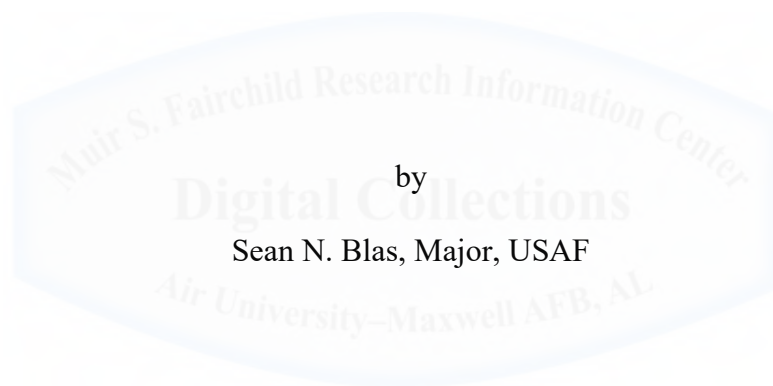


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Social Media and the Arab Spring



by
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Overview

In the early days of December 2010, pundits, analysts, and world leaders alike could not have anticipated the political and social upheaval that was about to unfold. The Arab Spring brought change with such speed and sheer magnitude, that it called into question many of the preconceived notions of both the strength of old-guard regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and many contemporary ideas of political scientists. Within a short period, in multiple countries throughout the region, the people overthrew the regime or forced political concessions. Prior to the uprisings, many social movement theories neglected the impact of social media technologies on protest movements, and commonly relegated them to fashions of the younger generation. Analysts saw protests through a framework of physical collective action to achieve a goal, but they neglected to consider the potential impact of the cyber realm was on the process of social mobilization. Early analysis often missed the effect of information spread through the Internet on local anti-establishment movements. Protest organizers used social media to collect and focus grievances against the government, to overcome the inherent hesitancy of individuals to participate in a protest movement. Social media alone did not create the social movements observed in the Arab Spring, but access to interactive media affected the movements' narrative and framing, which dictated success or failure of the various civil efforts to force political concessions.

Social Media and Social Movement Theory

Social movement theory provides the lenses needed to assess how social media affected the Arab Spring. Michael Billig defines a social movement as a collective, organized, sustained, and inherently non-institutional challenge to authority.¹ Social movements differ from many similar politically active groups such as an interest group or political party. Social movements endure through adverse events far beyond a passing trend.² A social movement often begins with

an informal network of people who want to change politics and society. Social movements try to gain influence over the state and its bureaucratic apparatus. Activists seek as much support as possible to influence these social changes. Therefore, they attempt to mobilize members for their causes from other associations which make up the fabric of civil society such as labor unions, soccer clubs, business societies, charitable groups, or religious organizations.

Civil society consists of associations outside the state apparatus that enable collective participation. These associations aggregate community interests to achieve a common purpose, often toward a political, religious, or cultural objective.³ For example, civil society includes religious organizations, labor unions, and professional associations. Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott further defined civil society as “a dense network of non-government associations and groups established for the autonomous pursuit of diverse socioeconomic interests and prepared to rebuff state efforts to take control of these activities.”⁴ These various groups and individuals create a fabric of life within a given area apart from the state context. They represent an independent “will,” a composite representing different sectors of the populace.

This collective will, when put into action can create social change, but it requires motivating individuals to take action. The process of social movements provides the mechanism to drive any public transformation. Charles Tilly defined social movements as a series of sustained contentious performances, public displays, and campaigns by which ordinary people make collective claims on the interests of others.⁵ Tilly’s explanation emphasizes ordinary people overcoming the social, economic, and personal barriers to engage in collective action. A combination of opportunity and threat can serve as a catalyst propelling protest movements to gain significant ground against the government, and demonstrate the depth and magnitude of popular support for their cause.⁶

Social media, at the outset, provides some significant capabilities to a potential movement by lowering the barrier to entry into a protest movement. The advent of social media enabled citizens to play a more active civic role, and it has stimulated the desire for greater transparency in government dealings. Generally, common citizens do not conduct in-depth studies of the social issues they face in their communities, and traditional media historically plays a large part in developing a shared understanding.⁷ Social media holds power by enabling people to experience current events on a personal level at a speed never before possible. Movements require people to adopt the publicized ideals and promote petitions for social change: they cannot simply distribute a message.⁸ A successful social movement must call for action in a way that reaches people on an emotional level.

Social media provides a burgeoning capability that enables people to feel connected to and identify with the concerns of others. Participation in a protest movement carries an underlying cost in the risk of family opposition or professional backlash, on top of the opportunity cost of the time spent volunteering. Protestors must sacrifice time from other activities, often to the detriment of their ability to engage in normal life-related activities. The personal cost deters most people from engaging in civil action.⁹ This formidable barrier to entry requires activists to engage with potential protestors on a personal level. The potential protestors need to identify with the movement's framing of the social issue or grievance. When an individual deems the framed issue as a relevant concern based on their pre-established beliefs, participation will outweigh the cost of participation. Social media can provide that experience.

As social media continues to connect groups and individuals on an emotional level, the Internet also enables the globalization of local social movements. Local groups who once operated isolated within the borders of their state can now connect with the diaspora of

expatriates and can seek assistance from activist groups who are not constrained by the government. Outside parties can take a more direct hand in events and influence the outcomes of protests.¹⁰ The Internet has made the world more interconnected, and activists can influence people despite the traditional boundaries of the state. Specifically, people identify strongly with others in even distant places. Social media allows expatriates and groups to re-engage former associates who still live in the affected country. This external influence on local protests through social media often becomes a contributing factor to the longevity of the movement, because these outside parties have no incentive to negotiate with the existing government.

Additionally, social media allows for the sharing of protest experiences and best practices. Much like the effect that diaspora elements have on the longevity of a protest, outside organizations can help train inexperienced groups within a given country. International activist groups can use the Internet to prepare local protest leaders. Thus local civil society groups can expand their protest repertoire and make a leap in their ability to organize, motivate, and employ resources.¹¹ Groups tend to protest in ways they understand and trust, but the sharing of best practices augments their existing experience in protest tactics. International activist groups have increased the effectiveness of less proficient protest movements by propagating knowledge and practical skills.

Paradoxically, while social media has the ability to create connections, it also can degrade the personal element experienced with participation in social activism. Many social scientists have started using the term “clicktivists or slacktivism” to denote the tendency for people to participate in a social issue for a short period, but fail to engage or fully commit to a long-term sacrificial struggle.¹² The lack of sustained social media interest reinforces the necessity for civil society organizations to actively organize before the start of a movement.

Social media news has a short shelf-life; in a moment the Internet mob can move on to the next big topic. Social media can incite strong feelings, even extreme anger, but these emotions do not sustain social movements in the long run. In juxtaposition, through participation in civil organizations, people can build trust and relationships that coalesce over an extended period to ensure group cohesion. This networking is especially vital in highly personalistic societies where people expect to act based on trust and group cohesion.¹³ Movements established solely around social networking over the Internet struggle to develop the same strength and will likely surrender to institutional demands. To be truly effective, a social movement needs the ability to create sustained action.

Citizens reporting on fast-moving, complicated events often provide conflicting accounts, which make it difficult for their readers on social media to discern the truth. The free flow of information found in social media comes at a price. While social media has broken the monopoly on the flow of information, once controlled by traditional media outlets, it does not provide any way for readers to confirm the claims reported. Accountability for deception or error comes only from reputation over time. In crisis or urgent conditions, this causes over-reactions and rapid swings of public sentiment. The vetting of facts does not occur at the same level. Now anyone can post information without the editing or checking that institutional media once used.¹⁴ The cost has come in the form of confused messaging, misguided intents, and sometimes outright lies. The questionable trustworthiness of information on social networks causes issues such as confirmation bias. Confirmation bias occurs when individuals seek out information compatible with their preexisting beliefs.¹⁵ Social media sometimes enhances confirmation bias by creating feeds of like minded thinkers. When a social media post fits into what a reader already wants to believe, they usually don't question the veracity.

Social Media in a MENA Context

In today's connected world, internet access through mobile devices has enabled ordinary citizens far greater access to information than any other period in history. In 2010, as the political unrest in the Arab world started to boil, The Oxford Internet Institute reported that an estimated two billion people enjoyed persistent internet access across the globe.¹⁶ Specifically, sixty percent of MENA's population had at least intermittent internet access during this period. Furthermore, these numbers do not consider the fact that in many Arab countries, multiple people will share internet devices.¹⁷ The shared nature of these devices exponentially increases the possible number of people with access. However, the saturation of internet access does not automatically correlate with the ability to mobilize a successful social movement. The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Lebanon and Kuwait had some of the highest levels of social media penetration, and yet experienced only small levels of unrest during the Arab Spring time period.¹⁸

In the case of the Arab Spring, social media provided a means for assorted civil groups to collaborate. The networks of activists, with a common purpose survived the government's efforts to disrupt and suppress their activity. By forming a collective protest narrative, different groups shared their experiences and organized joint protests. The formation of a cohesive civil resistance, the "frame" explaining and justifying collective activity, provided a crucial unifying element in holding groups together in a shared commitment. Social media enabled activists to quickly shape the dominant discourse of Arab resistance to the old regimes. This clear, emotionally powerful narrative justifying resistance ensured a wide base of support on the streets.¹⁹

People in the MENA region, on average, have some of the highest rates of technology adoption, and correspondingly have some of the highest rates of government censorship.²⁰ Government censorship of the Internet, before and during the Arab Spring, followed the historical pattern of repression of civil action groups, where the state adopts strong-arm tactics to limit or disband physical organizations. This type of repression did not work against internet activists. As information spread and groups formed in the digital realm, group dynamics in the physical realm correspondingly mirrored social media organization patterns. The broader movements in each country lacked a hierarchical structure, and instead a cooperative network developed around anger against the government.²¹ Very quickly small local groups not only networked with each other, but also connected with seemingly unassociated groups throughout the world, like the Occupy movement in the United States.

From the start of the Arab Spring, governments lost their monopolies on the control of information as internet-savvy youth promoted their message via social media. This flow of information enabled even groups with long-standing disputes with each other to set aside their differences and coalesce behind a common platform.²² Aristotle explained this aspect of persuasion as the use of *sensus communis*, or in today's vernacular, the use of common sense to influence a group through a communal interest.²³ As in the previous explanation of social framing, information released on social media shaped the narrative by using a commonly understood picture that harkened to a shared ethos among the differing organizations.

While social media helped activists propagate a resistance narrative, this did not automatically create a corporeal means for organization. Already existing civil groups effectively filled this role, with a prime example being Islamic organizations. Social movements need places to meet and connect. In the MENA region, people instinctively go to the closest mosque or

teahouse. The mosque and Islamic institutions provided activists the physical and social space to organize resistance against the old regimes.²⁴ Religion has long been a dominate space for organization and development of social movements. Many of these Islamic groups provided the precursor elements necessary for social mobilization, and the internet provided the tools for these groups to break the status-quo. Social media informed the wider movement, but it also became a space for the revolution in its own right.²⁵ Social media as a space enhanced the speed of the wider movement, but at times cyber activists saw their objectives overtaken by existing physical movements that did not need them once the flames had been stoked.

Case Studies

I. Tunisia

Events in Tunisia sparked the Arab Spring and they provide a ground-zero to study the other manifestations of protests throughout MENA. Known more prominently in Tunisia as the Jasmine Revolution, most reports attribute the beginnings to the self-emollition of Mohamed Bouazizi. However, Tunisia was primed for an uprising well before Mohamed Bouazizi's act of protest on December 17, 2010. Indeed, Mohamed Bouazizi was not the first person in Tunisia to protest the government through emollition.²⁶ There existed a repertoire of both physical protests and cyber opposition to the Tunisian government. The 2008 protests in the mining basin of Gafsa over food price inflation and the late July 2010 riots in the southern province of Ben Guerdane set the tone for what would come next.²⁷ Neither of them spread far beyond the confines in which they began, but they did raise popular awareness that the government was starting to lose its hold on the people. During this same time period cyber activist groups like the "Takrizards," gained more traction against the authoritative regime of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. They particularly became more innovative in how they employed and incorporated different social

media platforms to spread their message.²⁸ The difference between the earlier protests and December 2010 was that Mohamed Bouazizi's act triggered a reaction from the largely unemployed and disenfranchised youth who quickly spread the seeds of protest via social media. Protests started developing again in the southern mining belt of the country, but quickly spread to more affluent suburbs through social media.²⁹

Early twitter feeds with the hashtags #Bouazizi and #sidibouziid provided fuel during the protest period. Reading through the thousands of posts gives a kaleidoscope view of the multiple interest groups that utilized the events of 2010 to launch their efforts. Although numerous posts seem like just snide and sarcastic jabs, a holistic analysis reveals a common theme: the desire for change. Posts like "How typical!! My blog got censored after posting an article about #sidibouziid YESTERDAY"³⁰ were rallying cries to keep fighting against an oppressive system.

Oblivious to the state of affairs, Ben Ali attempted to utilize a combination of aggressive tactics against protesters and partial concessions that only aggravated the situation. Ben Ali's failure as he used previously successful suppression tactics showed that he did not understand the capabilities and anger of the urban educated middle class.³¹ He failed to communicate effectively with the rising middle class youth. Not surprisingly, one of the first civil society groups to join the leaderless protests was the Bar Association.³² Young lawyers who saw no means in which to address their grievances within the Tunisian governmental system took to the streets to voice their frustration. Soon after the New Year, the networked movement of unions, student groups, professional syndicates, and other opposition groups developed a new determination.³³ These groups, now more fully armed through social media, began spreading information to support the movement. For example, the WikiLeaks' release of 90,000 US embassy cables helped confirm what Tunisians had long suspected about the rampant corruption in Ben Ali's government.³⁴

The social movement began to coalesce around internet personalities and civil society leaders who could provide the masses for the protests. Despite this close communication between different groups via the Internet, the protestors still needed courage, tools and tactics to counter the police force, which tried to roll back the tide of protests. At this point the Takrizards scored a victory when they successfully brought the soccer Ultra groups into the protests.³⁵ By raising the political awareness of these Ultra groups, the Takrizards were able to convince them to put aside their enmity and help the uprising. Ultra-members became the shock-troops for the protests as confrontations with the police escalated. Often the soccer fans with experience in these types of violent street confrontations set the example for other meeker protestors so that demonstrators could sustain their activities in spite of police attempts to restore order. While protests spiraled out of control in more cities the Ben Ali regime made another attempt to snuff out the protests by arresting prominent Bloggers and other internet personalities, but once again this only fueled tensions.³⁶ Additionally, these arrests had little effect on stemming the flow of information on social media. Tunisian diaspora-based cyber groups like *Nawaat*, played a critical role in bypassing government censorship attempts and relaying information and news.³⁷

By January 14th, Ben Ali realized the untenable nature of his situation and fled the country to settle into a life of exile in Saudi Arabia. Once again people disseminated the information on social media with tweets like “FREEDOM FOR #TUNISIA. The government is down and Ben Ali fled the country. The will of the people won. Revolution wins #BOUAZIZI #DEMOCRACY.”³⁸ As the Jasmine Revolution came to a conclusion the sparks of the Arab Spring began to light flames in Egypt.

II. Egypt

On January 25th, 2011, just eleven days after Ben Ali’s exodus from Tunisia, Egyptian pro-democracy groups called for a day of national protest. The flames of the Jasmin Revolution

had spread to Egypt, but political activism against the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak did not just start in 2011. Like Tunisia, Egyptians had a long history of protesting injustice. To think of the Arab Spring in Egypt as a precipitous phenomenon does a disservice to earlier efforts which underpinned the eventual removal of Mubarak.³⁹ Early attempts at labor protests often failed due to the union leader's inability to generate large support, but those early attempts provided practical experience to activists. These early efforts helped form a nucleus of resistance knowledge, and with the spread of internet access in the early 2000s, protest organizations began to become more proficient.

Activists like Ahmed Maher started to employ social media as a means to influence mobilization in early 2008. In April of that year, he used Facebook as a tool in his organization strategy to support a unionized strike at a textile factory in the city of Mahalla. What started as a local strike soon became a nationwide movement, as an estimated 160,000 bloggers began sharing content not only on Facebook, but other sites like YouTube and Twitter.⁴⁰ By 2009, the online organization morphed from just a localized attempt at protesting to the virtual group "April 6th Youth Movement." Even though the original efforts of the strike failed, it created a larger movement.

Between 2008 and 2011, the April 6th Youth Movement and other groups within Egypt reached outside of the country through the Internet to help expand their protest repertoire. The April 6th Youth Movement gained significant experience from Optor, which was a Serbian-based youth movement that assisted in overthrowing Yugoslavia's Slobodan Milosevic in 2000.⁴¹ Optor helped train protest leaders to employ non-violent tactics and other organization strategies. Protest groups also reached out to the international media to gain more influence and support. Captivated by the events transpiring in MENA, the cyber activist group Anonymous

sought to support fledgling movements in Egypt.⁴² Much like in Tunisia, the stage was set for loosely affiliated groups to begin to organize under a common platform of change.

On June 6th, 2010, tensions started to rise when police killed Khaled Said after physically removing him from an internet café.⁴³ In response Nael Ghineu started a Facebook page to commemorate his martyrdom. The page Ghineu created provided the early fuel for the Arab Spring in Egypt, just prior to the uprisings in Tunisia. Khaled Said's life could have passed with little notice. He was a normal, middle-class citizen, but as news of his death propagated on social media, he became a symbol. Egyptian citizens, more importantly middle-class Egyptians, wondered if this could happen to them. Said's death highlighted middle-class concerns that the government would treat them the same way. Groups like the April 6th Youth Movement capitalized on events in Tunisia and framed their protest around a platform of governmental injustice which spread exponentially via social media.

After word of Ben Ali's departure spread to Egypt, pro-democracy groups sprang into action, but this time they worked with other organizations that normally operated independently. The youth arm of the Muslim Brotherhood became a major organizer in the 2011 uprisings with the April 6th Youth Movement.⁴⁴ The Arab Spring protests started by initially using non-violent tactics, but they quickly morphed in response to violent police actions. This left activists few options for political recourse, so the movement as a whole correspondingly turned into a full-scale uprising.⁴⁵ Much like in Tunisia, coordination with the soccer fans played a significant role in countering police efforts. This was most evident at the fight for the *Qasr al-Nil* bridge, on January 28th, which became a turning point in the fight against Mubarak's regime.⁴⁶ Once again street-savvy fighting by soccer fans led an assault on police forces and ensured they could not disperse the protestors.

As the protests approached the tipping point, the main force of the Muslim Brotherhood entered the scene, creating a new dynamic. Now a long-standing civil organization brought its full capabilities against the regime. At this moment Egyptian cyber space activism truly met the physical establishment in the form of the Brotherhood. For over eighty years the Muslim Brotherhood has been the mainstay of opposition to Egyptian regimes. Despite years of government opposition, the Brotherhood had expanded its organization and influence by adapting to contemporary ideas and opportune situations. Far from being exclusionary, the Muslim Brotherhood embraced early student unions, professional syndicates, and pre-internet democracy movements.⁴⁷ Persistent government repression from the Mubarak regime enabled the Brotherhood to create a narrative in which it played the role of defender of the people, especially for those who viewed themselves in opposition to the government. In 2011, social media activists could bring together a loose network of cohorts, but this dispersed grouping could not achieve political results like the Brotherhood.⁴⁸ Essentially, they continued to operate mostly in cyber space, while the Muslim Brotherhood as an institution took control of the movement.⁴⁹

Ultimately, the military's decision to not back President Mubarak represented the crucial turning point for the uprising. The Military Supreme Council refused to step in until February 2nd, when Mubarak loyalists resorted to violence. Once the military decided to shift their allegiance to the protesters, this marked the end of the regime. On February 10th the military officially took control of the country and persuaded Mubarak to resign.⁵⁰

III. Saudi Arabia

In comparison to other MENA countries, Saudi Arabia had twice the number of mobile internet devices, which would logically enable people to mobilize in a similar way through social

media.⁵¹ Instead, the exact opposite held true. Saudi Arabia experienced some of the least upheaval during the Arab Spring period.

Saudi Arabian politics reflects its status as both a rentier state and an absolute monarchy. The King has allowed activists to argue for increased liberalization through a *majlis al-shura*, but this largely appointed body has limited power to constrain his decisions.⁵² The term “rentier status” means that the Saudi government derives its income from the sale of natural resources, and not from taxes on people creating manufactured products or services. This means the state employs most of the population directly. The King can use hard currency to provide benefits to the population. Thus many young Saudis can turn in only one direction for gainful employment—the government. The political/social contract revolves around the patronage system which ties the populace to the ruling family. The middle class has lacked either the freedom or the motivation to develop a robust civil society.⁵³

Furthermore, the Saudi government’s use of oil revenue to give citizens economic handouts played a part in precluding any Arab Spring movements. As pro-democracy demonstrations gained momentum in March of 2011, King Abdullah announced the release of two economic relief packages. The first consisted of thirty-six billion dollars in financial aid. Then he announced a larger one-hundred billion dollar package which included five-hundred thousand dollars for new housing, two month bonus salaries for government employees, and the promise to create sixty-thousand new jobs in the security sector.⁵⁴

The Saudi variant of the Arab Spring, envisioned by Pro-democracy activists, came and went with little notice. Like their counterparts in other countries these activists employed social media to generate a broad-based support group, which culminated in the March 11th “Day of Rage.”⁵⁵ Despite government attempts to shut down pages advertising protest narratives, the

content was quickly moved to other locations. With each attempt at suppression the movement's online presence grew, while groups like the National Coalition and Free Youth Movement created more social media propaganda. At this point, the Saudi case differs greatly from Egypt and Tunisia. The online movement never materialized into a physical presence. Neither the National Coalition nor the Free Youth Movement ever had an offline organizational presence in Saudi Arabia.⁵⁶ Support for the Day of Rage on social media sites was not limited to just youth movements. Alternative Islamists, woman's rights crusaders, liberals, and even non-Saudi groups jumped online to support the cause virtually. From a civil society standpoint, all of these groups lacked a real presence in Saudi Arabia.

Just as damaging, the broad-based nature of the protest narrative allowed Shia groups to include their grievances against the Sunni monarchy. Saudi officials quickly used international tensions between Iran and many western nations to identify the protest movement as a threat justifying security forces response. Specifically, the government accused Shi'a pro-democracy reformers of acting as agents of insurgency. Despite limited political rallying in the major cities of Saudi Arabia, multiple protests took place in the eastern part of the country. The Shi'a majority in the oil rich east quickly championed the democracy movement and the area saw continued protests throughout the year. This further fueled the ruling family's narrative, stymying broad-based support for the Arab Spring movement. The al-Saud family effectively stoked anti-Shi'a sentiment to deflect much of the criticism from the state apparatus.⁵⁷ The accusation that protesters promoted a sectarian goal shifted attention from their democratic substance and recast them in a radical light. Additionally, the ruling family labeled the Shi'a opposition as an Iranian attempt to provoke instability in the region. By creating the image of the democracy protests as a foreign threat, the regime effectively nullified any additional internal

support and provided itself with a legitimate umbrella for its overt actions to suppress demonstrators.

On the day planned for the rally, the government stationed helicopters and security forces in strategic locations throughout Saudi's major cities. The government prepared well in advance to smother any attempted rally. Police quickly arrested those few individuals that did show up to protest and they were taken away.⁵⁸ Social media in this case hindered more than helped social mobilization. It did not assist in motivating individuals to support a reform cause, and in fact provided assistance to the Saudi regime. Officials knew the details of the planned event and took steps to make sure it never occurred.

Common Themes

While the three case studies show some aspects of shared cultural norms, these MENA countries have many distinct differences. Each of the case studies provides a back-drop to analyze a cross-section of the Arab Spring and highlight possible trends. This analysis emphasizes six salient factors.

First, people organize in ways that they know and understand. Social media can assist in social mobilization, but ultimately the context and cultural assumptions shape the development of protests. Without the group connections and loyalties developed through participation in civil society organizations to mobilize action on the ground, calls for protests online have little ability to take root. Of the three case studies, Tunisia had the most elements in its favor for a successful regime change. Tunisia had a long history of activism against Ben Ali, where an active civil society in conjunction with a motivated and educated middle class helped lead to a popular uprising.⁵⁹ Egypt similarly had a long history of activism, but Mubarak arguably had greater capabilities to limit and isolate the relevant element of civil society during his tenure. In contrast to the other two case studies, Saudi Arabia had the least potential for a popular uprising. Since

1979, Saudi history shows few protest movements and the government restrains the development of civil society.

Second, anger alone does not sustain mobilized action, but solidarity and shared identity do enable social mobilization by creating an “us versus them,” framework. Anger and frustration only provide limited motivation for a small minority to participate in a protest. Group identity and shared grievance is a much stronger motivator. Social media enabled both anger and a sense of identity during the Arab Spring. Tensions rose as cyber protesters spread videos and reports of government abuse. More importantly, these same viral internet posts helped connect people with different backgrounds. Arab Spring protests leaders went against the traditional demographics of previous uprisings, and this new leadership mixture helped gather people of differing backgrounds.⁶⁰ Solidarity helped overcome risk-to-reward calculus of the established middle class and rising elites. Ultimately, Tunisia and Egypt demonstrated that global social media allows local and international organizations to coordinate effort on a single focus and construct dynamic and flexible networks.

Third, the citizen journalism aspect of social media can reinforce likeminded thinking, which often polarizes issues. Social media does this through the algorithms utilized to track individual preferences. Once an individual show a propensity towards a particular stance on an issue, their news feeds tend to be dominated by suggested articles with the same view. Furthermore, closed group social media platforms tend to facilitate exclusionary thinking, where people associate with individuals who have the same beliefs. Finally, the multiple cases of “fake news,” raise concerns about social engineering. The viral nature of social media has the ability to disseminate false reporting to the point where the information gains credibility because of the number of people it has reached. Regardless of the truth behind a post, perceived validity can

galvanize a social movement just like a factual report. In the case of the Arab Spring, later investigations documented examples of bloggers claiming they were on site, when they were actually never there.⁶¹ When false social media claims meet an individual's threshold of plausibility, those claims then become supporting evidence for the social movement. In the context of the Tunisia and Egypt uprisings, this factor led to the observation that volume became more important than truth.

Fourth, governmental repression of social media increases the cost of collective action while at the same time provides a possible additional grievance.⁶² The degree to which these groups shifted tactics to employ violence represents a response to the government applying force: indiscriminate attempts at repression induced more violent reactions.⁶³ The process of suppression helped confirm the image of governmental institutions as an "absolute enemy," thereby justifying violence by the protestors. This creates a cycle of reciprocal vilification as the actions of the other side become symbols justifying greater violence. Both sides internalize a self-image of righteousness, which facilitates a shift in an individual's willingness to commit a violent act.⁶⁴ The strength of this psychological change can affect the willingness of a group to use violence, and invariably caused differing manifestations within the Arab Spring. Conflict strengthens identity even in a virtual environment.

Fifth, the amount of social media activity gave a skewed concept of how many people shared a liberal democratic ideal. The internet-savvy, young, secular, and liberal activists that played such a large part in shaping the original protest narrative quickly lost their status and influence once the fires of protest subsided. Old guard leaders of large civil society organizations quickly replaced these idealists.⁶⁵ In the case of Tunisia and Egypt, Islamist institutions like the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda in Tunisia gained political influence. The initial absence of

these Islamist groups from the early parts of the Arab Spring did not preclude them from winning stunning political victories in subsequent elections.⁶⁶ Numbers are important. Replacing a government requires either large numbers or armed groups, and the internet pro-democracy movements did not have the numbers to maintain relevance once the regime was overthrown.

Sixth, social movements do not completely disappear or end. They have a way of returning. The Arab Spring has roots in earlier protest movements. The uprisings of 2011 were a successful rebranding of previous movements, but in a larger context they only achieved marginal gains. In some respects, governments slid back into greater corruption and oppression, which commonly occurs in large social movements. One 2012 tweet, two years after the start of the Jasmin Revolution, explains this concept best. “Two years of #arabspring, 200 more to go for any real change to take root #bouazizi #sidibouziid.”⁶⁷

Conclusion

Because physical, human relationships provide the essential power of organizations, including states, some analysts dismiss social media’s impact on the Arab Spring in the long-term, big picture. However, formulating effective policies in the current world still requires understanding the nuanced interaction between social media and mobilization. Contemporary social mobilization strategy relies on activism through multiple media formats. The continued spread of devices with internet access, accentuates the importance of understanding the effects of this medium. Correspondingly, in the aftermath of the recent Arab Spring, many governments inside the region and around the world have sought to establish policies to restrict the use of or control social media content. However, the uprisings have shown the error of this strategy. The Internet has opened a Pandora’s Box of information, and it cannot be closed. A blocked site only means networked activists will search for ways around those restrictions, and will often move

their content to servers located in more hospitable countries.⁶⁸ In light of the way in which the Internet allows information to metastasize, policy makers should remember that social media is agnostic regarding content. The rapid distribution of information can cause short periods of societal change, producing a temporary surge of stimulus, but established governments have a similar ability to utilize the medium and establish a balance of power.⁶⁹

¹ Michael Billig, "Rhetorical Psychology, Ideological Thinking and Imagining Nationhood," in *Social Movements and Culture*, ed. Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) 78.

² Mark Kesselman, Joel Krieger, and William Joseph. *Introduction to Comparative Politics: Brief Edition* (Boston: Wadsworth CENGAGE Learning, 2009) 488.

³ Lawrence Diamond. "Rethinking Civil Society I. Towards Democratic Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy* 5. No 3, 1994, 4-17.

⁴ Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, *Russia and the New States of Eurasia: The Politics of Upheaval*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 124.

⁵ Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2007) 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁷ William Gamson, "Constructing Social Protest," in *Social Movements and Culture*, ed. Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) 86-87.

⁸ Kathleen Collins "Ideas, Networks, and Islamist Movements: Evidence from Central Asia and the Caucasus," *World Politics* 60, Number 1, October 2007, 6.

⁹ Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) 89.

¹⁰ Philip Howard. *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 10.

¹¹ Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 49.

¹² Erica Chenoweth, "How Social Media Helps Dictators," *Foreign Policy*, November 16, 2016.

http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/16/how-social-media-helps-dictators/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=%2AEditors%20Picks; Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren. *The Battle For The Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter Revolution and the Making of a New Era* (New York: Yale University Press, 2012) 55.

¹³ Kathleen Collins "Ideas, Networks, and Islamist Movements," 6.

¹⁴ Stefan Csizmazia, "The Role of Online Social Networks in Political Uprisings." (Faculty of Informatics, University of Technology Vienna), 9.

¹⁵ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011) 81.

¹⁶ W.H. Dutton, A. Dopatka, M. Hills, G. Law, V. Nash, *Freedom of Connection, Freedom of Expression: The Changing Legal and Regulatory Ecology Shaping the Internet*, Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford, U.K., 2011, p. 45.

¹⁷ Philip Howard. *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* 19. NOTE: Dr. Howard based his calculation from multiple sources to include: CIA 2010, ITU 2006, and Internet software Consortium 2010. A review of other academic materials on this subject indicates Howard's estimates are consistent with other research calculations.

¹⁸ Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren. *The Battle For The Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter Revolution and the Making of a New Era* (New York: Yale University Press, 2012) 54; Flavia Tsang, Ohid Yaqub, Desiree van Welsum, Tony Thompson-Starkey, and Joanna Chataway. "The Impact of Information and Communication Technologies in the Middle East and North Africa." *Rand Technical Report*, 2011, 31.

¹⁹ George Joffe. "The Arab Spring in North Africa: Origins and Prospects." *The Journal of North African Studies* 16, No. 4, December 2011, 516; John Esposito, Tamara Sonn, and John Voll, *Islam and Democracy After the Arab Spring*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) 17.

²⁰ Philip Howard. *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, 21.

²¹ John Esposito, Tamara Sonn, and John Voll, *Islam and Democracy After the Arab Spring*, 22.

²² Philip Howard. *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, 155.

- ²³ Michael Billig, "Rhetorical Psychology, Ideological Thinking and Imagining Nationhood," 72-73.
- ²⁴ George Joffe. "The Arab Spring in North Africa: Origins and Prospects." *The Journal of North African Studies* Vol 16, No. 4, December 2011, 515.
- ²⁵ Helga Tawil-Souri, "It's Still About the Power of Place," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communications*, 2012. 87.
- ²⁶ Yasmin Ryan "How Tunisia's Revolution Began," *Al Jazeera*, 26 January 2011. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/01/2011126121815985483.gtnk>
- ²⁷ Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren. *The Battle For The Arab Spring*, 69.
- ²⁸ David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) 180. NOTE: The Takrizards are a hacker group that was established in 1990. They were active cyber opponents to President Ben Ali, and repeatedly denounced his authoritative regime. Many of the group's members were expatriates of Tunisia and were thus able to operate outside of the country with more freedom.
- ²⁹ John Esposito, Tamara Sonn, and John Voll, *Islam and Democracy After the Arab Spring*, 175.
- ³⁰ Salim Allawzi @AllawziSalim, 29 Dec 2010, 11:36 PM, <https://twitter.com/AllawziSalim/status/20382736342585344>.
- ³¹ Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren. *The Battle For The Arab Spring*, 70.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 74.
- ³³ John Esposito, Tamara Sonn, and John Voll, *Islam and Democracy After the Arab Spring*, 175.
- ³⁴ Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren. *The Battle For The Arab Spring*, 29.
- ³⁵ David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains*, 183.
- ³⁶ Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren. *The Battle For The Arab Spring*, 75.
- ³⁷ David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains*, 187.
- ³⁸ Hazem Sharaf @eiximo, 14 Jan 2011, 9:37 AM, <https://twitter.com/elximo/status/25969700525580288>
- ³⁹ Tara Povey, *Social Movements in Egypt and Iran* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015) 3.
- ⁴⁰ Philip Howard. *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, 135.
- ⁴¹ David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains*, 190-191.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 191.
- ⁴³ John Esposito, Tamara Sonn, and John Voll, *Islam and Democracy After the Arab Spring*, 20.
- ⁴⁴ David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains*, 190.
- ⁴⁵ Mohammed Hafez and Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Violence as Contention in the Egyptian Islamic Movement," in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004) 66.
- ⁴⁶ David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains*, 193.
- ⁴⁷ Hesham Al-Awadi, *The Muslim Brothers in Pursuit of Legitimacy: Power and Political Islam in Egypt under Mubarak* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 76.
- ⁴⁸ Ramesh Srinivasan, "What Tahrir Square Has Done for Social Media: A 2012 Snapshot in the Struggle for Political Power in Egypt," *Information Society* 30, No. 1, 2014, 72.
- ⁴⁹ Ramesh Srinivasan, "What Tahrir Square Has Done for Social Media," 72.
- ⁵⁰ Barany Zoltan, "The Role of the Military," in *Journal of Democracy* 22.4, October 2011, 26.
- ⁵¹ Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren. *The Battle For The Arab Spring*, 53.
- ⁵² Michael Herb, "Princes, Parliaments, and the Prospects of Democracy in the Gulf," in *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance*, ed. Marsha Posusney and Michele Angrist, (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005) 175. NOTE: The majlis al-shura is Saudi Arabia's national assembly which fills the role as advisory council to the King.
- ⁵³ Jane's, "Sentinel Security Assessment - The Gulf States," <http://www.janes.com/products/janes/index.aspx>, (6 March 2012); F. Gregory Gause III, "Regional Influences on Experiments in Political Liberalization in the Arab World," in *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*, ed. Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble, (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishing, 1995) 292.
- ⁵⁴ Jane's, "Sentinel Security Assessment - The Gulf States."
- ⁵⁵ Madawi Al-Rasheed, "No Saudi Spring: Anatomy of a Failed Revolution," *Boston Review*, March 1, 2012. <http://www.bostonreview.net/madawi-al-rasheed-arab-spring-saudi-arabia>.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ Toby Jones, "Counterrevolution in the Gulf," *United States Institute of Peace: Peace Brief*, (April 2011) 3.
- ⁵⁸ Madawi Al-Rasheed, "No Saudi Spring: Anatomy of a Failed Revolution."
- ⁵⁹ Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren. *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 64.
- ⁶⁰ John Esposito, Tamara Sonn, and John Voll, *Islam and Democracy After the Arab Spring*, 22.

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- ⁶¹ Flavia Tsang, Ohid Yaqub, Desiree van Welsum, Tony Thompson-Starkey, and Joanna Chataway. "The Impact of Information and Communication Technologies in the Middle East and North Africa." *Rand Technical Report*, 2011, 58; Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren. *The Battle For The Arab Spring*, 55.
- ⁶² Mohammed Hafez and Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Violence as Contention in the Egyptian Islamic Movement," 67.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 71-76.
- ⁶⁴ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, (New York, Harper, 2009), 132; Donatella Della Porta, "Research on Individual Motivations in Underground Political Organizations" *Terrorism Studies: A Reader*, 21.
- ⁶⁵ Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren. *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 302.
- ⁶⁶ John Esposito, Tamara Sonn, and John Voll, *Islam and Democracy After the Arab Spring*, 189.
- ⁶⁷ Amira Al Hussaini, 16 December 2012, 6:16 PM.
- ⁶⁸ Philip Howard. *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, 3.
- ⁶⁹ Tiffany Danitz and Warren Strobel. *Networking Dissent: Cyber Activists Use the Internet to Promote Democracy in Burma*. (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2000) 133; Johanna Neuman, *Lights, Camera, War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 255.

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