cultural contexts were unable to adapt to the groups' activities, by virtue of their rebellious nature and their defiance of norms” (as quoted in El-Mahdi 2014, 65).

The Ultras were similar to We Are All Khaled Said but they had strict membership requirements including age and the payment of dues. Nonetheless, both groups illustrated their own creative repertoire of contention including the use of fireworks and Molotov cocktails. Having communicated with activists in Tunisia, they brought vinegar soaked scarves and onions (the acidity of which counteracts tear gas) and brought first aid kits (see Al-Saleh, ed., 2015; El-Mahdi 2014; Noueihed and Warren 2013, 108).

Allegedly, Mubarak ordered his Interior Minister to authorize the police to use live ammo on protestors, which the minister's deputy refused. Subsequently, Mubarak ordered the military to mobilize to suppress mobilization efforts. Unable to maintain order and seeing Mubarak's move as 'pushing him out of the loop,' the Minister called on the police to demobilize hours before the military was set to arrive (see Gelvin 2012, 45-46). As the military arrived, the protestors greeted them warmly, likely for two reasons. First, as, Noueihed and Warren (2013, 108) observe, this is often a common tactic in nonviolent resistance: 'winning the hearts of the military while dividing their loyalties' (see Chenoweth and Cunningham 2013; Shock 2013). Second, the military was highly regarded among the population and remained more distant from the *mukhabarat*, particularly the police and intelligence services. Other accounts suggest Mubarak ordered the military to open fire on the protestors as well, to maintain order, which they refused. Regardless, this represents a significant difference between Egypt and Syria, in that Egypt's forces were unwilling to escalate violence against civilians. In many ways, the rhizomatic structure of this movement encapsulated the military as well, particularly the lower level ranks and officers (Barany 2011, 28-29; Rutherford 2013, 40-42). The highly conscripted military sympathized with protestors and often shared similar grievances, particularly economic ones.



However, the military were not capable of policing the area. Looters and thugs (referred to as *Baltagiya* in Arabic), believed by many to be paid by Mubarak and sent to instill fear and cause disruption, attacked protestors and local buildings (see Gelvin 2012, chap. 2; Noueihed and Warren 2013, 109). This chaos would escalate on February 2 when pro-regime thugs, armed with swords and sticks and riding camels, attacked protestors. The event would become known as the “Battle of the Camels,” and ultimately rallied additional protestors as many saw this as both an escalation of regime’s attempts at suppressing them and a sign of its growing weakness (Lynch 2012, 96).

Despite the challenging circumstances and consistent attempts at suppression, the atmosphere of the opposition and its structure allowed for the transcendence of various divides among the population. In a show of solidarity, during the occupation of Tahrir Square, Coptic Christians and Muslims created circles protecting each other while praying (The Daily Mail 2011). Amid the chaos of Tahrir Square, opposition members even conducted a multi-faith mass attended by thousands on February 6, 2011 (Castells 2012, 84-85). However, the demonstrations soon risked fading out as many wished to return to normality, their numbers began to swell only on weekends, and local businesses complained about lost profits due to the sustained occupation of Tahrir Square. Indeed, Mubarak showed little signs of stepping down. This lull would be challenged with the televised emotional speech of Wael Ghonim, a Google executive and We Are All Khaled Said activist. He was arrested eleven days prior and upon his release appeared on the private television channel Dream TV. His emotional interview drew sympathy from Egyptians and revitalized the fervor of many as he blamed the deaths of nonviolent protestors on those who would refuse to relinquish power (see Ghonim 2012).

On February 10, Mubarak would deliver a highly anticipated speech, in which many thought he would declare his stepping down from office. Instead, he offered some limited concessions such as delegating certain powers to the vice president. Otherwise, he remained defiant and many saw his efforts as patronizing to the hundreds of thousands occupying Tahrir Square. As protests continued to grow, the labor protests began to swell. The main labor union, which was controlled by the regime, stood against the protestors. However, informal labor networks, which developed over the past decade through thousands of strikes and marches, provided the structure for workers to mobilize outside of regime-controlled unions. Independent unions began to organize and by February 10, a general strike was in effect, paralyzing public and private sector operations (Noueihed and 2013, 109). Ultimately, the point of no return had been reached. Eighteen days after protests began; the military took control of the country on February 11, 2011, ordering Mubarak to step down. The military's decision to intervene and remove Mubarak, rather than remaining neutral or violently repressing protestors, is an important consideration in measuring the Egyptian uprising's success. Many have discussed the internal decision-making of the Egyptian military, its relationship with the state, and its functioning as an almost separate entity with its own strategic and economic interests (Barany 2011, Frisch 2013, Hashim 2011, Jensen, ed. 2008, Kamrava 2000, Kandil 2012). Although an important distinction, the fundamental role of the military in the 2011 uprising was shaped by the mass mobilization of protestors. The uprising did not begin as a military coup or intervention; it began as a popular mass uprising that grew to such a force that the military was forced to respond.

## **Conclusion**

The 2011 uprising in Egypt was not a sudden youth awakening nor was it a movement created by internet activists. Digital media and social networking allowed contention and

communication to build in an often-ignored sector of society and allowed for innovative communication means during the uprising, but these were not sole causal factors in explaining the emergence and eventual success of this movement. Technology helped but what made this uprising succeed were over one million protestors united in their strategy and cause, combined with their willingness to die for the latter.

The movement that encapsulated Tahrir Square for eighteen days was one that slowly developed over the past decade. During this time, localized groups and organizations would target community-specific issues and grievances. However, these would ultimately intertwine into a larger network, which would unite these various networks against the regime. These mirror the umbrella of considerations within new social movements, as many of these movements began to focus on quality of life issues, as opposed to those that build identity through class or political ideology, for example. Catalyzed by the success of Tunisia's uprising, these localized grievances came together, creating one national movement. The networking of these community-specific grievances allowed the opposition to transcend traditional societal divides (i.e., political, ideological, religious, socioeconomic). Those engaged were not Nasserists or Liberals, Islamists or Secularists, Muslims or Christians, they were Egyptians united under a cause, one in which they were ready to die for what they believed in. The power of this movement rested in the activation of pre-existing networks, which engaged the average Egyptian to participate, defeating the often-underlying political apathy that made people see activism as useless and more harm than good to their own individual wellbeing (e.g., the potential for imprisonment and torture or losing their job). The general reluctance to escalate force, particularly among the military, by indiscriminately firing on protestors allowed for continued mass mobilization.

The movement succeeded due to its rhizomatic nature. While there were organizations and various figureheads of the movement, there were not leaders or a hierarchal decision-making apparatus of the movement. There were multiple groups, organizations, and activists participating, local and international, political and non-partisan, labor and other. Indeed, many participants were those that had never engaged in contentious public action like this before. While the development of this wide network of society, that is, its rhizomatic structure, was the movement's source of power, it ultimately hindered its ability to promote and guide long-term institutionalized political change. As Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 30) explain, "when a rhizome is blocked, turned into a tree, it's over, there's nothing more of desire; for it's always through the rhizome that desire moves." Others have made similar observations, noting that the opposition's participants found both desire and a sense of purpose in their unstructured movement, but had little plans for how to implement change within the political institutions themselves, thus allowing other groups to seize control (Abdelrahman 2014; El-Mahdi 2014; see Gerbaudo 2012; see also Sowers and Toensing, eds. 2012).

## Notes

1 As James Gelvin (2012, 17) notes, similar protests occurred throughout the region in response to other IMF conditions in Morocco (1983), Tunisia (1984), Lebanon (1987), Algeria (1988), and Jordan (1989, 1996).

2 Bassem Nabil Hafez (2013, 104-108) notes that by many accounts the Revolutionary Socialists, formed in 1991, represented the first social movement within Egypt. Importantly, they were distinct in both their structure (they were non-partisan) and methods. They differed from the methods of 1970s and 1980s movements by unifying with their opponents (the Islamists). The group rallied frequently under the slogan, "with the Islamists sometimes... against the state all the time."

3 The term "flash mob" typically refers to a method in which people are mobilized on short notice (usually through the use of text messages or emails) in order to collectively do something unusual, often in an attempt to make a statement or raise awareness of a particular issue. These are common tactics used by various groups around the world, including actors or theatre groups, activists of various types, and those doing it for general enjoyment or entertainment purposes as

well, among others. In Egypt, these methods often utilized important symbolism, including their locations, methods (such as ‘silent stands’), and dress (they would often wear all black). For more information on this method in Egypt see Ghonim (2012), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/13/us-egypt-revolution-idUSTRE73C18E20110413> and [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/magazine/25bloggers-t.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/magazine/25bloggers-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

4 The official website of the group (in Arabic) is <https://www.6April.org>. See PBS’s Frontline profile on the group at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/revolution-in-cairo/inside-april6-movement/>

5 Howard and Hussain (2013), define digital media as consisting of: “(a) the information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content that has individual value but reflects shared values; (b) the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, and ideas, that becomes cultural products; and (c) the people, organizations, and industries that produce and consume both the tools and the content.” See also Howard and Parks (2012).

6 Earlier OpenNet Initiative (ONI) filter testing in 2005 showed that the government had blocked websites associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and another associated with the Labor Party’s newsletter. However, at the time of this report (2009), these sites were accessible. The ONI report notes that widespread targeting and filtering is not systemic and scores Egypt as “No evidence of filtering” across all four categories: political, social, conflict/security, and internet tools (OpenNet Initiative 2009a).

7 See <http://www.facebook.com/ElShaheed>

8 As quoted in <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/13/us-egypt-revolution-idUSTRE73C18E20110413>

9 Manuel Castells (2012, 84) notes that on February 1, 2012, armed thugs, posing as fans of the local team in Port Said, attacked players and fans of the al-Ahly club, while the police forces failed to intervene. In response, demonstrations were held on February 2 and 3, resulting in thousands charging police buildings, brandishing the clubs flag. Several were killed and hundreds wounded as a result.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### SYRIA



**Figure 4.1:** Political Map of Syria

*Source: Public Domain – CIA World Factbook (2014)*

The 2011 uprising in Syria took many by surprise as Bashar al-Assad, elected in 2000 to succeed his father, was generally popular and although many were facing difficult economic circumstances, many public welfare policies remained in place. Under his father, Hafez al-Assad, who ruled Syria from 1970 until his death in June 2000, the government remained the main driving force of the economy in Syria, which stagnated due to corruption, lack of investment, and poor infrastructure. When Bashar al-Assad officially took the constitutional oath and delivered his speech on July 17, 2000, many Syrians saw him as a reformer that would bring about significant and much needed reforms. Indeed, Bashar was notably different from his father, and

was only groomed to be his successor following the unexpected death of his older brother, Basil, in a car accident in 1994. He trained as an ophthalmologist in the United Kingdom, was proficient in English, had a keen interest in technology (he even served as the chairman of the Syrian Computer Society), and was married to the daughter of a surgeon from a bourgeoisie Sunni community in Homs (see Hokayem 2013, 22; Lesch 2013, 79). While these underscored the stark differences that complemented his election speech calling for reforms, Bashar would rely on the same security and intelligence apparatus for control, implement limited economic reforms, and allow corruption to continue to run rampant.

### ***Economic Conditions***

By many accounts, the economic policies and circumstances underlying the 2011 uprising in Syria were just as abysmal, if not worse, than those facing Egypt were. An estimated 30% of Syrians live below the poverty line, with 11% of the population living below subsistence levels (Gelvin 2012, 108). The government remained particularly important through the subsidization of bread as 48% of household income is spent on food (Gelvin 2012, 108; Sawah and Kawakibi 2014, 136-137). The unemployment rate prior to the uprising ranged from 20-25% (Lesch 2013, 81). The country also had a large youth bulge, with 59% of the population under the age of twenty-five, which also constituted the majority of those unemployed, with 67% of these males and 53% of females being unemployed (Gelvin 2012, 108; Lesch 2013, 81). Similarly, as seen with Egypt, much of these unemployed youths have advanced education. On average, 81% of college graduates spend four years before obtaining their first job (Gelvin 2012, 108). Consequently, this youth demographic not only represents a large segment of the population, they were also a significant portion of those dissatisfied with the regime.

According to Transparency International's 2010 *Corruption Perceptions Index*, Syria had a global rating of 127 out of 178 (a higher score indicates higher rates of perceived corruption), giving the state a regional ranking of fourteenth (out of nineteen), categorizing it as highly corrupt. Corruption, fueled by poor economic conditions and high unemployment, permeated all levels of Syrian society. This was exacerbated by Bashar al-Assad's policies that promoted the privatization of various state assets. Instead of promoting competitive economic liberalization, the regime perpetuated a rampant authoritarian cronyism in which the hand-picked inner circle of his class and family would reap the benefits of the state (see Haddad 2012). Assad's brother, Maher, was placed in charge of elite military units, including the republican guard, while his brother-in-law Assef Shawkat assumed upper level positions in the intelligence apparatus (Hokayem 2013, 24). This nepotism and corruption extended beyond the security realm as well; Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf became a top business executive by using fraudulent licenses and misappropriating state assets (see Hokayem 2013, 25). Makhlouf's brother, Hafez, was appointed the head of the internal security forces, the General Security Directorate. Assad consolidated control through appointing his inner circle of elites to key positions, emphasizing a 'carrot-and-stick' approach (that is, a combination of rewards and threats) in order to maintain his elite support base (see Borshchevskaya 2010). These upper level positions were primarily limited to family and Ba'ath party members but friends and associates were also appointed to key positions as ministers, governors, and diplomats (Hokayem 2013, 24-25).

Importantly, corruption and its economic ramifications were not limited to the upper echelons of society, which pilfered and misappropriated state assets; the poor and lower classes were also affected. Although the inflation rate dropped from 15.2% in 2008 to 4.5% in 2010, prices were still exceeding the average Syrian's income (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 223).



These debilitating economic conditions disproportionately affected rural communities. A typical household in Damascus spent an estimated 35% of their income on food, whereas in the rural provinces of Aleppo, this number is closer to 60% (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 222). The reforms that were implemented by the Assads primarily focused on larger urban cities (such as Aleppo, Homs, and Latakia), which typically held large populations of Alawites, among other minority groups.

While food prices continued to rise, so did the cost of property. In the capital, Damascus, property owners renting apartments were required to register certain information and pay taxes on rental income. However, as seen in one example, apartments were often drastically underreported or incorrectly stated; a \$20,000 apartment was listed as being sold for \$1,000, with the owner pocketing the savings from underpaying taxes (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 30-31, 223). This small-scale corruption permeated all levels, ranging from traffic citations to permits. Government subsidies to the poorest communities were implemented to replace universal ones, though they too were subject to corrupt manipulation and lack of oversight (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 223). In many ways, widespread corruption ranging from elites down to everyday citizens created popular discontent and hindered the ability of institutions to promote any substantive change. Importantly, as Noueihed and Warren (2013) discuss, this predatory nature of livelihood, forces citizens to turn towards their communities, which are based on religion, family/tribal ties, or geography; as opposed to the state; for support.

### **A Tripartite of Control: the Assad Regime, the Alawites, & the Mukhabarat**

“Syria has for many years been a ‘kingdom of silence’”  
- Suhair Atassi, activist<sup>1</sup>

Underscoring the Syrian regime’s control are the historical dynamics of Syria’s intricate political and ethno-religious geography. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the

implementation of the French mandate in the Levant,<sup>2</sup> ethno-power dynamics changed considerably. This mandate called for a division and restructuring of the Levant, in which it would be divided into four key political areas: the Lebanese republic, Syria, an Alawite state (in Latakia to the northwest), and Jebel Druze (in a mountainous region in the southwest) (Ajami 2012, 19). Ultimately, the independence granted to the Alawites and Druze would collapse, following the 1936 Franco-Syrian treaty, which granted Syria its independence from French rule under a League of Nations mandate while allowing the state to incorporate these Alawite and Druze territories (Ajami 2012, 20). The call for a unified “Arab” Syria was dominated by Sunni rule and significant tension among sectarian divides in the Alawite, Druze, and Kurdish areas. These minority communities were heavily marginalized by the ruling Sunni classes, which sent governors to oversee these minority areas.

Large portions of the minority segments of society, particularly the Alawite community, would pursue military service as a way to escape poverty. This would eventually lead to their honing of skills and their subsequent seizure of power from the Sunni majority. These rural ethno-religious communities—Ismalis, Druze, Alawites, and some lower class Sunnis—would soon unite through a loosely-shared ideology under the Ba’ath party (see Ajami 2012, chap. 3). This party would lead a series of *coup d’états* in 1963, 1966, and 1970. Hafez al-Assad, an Air Force general and Ba’ath party member, would rise to power after a bloodless military coup in 1970, ruling until his death in 2000. The party exhibited total control of the political sphere, alienating political liberalism, viewing their values as “imperialist” (see Sawah and Kawakibi 2014, 138-140). As such, public political opposition was met with swift and brutal repression and subsequently ceased to exist. While Egypt had “unofficial” organized political parties

outside of their unitary system, Syrian groups operating outside of the Ba'ath Party lacked significant organization and coordination.

Contemporary Syrian political parties trace their roots to two main parties following this series of coups: the Ba'ath Party and the Communist Party, with the former emerging as the ruling political party, essentially creating a unitary party system. During the initial rule of the Ba'ath Party, opposition members were predominantly discontent members of the upper class; mainly Sunnis, who lost property or other assets due to the regime's nationalization policies. Unable to unite their efforts and discontent, the opposition failed to promote any changes. This would prompt a new opposition to emerge in the late 1960s from the middle class, as the result of various inter-party conflicts and divides, leading to several breakaway parties. Broadly, these groups were divided between the ruling National Progressive Front (NPF), a coalition of 'legal' political parties dominated and led by the Ba'ath party, and the opposition. At their core, both sides shared similar views on promoting socialism, the liberation of Israeli occupied territories, and the development of solidarity with developing nations (Sawah and Kawakibi 2014, 138). Their clashes revolved around the inability of the various political opposition groups to enact changes or reforms within the existing political structure because of the Ba'ath party's dominance and steering of the NPF. The other members had little influence on actual policymaking. The NPF, although a coalition of multiple political parties, existed as a shell that the Ba'ath Party exclusively controlled and dominated (see Dam 2011). Broadly, this marks a key characteristic of Syrian politics. The existence of political parties was not the opposition's problem. Indeed, there was a plethora of political parties and groups, rather it was their small size, frequent fracturing, and inability to network, which hindered opposition efforts (besides Kurdish parties most have less than 1,000 members) (see Landis and Pace 2006).

### ***Ethno-Religious Dimensions & the Rise of the Alawites***

The demographics and ethno-religious composition of Syria is as complex as it is stark. The country of 22 million contains four major ethno-religious groups, along which identity is primarily constructed. Living under a closed political system that repressed any attempts at activism and a shell of a political structure that did little to enact significant political and social change, Syrians tended to rely on support from existing and long-standing tribal, ethnic, and religious affinities. The Assad family is part of Syria's Alawite minority community (a breakaway sect of Twelver Shia Islam). Initially, the Assads, and subsequently the Alawite elite, upon their ascension to power, drew their support from poor rural communities, as it was the counterforce to the Sunni elite. However, this would be short lived as the Assad regime sought support from the upper class elites, particularly those in minority groups, alienating the rural poorer classes that ironically provided their fundamental support base. Although a historically marginalized segment of society, the Alawites would soon dominate the upper echelons of government following their rise to power. Although leading the Ba'ath Party, the regime prioritized their loyalty to fellow members of the Alawite community, placing their most trusted friends, family, and associates in upper positions in government (see Ajami 2012; Hokayem 2013). Even key military brigades were formed solely from those in the Alawite community. Subsequently, the Alawites became those in the most powerful governmental and military positions, consuming a disproportionate share of state assets (e.g., education) (Pipes 1989). In order to ensure loyalty and control, the Alawites comprised the upper levels of Syria's military, composing an estimated 70% of the military, 80% of officers, and approximately 100% of the elite Republican Guard (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2011). Under the Assads the military was awarded with a degree of economic involvement, was not made second to any other forces, and

promotions were typically based on loyalty and personal interactions, as opposed to skills (see Barany 2011).<sup>3</sup>

The ruling Alawite community has portrayed and positioned itself as a protector of all of the country's minorities (Hokayem 2013; see Lesch, 2013: 83). Although the country is predominantly Sunni Muslim, Assad courted support from the upper business elites of the Sunni community through strategic incentives and lucrative state contracts (Borshchevskaya 2010; Haddad 2012; Landis 2012; Lesch 2013). Supporting the opposition, which carried the possibility of regime change, would not only potentially put various minorities communities at risk of sectarian violence, but the elites would also have to renegotiate their privileged status (Landis 2012; see Lesch 2013, 83-84). As such, the regime has enjoyed considerable popularity and support from these groups, through its utilization of strategic incentives, the exploitation of tribal and family alliances, divide-and-rule tactics, corruption, and its considerable intelligence apparatus that repressed political activists (Hokayem 2013; see Lesch, 2013). By exploiting these various factors, Assad ensured support and loyalty from a significant portion of the population (see Lesch 2013).

This discussion of sectarianism and existing societal divides is important not only for providing context of the underlying rhizomatic logic required of this movement to unite society; it represents the power structure of the Assad regime. Indeed, as Nikolaos van Dam observes:

“Irrespective of the political line taken by the Syrian Ba’thist leadership after 1963, it should be noted that sectarian, regional and tribal ties have been so important that for about half a century they have constituted an inseparable and integral part of the power structure of the Syrian regime. [...] Exploiting sectarian, regional and tribal ties was simply a matter of pure and elementary power politics” (Dam 2011, 137).

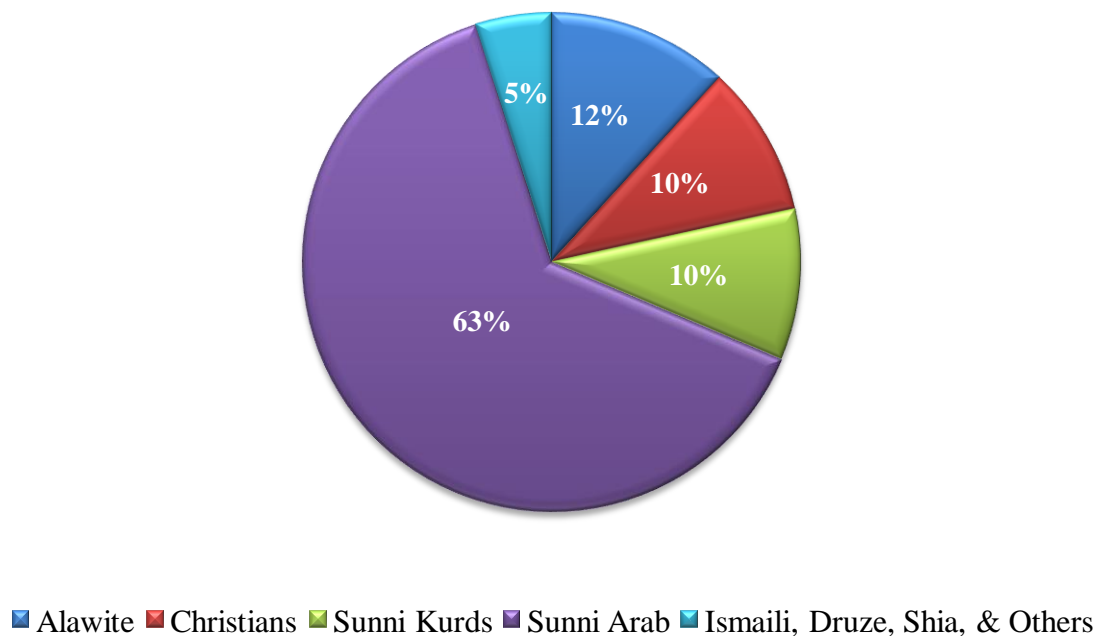
The power structure of the al-Assad regime exploits these various sectarian divides to maintain control, ensuring no groups pose a significant challenge. While Syria is a religiously

heterogeneous country, the fundamental factor is sectarianism based on ethno-religious and tribal affiliations (Dam 2011, chap. 10). While the state strictly suppressed and subdued Islamist groups, it indiscriminately suppressed any groups that threatened its power, basing their efforts on ethnic, regional, religious, and tribal lines, rather than one strictly focused on religious affiliations.

Indeed, Bashar al-Assad enjoyed relative popularity and his rule, like many authoritarian regimes, contained rival political parties. However, those that existed within the ruling NDP were unable to promote any change that the Ba'ath party did not agree with and the opposition faced violent repression and lacked institutional means to promote change. The actual control and political power of the regime stemmed from Assad's personality as a leader through his portrayal as a protector of minorities (allowing him to win 'hearts and minds'), an inner circle of elites, a closed political system that limited change, and a brutal security apparatus that restrained dissidents and political opposition. This meant that substantial reforms were impossible to enact through existing institutions. As a leader, Bashar portrayed himself as a reformer, a modest leader, and a protector of the disenfranchised minority and lower classes. When Wikileaks exposed the lavish lifestyles and blatant corruption of other leaders, such as Tunisia's Ben Ali, Assad remained unscathed due to his comparatively modest lifestyle (Lesch 2013, 84). Although not particularly common events, stories about him driving his own car, shopping in normal stores, and traveling through the city without his security detail, were popular stories in the suburbs of Damascus (Lesch 2013, 83-84).

Although Bashar would shift to support Syria's elite classes, subsequently marginalizing the poorer communities, he attempted to balance this by building marginal support from the minority and lower classes through various welfare programs and subsidies. This would prove

difficult to maintain in the later years as the country experienced a large increase in birth rates during the 1980s, causing a large population bubble to develop, which strained existing social resources and subsidies. While economic conditions drastically ravished the Syrian population, Assad maintained some popularity by strategically ensuring the continuation of some energy and food subsidies (Sawah and Kawakibi 2014, 136-137).



**Figure 4.2:** Ethno-Religious Demographics in Syria  
*Source: Hokayem 2013*

### ***Restraining Activism through the Mukhabarat***

The *mukhabarat* in Syria, which included the repressive security, police, military, and intelligence services, collectively viewed as one repressive system, provided the foundation for the Assad regime and its inner circle to consolidate power. A state of emergency, enacted in 1963 (remaining in place until early 2011), afforded security forces extraordinary discretionary power and unchecked power. People may be detained without arrest warrants with their whereabouts and wellbeing undisclosed for months; with forces neither confirming nor denying

their detainment. Torture is commonly conducted on those detained. The emergency law also established special courts, such as the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), which does not allow for appeals, limits access to legal counsel, and typically operates behind closed doors (see Freedom House 2010; see also Human Rights Watch 2010). Although there would be some political liberalization following his election, which will be discussed later in this chapter, these would be rapidly repressed. Indeed, just one year after his election, Bashar would announce new restrictions on the press (Decree No. 50/2001), giving the government unprecedented control and censorship over virtually all forms of media including newspapers, magazines, periodicals, pamphlets, books, posters, and other print (Freedom House 2010; Human Rights Watch 2010; OpenNet Initiative 2009b). This restriction on access to information combined with the inability to enact change or reforms due to a closed authoritarian political system, led to the buildup of discontent that would spillover into the streets.

Historically, these forces are extremely feared in Syria as they have a strong proclivity towards violent repression (see Lesch 2013). Indeed, this restrained activism to small pockets over the past decades. Activists were limited in how and when they could mobilize, throttled by a culture of fear and indiscriminate violence. Widespread disappearances, extrajudicial murders, and the targeting of political opposition were common in the 1980s. The Ba'ath party and Assad's inner circle dominated the political sphere, exclusively controlling the state's power. As such, individuals and political opposition groups have no institutional means in which to promote potential change, nor do they have public forums in which to discuss controversial issues, especially those political in nature. Like his father, Bashar would utilize the *mukhabarat* forces to maintain his power. He would curry favor with the elites, while utilizing sectarian tension to



maintain the support of some poorer minority communities through a series of carrot-and-stick approaches, offering a combination incentives and threats to build a loyal circle of supporters.

### **Decades of Strained Activism**

The history of Syrian opposition would see two pivotal turning points: the Muslim Brotherhood uprising of the 1980s and the emergence of the Statement of 99 and various other efforts in the early 2000s, collectively referred to as the Damascus Spring, following the death of Hafez al-Assad and the subsequent transfer of power to his son, Bashar al-Assad (see Sawah and Kawakibi 2014). The former would prove to fail drastically, with the latter leading to a longer series of contentious actions, ultimately paving the way to the 2011 Arab Spring uprising. In response to an assassination attempt on Hafez al-Assad and an uprising by Sunni activists, spearheaded by the Muslim Brotherhood, in 1982 in the city of Hama, the military, under orders by Hafez al-Assad responded with massive force (see Lefèvre 2013; see also PBS 2012). The military assaulted Hama, Syria's third largest city at the time, for three weeks to suppress this uprising, resulting in the deaths of 20,000-40,000 civilians (estimates vary but most place the number around 30,000) (Gelvin 2012, 102; Noueihed and Warren 2013; PBS 2012; Sawah and Kawakibi 2014, 136-141). In another example of the regime's relentless and unrestrained use of violence to contain activism, the military used attack helicopters to kill 800 political prisoners in the Palmyra desert prison (Ajami 2012, 40-41). This illustrated to Syrian activists that there was no limit to the regime's use of violence in order to maintain control (Wikas 2007). This regime, and the various security agencies that supported its power, represented the longstanding repression of civil rights and public activism, which created the inability to enact meaningful social and political change through formal governmental institutions. This proclivity towards

violent repression does not mean that public political activism is unattainable or nonexistent; rather, it raises the ‘costs’ for participants engaging in such action.

### *The Damascus Spring*

Under his father, Hafez, public activism was virtually non-existent and the regime consistently demonstrated its willingness to use indiscriminate and unrestrained violence in order to subdue any opposition efforts. However, Syrian activists emerged from the shadows when his son Bashar succeeded him. Upon his ascension to power in 2000, Bashar began implementing calculated reforms in an effort to modernize; these were primarily economic in nature but also included some political liberalization. He shut down the Mazzah prison, a longstanding symbol of the regime’s political suppression and a place where many political prisoners were held. Under this first year, the number of Syria’s political detainees would dwindle to less than 1,000 (estimates place the number of detainees a few years prior as high as 4,000) (see Landis and Pace 2012, 174-175). For the first time, the regime licensed private newspapers (including those published by political parties) and allowed the opening of various political forums and salons where public criticism of the regime and controversial political discussions were tolerated (Carnegie 2012a; Lesch 2013, 80). Indeed, even six political parties of the NPF were allowed to open their own respective provincial offices (Carnegie 2012a).

This period of reform, occurring from around June 2000 to August 2001, led to a rapid growth of civil society organizations, public criticism of the regime, and the establishment of various prodemocracy efforts (see Lesch 2013, 80). The death of Hafez al-Assad and the election of an apparent reformer created an intense wave of political and social discussion in Syria. In September, 2000, just three months after Bashar’s election, ninety-nine intellectuals signed a petition called “the Statement of 99,” which called for various political reforms and the removal

of the existing state of emergency (Sawah and Kawakibi 2014, 139). The emergence of these activists that signed the Statement of 99 caught the regime by surprise, as they were not considered traditional opposition members. As Alan George observes, “None of the signatories had significant histories of anti-regime activism and the authorities were hereby denied the chance to condemn them as ‘well-known enemies of the state’ or ‘agents of Israel’” (excerpt of quote in Lesch 2012, 87-88; see Sly 2012). Subsequently, this signing of the Statement of 99 sparked a series of public contentious action that would become known as the Damascus Spring. This led to various other initiatives, the awakening of Syrian civil society, and an addition to their repertoire of contention—sit-ins (Sawah and Kawakibi 2014, 139).

This wave reached its peak when 1,000 civil society activists signed the ‘Statement of One Thousand,’ in January 2001 calling for extensive political reforms (Landis and Pace 2012, 175). One week later, Riad Said, an opposition activist, formed the Movement for Social Peace. The opposition was comprised of human rights groups, political parties, civil society groups, independent activists, and Islamists. However, these groups remained divided over various critical issues from Kurdish rights to ideology (see Landis and Pace 2012, 176).

The regime, surprised by this new wave of activism, began a rapid crackdown in order to suppress these movements. Ultimately, the opposition would remain too divided and when faced with constant interference from the *mukhabarat* forces, they would fragment. In the months that would follow, eight of the opposition’s most prominent civil society members would be arrested, and all but two civil society organizations would be shut down (see Landis and Pace 2012, chap. 7). This subsequent crackdown would later be called the Damascus Winter. Ultimately, Bashar would reverse course, instead adopting a hybrid method of liberalization, in which economic liberalization would occur without subsequent political reforms. The Damascus Spring, although

swiftly crushed, was important in that it represented the first time since the late 1970s in which people could publically criticize the regime. Although oppressed, this allowed dissidents to become aware of each other's existence (Landis and Pace 2012, 176). However, the Damascus Spring also illustrated a fundamental problem of the opposition—they failed to produce common understandings, shared strategies, and a sense of solidarity that would provide the basis of a unified opposition. Nonetheless, this brief period of liberalization led to the revitalization of street activism, representing the second historical pivot in the country's recent opposition efforts (the first being the Muslim Brotherhood's 1980s uprising).

### ***Activism & Civil Society after the Damascus Winter, 2001-2005***

Following the regime crackdown (often referred to as the Damascus Winter) of the Damascus Spring, activism stagnated. Many of the existing civil society organizations from the Damascus Spring would be shut down. Civil society organizations and activist groups are technically illegal unless licensed by the state. The state refuses to license these groups, instead allowing them to operate illegally until their efforts prove problematic resulting in systematic suppression. Although the Damascus Spring saw a rapid increase in civil society organizations, only two would remain after the regime's crackdown: the Committee for the Revival of Civil Society (a collection of various organizations), and the Jamal al-'Atasi Forum for Democratic Dialogue (named after political activist Jamal al-'Atasi and founded in 2001 by his daughter, Suhair); the latter would be shut down in spring 2005 (Landis and Pace 2012, 178; see Carnegie 2012b). These forums provided an area in which to promote critical dialogue, facilitate the creation of a unified platform, and to promote inter-ethnic and inter-religious congregations and discourse (Landis and Pace 2012, 178-179). However, these various groups and forums frequently failed to promote meaningful change or consensus among the opposition. In many

regards, rather than facilitating connections and cohesiveness, they starkly highlighted their ideological differences. As stated by one activist, “People voice their views, others disagree; and when the forum ends, people go home without ever resolving the argument. Three hours of talk once a month is not going to produce a unified opposition” (quoted in Landis and Pace 2012, 179). At the same time, the existence of these groups allowed the regime to refer to them as an example of its attempts at promoting free speech and political liberalization.

Other smaller organizations have assisted with opposition efforts in Syria, as well. Since 2003, approximately ten human rights organizations, two centers of study, and a number of smaller issue-centric associations have operated within Syria (Landis and Pace 2012, 176-178). While their efforts have been heavily mitigated due to state suppression, they have served as useful means to collect information on violations, often issuing press releases calling for the release of various detainees.

Although these groups provided an avenue in which the marginalized and oppressed segments of the population could address regime repression, they suffered from similar issues as the opposition at large – they were largely uncoordinated, hindered by limited participation, and tended to promote more reactive as opposed to proactive change (Landis and Pace, 2012, 176-178). As Joshua Landis and Joe Pace (2012, 177) discuss, the Syrian Organisation for Human Rights, after splintering, had only ten core members. Further illustrating the lack of widespread societal involvement, one woman was solely responsible for writing and publishing all of the research, reports, correspondence, and press releases for the Human Rights Association of Syria in the year 2004 (Landis and Pace 2012). Little collective solidarity or identity was common among these groups, in-fighting was frequent and they often failed to cooperate or share information effectively amongst themselves. In one example, due to conflicts between various

organizations (which are often of a personal nature due to their small size), activists boycotted a demonstration in front of the High National Security Court to challenge the trial of activist Aktham Naissah, effectively working against their own cause (Landis and Pace 2012, 178). While the Damascus Spring would provide a flourishing of civil society organizations, activist groups, and political forums, many would not survive the regime crackdown. Furthermore, those that continued to exist in the following years were limited in their size, efforts, and power. The opposition remained unable to coordinate amongst themselves, let alone able to directly confront the regime.

### ***2005: The Revitalization of Activism & the Assassination of Hariri***

The crackdown of the Damascus Spring shuttered many hopes for significant political change and liberalization within Syria. Furthermore, the inability of various opposition groups to synthesize or enact change only supported commonly held beliefs that activism was not worth the risks. This sentiment would change as the regime appeared vulnerable following the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. On February 14, 2005, Hariri's convoy, travelling in the outskirts of Beirut, would be struck with an extremely powerful explosive, killing him and twenty-two others. This assassination drew widespread international condemnation, which called for an independent investigation, all of which led to a renewed scrutiny of Syria's occupation of Lebanon. Over 1,000,000 activists took to the streets in Lebanon, protesting Syria, demanding justice, and calling for an investigation (this series of uprisings would be dubbed the Cedar Revolution) (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 58; see Landis and Pace 2012, 186-188). Activists within Syria, seeing the increased international pressure targeting the regime, saw this as an opportunity to renew their efforts (see Landis and Pace 2006).

During this time, low-level coordination was renewed among activists, particularly on an Arab-Kurd ethnic basis, leading to the creation of a highly inclusive coalition, the National Coordination Committee for the Defence of Basic Freedoms and Human Rights (Landis and Pace 2006; 2012, 187). Another organization, the Committee for the Revival of Civil Society (Syria's largest civil society group), called for the opening of dialogue across all of Syria's society; among these, most notably, was the Muslim Brotherhood (Landis and Pace 2012). This call for coordination continued when Ali Abdullah, an activist, publically read aloud a letter in front of the al-'Atasi Forum in Damascus from the Muslim Brotherhood's Secretary-General, calling for the cooperation and unification of Syria's various political movements (Landis and Pace 2012, 187). This was important in two regards. First, this represented the first time the Muslim Brotherhood was publically represented since the 1982 Hama massacre (Landis and Pace 2012, 187-188). Importantly, this showed a considerable sense of empowerment among activists as membership, and likely association, with the Muslim Brotherhood was punishable by death under Syria's Law 49 (Landis and Pace 2012, 181; Sawah and Kawakibi 2014, 137). Second, it showed the desire to develop a collective front as the letter called for cooperation across political parties and ideologies, although this would prove difficult to formulate. Riad al-Turk would soon announce a groundbreaking declaration, the Damascus Declaration, calling for a broad coalition in which the Muslim Brotherhood would be included. However, it would soon appear that the widespread appeal of the Damascus Declaration was due to its sidestepping of various issues, which would ultimately lead to its downfall.

### ***The Damascus Declaration & the Opposition Underpinning the 2011 Uprising***

Following the assassination of Hariri, a new secular opposition movement, the Damascus Declaration (titled after an opposition statement of the same name), would be formed in 2005, in

part, by activist and former parliamentarian Riad Seif, former Muslim Brotherhood leader Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni, and political activist Riad al-Turk. The organization formed, in part, to unify opposition efforts and promote four key issues: pluralism, non-violence, oppositional unity, and democratic change (Landis and Pace 2012).<sup>4</sup>

The Damascus Declaration initially began as a coalition of five political parties and civil society organizations, and nine independent intellectuals; although many soon declared their support following its formation (Carnegie 2012a; Landis and Pace 2012, 188-191). The organization appeared to be a newfound example of Syrian activism—it included multiple ethnic groups (Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians); various ideologies (socialists, liberals, and Islamists); as well as civil society groups and political parties (which were traditionally weary of working with each other), along with various individuals. While at face value this appears to be a flagship effort to promote unity, which it did accomplish for a short period, it ultimately fractured along its fault lines. This initial unity did not endure due to their inability to overcome various differences or stances on multiple issues, ultimately leading to a division in 2007.

The declaration itself would prove too controversial to unite its various constituent groups.<sup>5</sup> Political ideologies, minority rights, and the issue of secularism would be at the forefront of these divides. The Kurds, wanting their own national rights, took issue with wording referring to Syria's affiliation to 'Arab Order' (Landis and Pace 2012). Consequently, Arab nationalists countered by arguing that removing this would affect Syria's heritage and national identity. Three Kurdish groups echoed this sentiment but ultimately rejected the final declaration due to its lack of recognition of the Kurds as an independent national group with historic ties to the northeast part of Syria (Landis and Pace 2012). The Declaration also stopped short of declaring a state religion (Landis and Pace 2006). However, others in favor of the predominant



secularism challenged Islamist language in the Declaration, which referred to Islam as the ‘religion and ideology of the majority,’ and ‘the more prominent cultural component in the life of the nation and the people’ (Landis and Pace 2012, 190).

The Muslim Brotherhood, along with former Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam, founded the National Salvation Front (NSF) in 2006, separated from this new mainstream opposition movement in an attempt at rebranding the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria (Landis and Pace 2006; Lesch 2012). Not only was this targeted by the regime, the opposition shunned the NSF, fearing it would affect the secular nature of Syria and the status of various religious minorities (which the opposition already had to compete with the regime for influence over) (see Lesch 2012, 90-91).

The Damascus Declaration would significantly fracture due to these divides following internal elections in 2007, which promoted a more liberal orientation (as opposed to the former nationalist-socialist one) (Sawah and Kawakibi 2014, 144-147). While this new coalition fought internally, the regime recuperated and renewed its suppression efforts. This intensified wave of suppression was catalyzed by several developments. First, the regime feared a unified opposition, particularly one that would be united with activists in Lebanon. This fear became a potential reality following the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, a declaration signed by 300 Syrian and Lebanese intellectuals in May 2006 calling for the normalization of relations between the two states (Landis and Pace 2012, 197-201). The regime viewed this as a coordinated effort between Syrian opposition members, including the Muslim Brotherhood, and a growing anti-Syrian movement within Lebanon. Second, the international investigation, established by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1757 (2007),<sup>6</sup> was crippled by false testimony, witness recanting, and witness tampering (Landis and Pace 2012). This impetus to crackdown on

the opposition continued in the following years as the Special Tribunal for Lebanon further shifted attention away from Syria as it indicted members of Lebanon's Hezbollah (Lesch 2012, 38). Additionally, the opposition efforts in Syria remained considerably divided among themselves and anti-Syria coalitions in Lebanon remained comparatively weak, allowing the regime to systematically target opposition activists (Landis and Pace 2012, 197-201). The Declaration failed to unite the Kurdish parties, did not incorporate the largest Islamist group (the Muslim Brotherhood), and internal strife separated participating groups along political and ideological lines. The opposition's inability to develop as a unified front, with a set of common goals, tactics, and an overarching collective identity, allowed the regime to systematically target and fragment their mobilization efforts.

The recent history of Syrian activism illustrates several key considerations. First, activism in Syria has always remained fragmented, comprising of various groups calling for various levels of change, through different tactics (e.g., nonviolent versus armed resistance). These typically occurred in short waves and did not have long-term impacts before they were brutally repressed, in contrast to Egypt, which had multiple and often overlapping series of movements. Importantly, many of these efforts remained highly localized, forming after and targeting community-specific grievances. The opposition lacked overarching networks in which activists could build solidarity, facilitate communication, and develop common goals and strategies. Furthermore, many of these existing organizations and networks remained relatively small or existed for only short periods before separating or fracturing into other breakaway groups. Second, the regime has illustrated its strong proclivity towards violence in their repertoire of actions in order to maintain control and stability. This created a culture of fear and raised the 'costs' for the average person to participate in collective action. Lacking a united and

interconnected movement, these activists were easily targeted and repressed by the *mukhabarat*. Faced with this constant state suppression and the inability to network with other activists in order to build a single unitary front in which to pressure the regime, these various groups fell back upon their own ideology and strategic goals in the interest of self-preservation. Their splintering in the face of systematic repression allowed the regime to divide-and-conquer any mobilization efforts. Third, sectarianism and limited existing social networks hamstrung efforts by activists to promote significant change. Any efforts to coordinate after mobilization typically faltered as there were little connective networks or identities in which to unite opposition members. Because Syrians tended to rely on existing tribal, ethnic, and religious affiliations, a culture of viewing society in terms of ‘us versus them’ was common. Abysmal economic conditions, a history of a fragmented opposition, and a brutal regime with a willingness to employ a violent repertoire of actions to remain in power would set the stage for the 2011 uprising.

### **The 2011 Uprising**

Unable to reverse decades of poor policy planning, inadequate investment, and rampant corruption, economic conditions under Bashar al-Assad continued to worsen. These policies, while reaching all spectrums of society, drastically and disproportionately affected the rural, agricultural communities in the southern and eastern provinces. Approximately one quarter of Syria’s GDP is based in agricultural production, making these regions’ economies particularly volatile (Noueihed and Warren 2013; see Perthes 2004, chap. 2). The ‘official’ wealth gap between the major cities and the eastern provinces continued to widen, due to heavy droughts that began in 2006 and persisted over five years. The droughts themselves caused the mass mobilization of a nomadic population of about 1.4 million Syrians. This population is what

Gelvin (2012, 106-109) refers to as, the “new poor” (see also Landis 2012). Faced with drastically worsening economic conditions, high unemployment, and reductions in government subsidies, these agricultural communities began to move towards larger cities and towns in search of better conditions and work (see Haddad 2011; Noueihed and Warren 2013). In many ways their mobilization explains why certain cities were epicenters of collective action (i.e., Daraa and Hawran regions, rather than Damascus or Aleppo) once the 2011 uprising would begin (Gelvin 2012, 108-109). Additionally, this mobilization also illustrates the unbalanced modernization efforts and use of state resources as the major cities to the west (e.g., Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Latakia), which contained large minority populations, were substantially more developed than other regions. The mobilization of these poor rural communities exacerbated local grievances and existing tensions. This new wave of urban poor, which was displaced and had nothing to lose, built squatters settlements, illegally connected to municipal water and electricity utilities, and even established their own autonomous laws and economies (Sawah and Kawakibi 2014, 138-141).

### ***The Spark: Daraa***

Unlike the uprising in Egypt, which made Tahrir Square in Cairo, the capital, the predominant focal point of the uprising, Syria’s uprising centered in two eastern rural provinces, Daraa and Baniyas. The uprising was spontaneous and not the result of meticulous planning and preparation over years, unlike Egypt (El-Mahdi 2014; see Gelvin 2012, 103). Following the removal of Egypt’s Mubarak on February 11, the region faced new and ongoing protests in Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain; yet Syria remained relatively quiet (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 225). By many accounts, Syria seemed one of the least likely states to contain a mass uprising—Bashar was relatively liked, the populace generally feared the potential for sectarian violence,

and although facing tough economic conditions the people were not starving due to existing social programs (Gelvin 2012; Landis 2012; Sawah and Kawakibi 2014, 136-137).

Earlier calls for demonstrations failed to produce any substantial resistance. Calls for protests on February 3, which were organized online, were met with an overwhelming deployment of security forces, impeding the few that risked showing up to protest (Lynch 2012, 179). Activists called for ‘A day of Rage,’ organized via Facebook, on February 4 but that too received poor turnout. As Noueihed and Warren (2013, 225-226) observed, ‘a combination of fear and lackluster enthusiasm kept people at home.’ Syrians were not coming out “*en masse*” to pursue the same goal, though they carefully watched the events in Egypt and Tunisia unfold (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 226). Gradually, though, the atmosphere changed. A man reportedly beaten and assaulted by traffic police near Damascus’s Souk al-Hamidiyah market on February 17 led to the rapid gathering and mobilization of 1,500 angry protestors (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 226). This potential flashpoint of conflict only ceased when the interior minister arrived to placate the crowd and remove the officer in question (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 226-227). Typical of a *mukhabarat*-backed authoritarian state, the security forces and elites had the ability to control or personally interject themselves in circumstances as they saw fit. The security forces were free to do as they pleased so long as they did not undermine Bashar or the Ba’ath party. In many ways this illustrates the notion that much of the uprising focused on local community-specific grievances as the security forces had their own discretion and little oversight. Furthermore, much of the initial uprising focused on local issues, as opposed to direct calls for Assad to step down.

The opposition in Syria, witnessing the fall of Tunisia’s Ben Ali and Egypt’s removal of Mubarak, despite attempts at repression in the latter, saw an opportunity to promote change.

Faced with no alternative in which to protest the longstanding forty-two year rule of the Assad family through formal institutions or politics, they saw street activism as their only option. These sentiments only increased following the NATO-led international intervention in Libya, which would ultimately oust longstanding ruler Muammar Gaddafi. If Tunisia and Egypt could oust their leaders, and the international community supported protestors in Libya, Syria could be next, they judged. Activists began calling for a large demonstration for March 15. Initially though, the call for this demonstration was not fundamentally different from previous ones (e.g., the February 3 protests and February 4 ‘Day of Rage’) and many did not expect a significant turnout, except for the security forces. The significant, almost absolute, threat of imprisonment and torture for public protest remained, as did the repercussions for demonstrators’ friends and family (see, e.g., Lynch 2012, 181).

Yet the spark of Syria’s uprising would not be the March 15 demonstration, it would occur several days beforehand. In the rural city of Daraa, a small city with a population of seventy-seven thousand, on March 6, security forces arrested ten schoolchildren (all under the age of fifteen) for spray-painting graffiti, a slogan borrowed from the Egyptian revolution which stated, “Down with the system [*nizam*]” (Gelvin 2012, 103; Lesch 2013, 86). As Lesch (2013) observes, the use of system (*nizam*) versus government (*hukuma*) may serve as a reference to the oppressive and wide-reaching *mukhabarat* system that spanned all levels of society. Thus, as he states, it may indicate more of a call for social justice and anti-corruption efforts, as opposed to those calling for democratic governance (Lesch 2013, 86). The Syrian regime or government was inseparable in structure, control, and perception from the repressive security forces that maintained their rule.

The children were subsequently imprisoned and tortured. For almost two weeks, their concerned families pressed for information regarding their detainment and demanded their release. Eventually, this culminated in a flashpoint as hundreds of family members, friends, and residents took to the street to protest this repression on March 12. While the conditions of the children were the focal point of this event, the protestors also expressed other local grievances, calling for the removal of their provincial governor and local head of security (see Macleod 2011; Noueihed and Warren 2013, 226). Security forces responded by opening fire on the crowd, killing several. The following day, during their funeral procession, twenty thousand demonstrators marched, chanting anti-government slogans and attacking various municipal buildings (Gelvin 2012, 103). This immediate escalation of violence strained activist attempts at peaceful nonviolent mobilization.

The same day protests erupted in the northern coastal city of Baniyas. Although unrelated, this was similar to the uprising in Daraa as this demonstration targeted local conditions, particularly corruption and repressive security forces. This wave of protests in Baniyas began after a secular crackdown on female schoolteachers wearing the *niqab* (the Syrian version of the veil) (Gelvin 2012, 103). Other protests varied in their size and outcomes. An internet call for a “Family Vigil for Prisoners,” a sit-in led by women, to be held across from the Ministry of Interior on March 16 only gathered 150 protestors (Castells 2012, 100-101). The demonstrators were dragged by their hair and beaten by security forces. A sit-in in Daraa the following day was met with massive arrests. Yet on March 18, demonstrations protesting the arrest and torture of the Daraa schoolchildren gathered tens of thousands. The peaceful marches in Daraa were met with live ammunition. This reaction to the peaceful protests in Daraa served as the catalyst or ‘spark’ that awakened Syrian activists. These protests would soon turn into rallies, spreading

primarily at their onset to other smaller cities such as Jassem, Da'el, Deir ez-Zour, Idlib, Sanamein, Inkhil; although they eventually reached major cities such as Homs, Hama, and even Damascus (Castells 2012, 101; Noueihed and Warren 2013, 226; Sterling 2012).

While many groups and organizations would join throughout this period, a new level of coordination would emerge, the *tanseeqiat*. The *tanseeqiat* were locally organized coalitions or groups of people typically based on work or neighborhood affiliations. Interestingly, the *tanseeqiat* remained somewhat distinct from other opposition groups due to its comparatively high youth membership, its horizontal structure, and its non-ideological basis. Due to these being organized locally, they varied drastically in their size, structure, and effectiveness. Activists would eventually form a loosely structured overarching group called the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) in order to effectively network these groups. The LCCs would prove to be a fundamental asset during the uprising. They collected information via mobile phones, disseminated information via social media, and coordinated various nationwide mobilization efforts every Friday (see Hokayem 2013, 69). Eventually, various other politically-oriented civil society umbrella groups would form based on the structure of the LCCs, often competing with the *tanseeqiats* (Sawah and Kawakibi 2014, 141-142). The overall effectiveness of the LCCs would lead to a systematic targeting by security forces, which took advantage of the smaller localized nature of its various cells (i.e., the various *tanseeqiat* groups). Yet their structure aided their ability to continue operating as Emile Hokayem observes, "...their leaderless and decentralised character made total eradication impossible" (2013, 69). However, he continues by noting that this crackdown inevitably assisted the transition towards more radical elements by depriving the opposition of its most "forward-looking and idealistic elements" (Hokayem 2013, 69).



Rather than allow the protests in Daraa to continue, the regime launched a brutal crackdown in an effort to limit any significant occupation of space or momentum. Security forces were deployed on March 21. The violence was indiscriminate and widespread. However, it fueled the flames of resistance as acts of brutality and widespread indiscriminate violence was captured on video by activists and placed online. Activists smuggled satellite phones into the country in an effort to circumvent state censorship and shutdowns of mobile phone networks. The most influential use of social networks and technology in Syria revolved around the sharing and circulation of images and videos of the regime's brutal suppression. One activist organization, the Shaam News Networks, which lacks a particular political ideology or affiliation, collected and disseminated this information in both English and Arabic (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 45).

However, in contrast to Egypt, digital and social media in Syria did not fundamentally network activists or provide for the creation of collective identities. The internet was relatively new to the country, arriving only in the year 2000. Much of the state had limited access, and thus it was primarily available only in public cafés, which meant the regime could easily restrict, monitor, and intercept dissident traffic and communications (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 45; see OpenNet Initiative 2009b). The *mukhabarat* engaged in extensive filtering, primarily targeting foreign news websites, political parties, Islamist groups, and human rights organizations. Furthermore, there was little legal framework for protections for users, with many bloggers and online activists frequently arrested on vague charges such as “weakening national sentiment” and “publishing false information” (see OpenNet Initiative 2009b).

### ***Movement Proliferation: Opposition Efforts & Groups***

Bashar al-Assad gave a highly anticipated speech to lawmakers on March 30 that would cement the regime's position, further enraging citizens. He offered no apologies nor reforms, instead blaming the unrest on radical elements that sought sedition (later speeches on April 16 and June 20 would prove similar) (see Phillips 2012). The lack of apologies and changes in policy, combined with the applause and unconditional support of the parliament, infuriated Syrians (Lesch 2013, 89; Phillips 2012). However, the various opposition members and groups would not rally under Daraa or the rage of Assad's speech the same. Weary of brutal repression and unsure of how long this activism would last, many carefully waited to see how the following days and weeks would unfold. Much of this activism was local and community specific, which predominantly involved protests and rallies against either repressive security forces or economic conditions. As such, the widespread proliferation of this movement remained somewhat limited.

The initial opposition that challenged the regime consisted of several categories: 1) spontaneous local peaceful crowds, which typically congregated over a specific grievance, often after Friday prayers (e.g., the peaceful protestors after the arrest of the children in Daraa on March 6); 2) various groups associated with the Damascus Spring (e.g., human rights and prodemocracy organizations); 3) the *tanseeqiat* and Local Coordination Committees; 4) "traditional opposition" members such as Kurdish leaders, political opposition and religious groups (e.g., Socialists and the Muslim Brotherhood) (Gelvin 2012; Hokayem 2013; O'Bagy 2012; Sawah and Kawakibi 2014; Slim 2011). As the uprising turned into a protracted conflict, which would devolve into armed conflict, two other entities would join: deserters from the military and other security forces, and transnational or foreign fighters from surrounding areas.

The lynchpin of the Syrian opposition was its limited connectivity before the uprising began. Though Syria had its own history of pre-existing political opposition, activists were harshly repressed and tended to operate less often and demonstrated less frequently than those in Egypt. The gatherings in Tahrir Square in Egypt were coordinated, planned, and organized by various networks of activists, allowing them to circumvent various regime efforts to suppress them. However, in Syria, the opposition began as a flashpoint response to events in Daraa.

The various “traditional” opposition groups in Syria, which included those involved in the Damascus Declaration, various Islamist organizations, and political groups, remained divided on ideology, movement goals, and strategies (Gelvin 2012; see Sawah and Kawakibi 2014; Slim 2011). The largest Islamist group in Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood, remained significantly weak due to Syria’s Law 49, which made membership in the organization punishable by death, and reluctant to enter the opposition following its fallout after separating from the Damascus Declaration (see Lefèvre 2013; Sawah and Kawakibi 2014). Furthermore, the regime has illustrated its clear intent to suppress the group (e.g., the Hama Massacre) causing it to remain in exile, largely operating outside of Syria. Other groups, such as the Islamic Party of Liberation (transliterated in Arabic as *Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami*), the country’s second largest Islamic group, remained unpopular among the population as well (Sawah and Kawakibi 2014, 146). This organization promotes the unification of Muslim states under a single Islamic state (caliphate) under Shariah law, which clashed with secular opposition movements, such as the Damascus Declaration.

The Kurds, although representing a significant portion of Syria’s prodemocracy movement, were unable to integrate into the opposition and remained fragmented among themselves. The Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria, which was founded in 1957, would suffer a

series of splits resulting in the formation of over one dozen various smaller parties (KurdWatch 2011; Lesch 2012; Sawah and Kawakibi 2014). These various groups remained heavily divided on how to approach the regime, torn between seeking more nationalistic rights through the state versus direct opposition. In one such example of Assad's carrot-and-stick approach to control, following a Kurdish uprising in 2004, the regime sent tanks in to suppress the opposition, killing forty and arresting over two thousands (Hokayem 2013; see KurdWatch 2011; Sawah and Kawakibi 2014). However, he would soon grant citizenship to over two thousand Kurds. Disenfranchised and not involved with later activist movements, most notably the Damascus Declaration, the Kurdish groups would carefully gauge the opposition, deciding whether to participate, while the recent memory of repression remained. Consequently, this caused them to wait for over a year to join opposition forces challenging Assad (Sawah and Kawakibi 2014, 146).

The *tanseeqiat* were the most active of the opposition at its onset and likely contained the most youth involvement and innovative strategic planning (e.g., organizing through social media). While a sign of strong interconnectivity, their limited proliferation hindered mobilization. The multiple *tanseeqiats* often failed to coordinate amongst themselves, and instead focused on the varying tactics, strategies, and goals based off their own respective constituency. Furthermore, much of their organization was retroactive and occurred after the initial uprising. While Kifaya and other horizontal movements existed and networked in the years leading up to Egypt's uprising, the *tanseeqiat* and LCCs in Syria were reactive in nature, only forming after the initial uprising.

Most importantly, the majority of the Syrian population would not readily mobilize behind these opposition efforts at the start of the uprising in March. Unless the regime seemed

likely to fail, much of the population was unwilling to face the *mukhabarat*, risking their lives and their family's livelihood. Furthermore, the opposition failed to present itself as a significantly viable alternative. It was unclear what this fragmented opposition would lead to. It is thus likely that many judged, particularly the minority communities and upper middle class, that, they would be in a worse position if these radical activists would succeed in removing Assad (see Gelvin 2012; see also Lesch 2013).

### ***The Militarization of Nonviolent Resistance***

The regime systematically targeted opposition members and sympathizers through a combination of half-hearted attempts at reform and violence. Assad accepted the resignation of his government in March and proposed constitutional changes addressing the Ba'ath party's dominance of political power in June (Lynch 2012, 184). These, however, proved inadequate as the population saw these half-hearted reforms juxtaposed to the regime's systematic targeting of civilians and peaceful protestors with indiscriminate and brutal violence, killing over one thousand in just a few months (see Gelvin 2012; Hokayem 2013). In July, Syria's vice president, Farouq Sharaa, outlined a series of political reforms that included the legalization of opposing political parties. Yet, again, the opposition saw these as half-hearted as they did not target the underlying *mukhabarat* apparatus that supported the dominance of the Ba'ath party (Lynch 2012, 185). Caught between a series of systematic and violent suppression, and unable to enact change through peaceful protest, the opposition soon devolved into an armed struggle; representative of what Tarrow (2011, chap. 10) refers to as the "radicalization" and "exhaustion" phases of cycles of protest. For Tarrow, social movements occur in phases and constitute the dynamic interactions of challengers, opponents, authorities, organizations, and members of the polity. As a cycle or wave of action progresses, this interaction affects an individual's beliefs, their cost-benefit

calculation of acting, their support, and power. Importantly, this systematic and targeted violent repression by the Syrian forces supports the notion that “the movement is likely to attract supporters while becoming more radicalized in its goals and actions” (Goldstone 1998, 130; quoted in Tarrow 2011, 209).

As the violence worsened, the regime expelled foreign journalists, tightened control on the media, and attempted to filter the images and videos of their brutality online. At the same time, this sustained and increasingly brutal violence led the opposition to move beyond their initial demands, as they were deemed no longer acceptable. As U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford reportedly stated, “I have seen no evidence yet in terms of hard changes on the ground that the Syrian government is willing to reform at anything like the speed demanded by the protestors. If it doesn’t start moving with far greater alacrity, the street will wash them away” (quoted in Lynch 2012, 186). Unlike the protestors in Tunisia and Egypt, which successfully removed their longstanding rulers through predominantly nonviolent means, and unlike Libya, which received international support including NATO-led military intervention, the Syrians were trapped somewhere in the middle. The violence made these light reforms insulting and unacceptable, yet the systematic and unrelenting repression by the *mukhabarat* made it difficult for many to remain engaged. As Burhan Ghalyoun, a Syrian activist and professor, contends,

“I believe that there actually is a significant, not-so-small group of Syrians who remain silent. One of the main reasons for their silence is their concern for stability. Here, we are speaking of businessmen, professionals, manufacturers, and economists. The livelihoods of these people require stability, and they believe that the Asad regime secures this stability. Now... we are moving towards a new phase during which the silent group is becoming convinced that it is impossible to guarantee stability by returning to the old system. Such a return is impossible after three months of bloody struggle that has resulted in a large number of dead and injured persons, including martyrs” (quoted in Lynch 2012, 185; Azem 2011)

Caught between this increasing cycle of violence, which created a feedback loop, the opposition soon turned to armed struggle, leading to a protracted conflict. This transition would occur at different times, depending upon local considerations. Indeed, even at the beginning, various members of the opposition remained divided on the issue of nonviolent versus armed struggle, with some opting for armed struggle from the onset. Just as the opposition formed along local and community-specific considerations, the decision and ways in which the various opposition groups would engage in armed struggle reflected these localized sentiments. For example, some rural towns saw an influx of local militia groups aimed at defending local populations and property, where other areas saw large influxes of foreign fighters (see Hokayem 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Syrian activists have always operated under the regime's repressive *mukhabarat* apparatus. However, in 2011, for the first time in recent history, the opposition appeared to catch the regime by surprise while posing a significant challenge to the regime's power. Protestors rallied around the massacre in Daraa, which soon spread to neighboring rural provinces and towns. Ultimately, the opposition failed to develop into a strong overarching national coalition. These efforts at promoting regime change through mass mobilization would eventually fall short, collapsing into a protracted civil war. The initial mobilization remained highly localized and focused community-specific grievances, which hindered the unification of participants and limited its appeal to outliers in society that were discontent with Assad's rule. While they would mobilize and challenge the regime, the lack of a unified front in which to do so caused the opposition to fragment upon repression from the *mukhabarat*. This lack of an underlying rhizomatic structure which binds participants caused the opposition members to resort to their own individual or organizational self-interests, tactics, and identities.

Unlike the uprising in Egypt, the Syrian opposition lacked strategic and long-term planning. Historically, various opposition groups and activists remained heavily divided among various issues including ideology, strategy, goals, and tactics. The lack of pre-established communication structures, networks, and common solidarities, hindered their ability to sustain collective contentious action. When faced with the brutal and systematic repression of the *mukhabarat*, activists soon fell back on their own respective strategies and ideologies. In contrast to the opposition in Egypt, Syrian opposition members and groups were unable to transcend existing societal divides (i.e., religious, political, ideological, socio-cultural, class). Lacking the ability to transcend these divides, the opposition frequently fought amongst themselves, lacked a cohesive organization, and further fractured as the regime continued their brutal suppression, and nor could it agree on a set of commonly agreed upon demands.

A fundamental downfall of the opposition was its inability to appeal to and mobilize large segments of society that were discontent with Assad's rule. The opposition lacked a unified goal and supporting this wave of action meant that any of multiple groups could come to power if Assad were to fall; with the likely possibility many of those on the fringes of society would be in a worse position. As such, large segments of society failed to rally around this call to action. As Tarrow (2011, 205) discusses:

“What is most distinctive about cycles of contention is not that entire societies “rise” in the same direction at the same time (they seldom do), or that particular population groups act in the same way over and over, but that the demonstration effect of collective action on the part of a group of “early risers” triggers a variety of processes of diffusion, extension, imitation, and reaction among groups that are normally more quiescent and have fewer resources to engage in collective action.”

In viewing this mobilization as part of a wave or cycle of contentious action, the “early risers” underscoring the 2011 uprising were unable to activate national networks due to their nonexistence. Indeed, the suppression originating in Daraa did serve as a catalyst, but it activated



localized networks, as opposed to a national rhizomatic force in which to contest the regime. Importantly, while the *tanseeqiat* represented the structure and power of a rhizome, it was retroactive. This form of mobilization occurred after the uprising began and did not serve as a network in which various segments of society could rise to action. While Kifaya in Egypt mobilized and coordinated for years prior to their revolution, *tanseeqiat* emerged as the uprising was unfolding. The building of rhizomatic and interconnected movements requires time and the added difficulties of systematic regime suppression hindered the ability to do this on a widespread, national level. Subsequently, opposition groups returned to their own strategic interests and missions, creating fights amongst both themselves and the regime.

## Notes

- 1 See <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/02/201129103121562395.html>
- 2 The Levant, sometimes called “Greater Syria,” includes parts of Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and Cyprus. Some historians also include parts of Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt within this geographic region.
- 3 Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith (2011) argue that Assad’s power is not solely due to his leadership; rather, his power is maintained by a coalition or collection of forces that he must support through incentives in order to maintain their loyalty, thus ensuring his control. See also their book, *The Dictators Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics*.
- 4 For an English version of the Damascus Declaration, see Joshua Landis’ blog, the Syria Comment, at <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/11/damascus-declaration-in-english.htm>
- 5 For an interesting analysis of the various benefits, criticisms, and shortcomings of the Damascus Declaration, see the Cairo Institute for Human Rights’ article discussing seminar highlights on the issue at <http://www.cihrs.org/?p=4938&lang=en>
- 6 Available at [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1757\(2007\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1757(2007))

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### CONCLUSION

Faced with authoritarian regimes that ruled for decades, a shell of a political system with rigged elections, and unresponsive institutions that lacked the ability to enact meaningful social and political change, opposition efforts and members in Egypt and Syria were pushed underground for years. These regimes were supported by a brutal and relentless security apparatus, the *mukhabarat*, which suppressed any attempts at activism or discontent. High levels of unemployment, poverty, and corruption, combined with the inability to enact change through existing state institutions, set the stage and necessity for street activism. Importantly though, these conditions did not *determine* the success of these uprisings, rather they created growing discontent among the populace. When protestors in Tunisia removed their longstanding ruler, a spark was lit which provided the catalyst of hope. Egyptians saw the success of Tunisia's relatively swift and peaceful removal of their longstanding ruler and concluded that if Tunisia, a country one-eighth the size of Egypt, could do it, so could Egypt. However, it is not enough to say that the sense of hope provided by the Tunisian uprising caused the uprising itself; rather, it catalyzed the existing preconditions built through years of activist networking and public contentious actions that were fueled by poor economic conditions and a closed political system. This fervor would spread across the region, mobilizing protestors across various states. These mobilizations occurred due to various state-specific conditions but the calls were largely the same, they wanted to remove their authoritarian rulers and their regimes. Ultimately, Egyptians

would successfully remove Mubarak, while Syria's opposition would remain unable to remove Assad, devolving into an ongoing civil war.

Given the brutal repression of these regimes, many judged, often correctly, that the road to challenging these forces would be violent and difficult. The ability of the discontented masses to challenge these powerful regimes required sustained contentious mass mobilization. As such, the power of these movements and their ability to sustain this action required they develop and function as a rhizome. A rhizomatic movement cannot be easily destroyed—there is no leader, no hierarchy to cripple, and no fixed structure to target. The structure and power of rhizomatic movements allowed protestors to sustain their challenges against the regime. Furthermore, the power of the rhizome, illustrated by its degrees of connectivity across society, allowed the opposition to remain united and massive despite state suppression. The incorporation of rhizomatic logic into the underlying social movement dynamics explains the varying success between Egypt and Syria while accounting for various social, political, economic, and cultural conditions.

A decade of local, community-specific activism in Egypt cultivated into a unified, overarching national sentiment, in which the common denominator of these grievances was Mubarak and his regime, and the only way to enact meaningful change was to remove them. This period of activism was complemented by existing communication structures—both tangible and cyber. The past decade saw thousands of protests and rallies, across all segments of society (political, ideological, religious, class, and labor) which allowed activists to be aware of each other's struggles and existence, providing for a sense of solidarity. The cyber realm allowed activists to coordinate, discuss, and network their grievances through social media, blogs, and websites. Despite the occasional crackdown and arrest of internet activists and bloggers, this was

largely tolerated by the security forces as they likely judged this discontent would remain in the cyber realm, never manifesting itself as a tangible threat. Yet the use of digital media and social networks is not a sole causal factor either. Social movements and mass mobilizations have formed and enacted meaningful change before this technology existed and will continue to do so with or without its presence.

What made Egypt's uprising successful was not its underlying economic conditions nor its use of digital media and social networking, although these contributed in their own ways. The opposition was able to successfully challenge the regime and the *mukhabarat* because it was comprised of the mass mobilization of over one million Egyptians in the streets, united in their calling for the removal of Mubarak. The protestors were not Nasserists and Leftists, Coptic Christians and Muslims, Women's Rights activists and Union leaders, although many identified as part of one of these groups or others. Rather, these protestors assumed a new overarching identity that transcended existing societal divides. As such, this unification allowed the opposition to act as a single rhizomatic force that could pose a significant challenge to the regime, ultimately leading to the military's intervention and removal of Mubarak. This movement was horizontal, leaderless, and overarching. The rhizome provided for the construction of a sense of solidarity, allowing opposition members to transcend societal divides such as politics, religion, ideology, and class. The inability to easily suppress and target specific leaders or structures of the opposition hindered the regime's attempts to crush this mobilization.

While Syria had its own history of contentious street politics and activism, it remained heavily repressed and largely localized, never reaching a powerful enough or salient force in which to expand nationally. Opposition groups and members remained fragmented on various issues and tactics. The Damascus Spring, the Damascus Declaration, and other events illustrated

the historical fragmentation of the opposition. Although these initiatives and movements brought together various opposition groups spanning different political, ideological, and ethno-religious groups, they lacked any unifying strategies, communication, or identities. A strategic failure of the Syrian uprising was the opposition's inability to present a single unified goal or target around which they could unite their opposition. While much of the population disliked the regime and their living conditions, the opposition struggled to unify and bring outliers into their movement. Furthermore, those that were involved often fought internally as to how to engage in contentious action. Although many were discontent with Assad's rule, he remained relatively popular due to his maintaining of social programs and subsidies. Society remained divided as many minority groups saw him as a protector and shield against sectarian violence, while many members of the upper class saw him as protecting their interests and welfare. Supporting this fragmented opposition essentially meant any group could come to power replacing Assad, including radical elements. This sense of the unknown led many to remain hesitant to join the opposition, particularly during its initial outbreak. While they were struggling, they were not starving; they saw Assad as a lifeline that guaranteed their survival, which was something the opposition could not.

A critical downfall of the Syrian opposition was its inability to mobilize a large segment of Syria's population although discontent, remained hesitant to engage in activism. Because the opposition contained multiple groups, parties, organizations, and associations, supporting regime change meant any one of these could come to power. Importantly, many of them were very distinct and often had opposing views. As such, many minority populations and the upper middle class, saw Assad as a better alternative. Although they were dissatisfied with their political system and facing abysmal economic conditions, Assad provided a shield against sectarian

violence, maintained government subsidies, and generally promoted the interests of the minority communities and elites; something which the opposition could not guarantee.

The opposition that did mobilize failed to promote substantive change through sustained actions due to the calculated and systematic repression of the *mukhabarat*. This repression forced opposition members to splinter in order to protect their own interests. The opposition lacked a unified front based on a shared collective identity and a shared set of goals. Furthermore, the various opposition members and groups remained divided on the most fundamental of tactics such as whether to challenge the regime through violent or nonviolent resistance. As the regime intensified its crackdown following the initial outbreak in Daraa, the opposition found it increasingly difficult to network and sustain efforts. These opposition members and groups did not have any underlying connective structure on which to fall back, except their own interests. Although the *tanseeqiat* developed a rhizomatic structure that pushed for a leaderless and horizontal organization, it developed as the uprising was unfolding, not during the years preceding it. Furthermore, the *tanseeqiat* never cultivated into a widespread national movement. The Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), which formed in an attempt to network local *tanseeqiats* into a national network, faced considerable difficulties as it formed after widespread systematic repression from the Syrian regime began. By the time the LCCs were formed, many groups had gone their own ways, pursuing their own interests through varying tactics and strategies, allowing for a patchwork of opposition efforts that the Assad regime could divide and conquer.

Discussing the Arab Spring in terms of an ‘awakening’ is somewhat misleading as it ignores the years of underlying conditions that built popular discontent and the history of activism preceding these events. It implies that these events were sporadic, ill planned, and

emotionally reflexive. While the onset of these events was just as surprising as some outcomes, the underlying conditions and opposition efforts existed for years. This underlying rhizomatic logic in the Egyptian and Syrian opposition movements provides a powerful analytical tool in which to analyze the social movement and power dynamics. This rhizomatic approach also explains, in part, why Egypt's opposition failed to remain unified after reaching their critical apex of removing Mubarak from power. Once a rhizome enters into a hierarchical structure, such as a formal political structure, it ceases to exist. As Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 30) discuss:

“When a rhizome is blocked, turned into a tree, it's over, there's nothing more of desire' for it's always through the rhizome that desire moves and is produced. Every time “desire follows a tree,” there are internal repercussions that make it fail and lead to its death; but the rhizome works on desire through exterior and productive pressures.”

The same forces that unified Egypt's populace providing for a successful and powerful movement simultaneously hindered its ability to integrate into the political sphere, allowing better-coordinated groups to co-opt and capitalize on this new power void. Integrating these efforts into a hierarchical fixed-structure such as political institutions inherently clashes with the underlying rhizomatic logic of horizontality, grassroots mobilization, and consensus building. As Funke (2014, 41) describes, the rhizome provides for a “rather thin articulation of commonalities and convergences,” which allows for the identification of common struggles and the construction of a shared identity and sense of solidarity. This allows for the sustained networking and linking of grievances, which he discusses in terms of “relays,” that were seen through the past decade of Egypt's street activism (Funke 2014; see also Olesen 2011). Importantly, as Rodrigo Nunes (2005, 300-302) notes, this concept of horizontality is built through its *praxis*, not its ideological foundations. Put differently, building rhizomatic movements requires actions in order to connect and unify these grievances. Interestingly, this also applies to Syria's opposition as the sustained repression from the regime allowed for little public political space in which the opposition could

move forward with their efforts. Although Egypt's forces suppressed activists, they did not do so to the same extent as Syria. Unable to network grievances and build an underlying rhizomatic structure, Syria's opposition ultimately fell back upon their own autonomous self-interests, rather than standing as a unified front from which to face this repression.

Thus, the structure of the rhizome is a double-edged sword, allowing for successful movement building and sustained contention, yet it also hamstring its own power based on its circumstances. The power of the rhizome ceases to exist once the necessity for integration begins, e.g., integrating and mobilizing within social and political institutions and formal hierarchical structures. As Funke (2014, 40-41) hypothesizes this limitation may be overcome through "more transversal mechanisms and structures" that could better synthesize these groups into longer-term efforts. However, it is unclear under what conditions this would occur. Certainly when faced with widespread systematic suppression, the task of building these more coordinated efforts is significantly more difficult as it requires more communication and networking opportunities through public contentious action. Nonetheless, the rhizome provides a useful tool for building a collective web of opposition members, which transcends societal divides, allowing for the coalescence of a unified force able to pose a significant challenge to authoritarian regimes. Its utility as a significant binding force remains limited when serving as a concrete and structured institutional force for integrated social change.



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