TWEET LIKE AN EGYPTIAN:
THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ARAB SPRING UPRISINGS

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions in early 2011, academics and political pundits alike have attempted to discern the causes and factors that led to the success (or failures) of these movements. While each country has faced its own specific set of political, social, and economic problems, a common thread that academic observers have detected is the increasingly common use of social media for purposes of revolution. While social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter undoubtedly played a role in the numerous revolts in the Middle East, there are widely varying opinions on the importance of that role to the success of the revolutions. Many Middle Eastern experts protested that, while social media had facilitated the uprisings, the impetus for these events were varied and complicated. In their eyes, the underlying factors unique to each nation were the true causes of successful revolution, even if Facebook and Twitter assisted the social movements. To others, however, the novelty of social media was an alluring news story and a potential cause of the MidEast revolutions. Pundits and news anchors drew on Facebook and Twitter accounts of citizens on the ground to illustrate the dire situation of the protestors. Even politicians and other decision makers relied heavily on social media, as state controlled conventional media ignored the actual conditions on the ground.

When Tunisian street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set himself ablaze in protest of the Tunisian government’s economic policies on December 17th, 2010, he no doubt wished that his actions would bring about some type of governmental or economic change. He likely never expected that his actions would lead to upheaval all
across the Middle East and North African region. However, soon after his self-immolation, Tunisia was engulfed in widespread protests that overthrew President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and led to recent democratic elections. Tunisia spurred protests and full-on revolutions in numerous other countries that outside observers had perceived as politically stable. The overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt garnered the most international attention, but protests on varying scales took place in Yemen, Jordan, Bahrain, Libya, and continue in Syria. This extensive unrest in the region came as an immense surprise to academics, politicians, and experts on national and international scales. While the nations in revolt undoubtedly had domestic political problems that were a potential source of unrest, no one, not even the local citizens, had predicted such potential for revolution and protest in the Middle East.

There is little doubt among all observers that social media outlets were invaluable to facilitating the revolutions once they had gained a measure of momentum. However, thornier questions arise. If social media was a “necessary but not sufficient” criterion for successful uprisings, what other factors were important in igniting the protesters’ passions? To what extent did social media act as an impetus for revolution, or was it merely a useful tool? Through focusing on social media narratives, do we in the West portray these complicated national movements too simplistically? Undoubtedly, the answers to these questions, and a myriad of other questions about the Arab Spring uprisings, will be of academic and political interest for years to come.
Chapter 1:

Before Social Media: Conventional Causes of Political Transformation

Unsurprisingly, there is an expansive academic literature on the varied causes of revolution, democratization, and broader social movements. With the advent of social media, this conventional literature does not become obsolete. In fact, the academic community commonly cites several diverse reasons that had a much more profound societal effect in the nations that experienced unrest. The most common of these reasons include political structure, demographics, the status of civil society, the national and international economy, and how the specific history of each country shapes the above variables. Many of these factors went overlooked in the Western media during the uprisings, but as academic literature on the revolutions begins to take shape, a fuller picture is becoming clear.

Political Structure and Policy

The political structure and policies of a nation are inevitably significant to whether or not a country will experience political unrest. Political structure is not the sole indicator, but some structural elements can make the difference in the success or failure of revolutionary movements.

For example, the ability of an undemocratic regime to be nimble and at least somewhat responsive depends not only on the personality of the national leader (in less democratic regimes), but on the structures and policies through which the country operates. The policies in place to discourage activities like political dissent and public protests can be enacted in a heavy handed manner, or enacted in a much more
politically devious manner. Albrecht and Schlumberger describe these political actions as a self-preservation tactic, writing, “Even in cases such as Castro’s Cuba, Saddam’s Iraq, or the Soviet Union under Stalin, there are clear indicators of political rulers trying to gain and maintain at least some measure of political legitimacy”\(^1\). This instinct of ‘self-preservation’ in undemocratic regimes is much in evidence in the structure of many Middle Eastern regimes. In fact, striking a balance between restricted and free speech can be an invaluable tool for an authoritarian government, as it provides a false sense of political freedom to the public at large\(^2\). In some instances, allowing for some dissent even allows the regime to propagandize, and portray the protesters as dangerous radicals from whom the public must be protected. However, allowing even this level of freedom can backfire, as has been seen in numerous cases where uprisings have started small and gained enough momentum to succeed. The public perception of an authoritarian regime has an influence on whether or not revolution is seen as a viable option to the populace.\(^3\)

In the public square, as well, authoritarian regimes exercise varying levels of control. The monopoly that governments exert over the use of force allows abuses of power in physical public space. As has been demonstrated in various cases, desperate authoritarian governments resort to use of force to discourage dissent against the regime once any revolutionary movement has enough legitimacy among the people to possibly become successful. Again, these tactics are used to varying extents by differing regimes, but the threat of force in authoritarian governments causes a

\(^1\) Albrecht and Schlumberger, 2004
\(^2\) Newton, 2001
\(^3\) Passy and Giugni, 2001
‘chilling effect’ on free speech in the public square. Social media allows for a virtual
public square, and thus circumvents some of these governmental restrictions, as will
be discussed later.

The demographic and economic makeup of undemocratic regimes must be
taken into account as well. If any democracy or revolutionary movement has hope of
success against an entrenched authoritarian government, the movement must sway at
least some of the societal elite to their side. The specific political structure of a nation
often determines who these elite groups are, and if these groups are satisfied in with
the current regime. In cases throughout Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East,
one of the key elite governmental groups is the military. As was demonstrated yet
again in (successful) Arab Spring uprisings, a significant amount of political and, of
course, military power lies in the hands of the officers who provide support to the
regime. It is when a major elite group like the military begins to question the
established regime that a populist movement can truly gain legitimacy and
momentum. Predictably, some of these other elite groups are common in any society;
the wealthy and well-connected politicians, military leaders, and other societal figures
such as religious leaders. When the allegiances of these groups begin to waver,
revolutionary movements have an opening in which to exert their influence. However,
the fact that these groups are so entrenched in society can often present problems for a
post-revolutionary nation. In short, understanding the political actors and elites within
and without government is key to determining the potential success of an uprising, no
matter how much broad based support the revolution has garnered from the general
public. Conversely, if the elite is small and reviled by all, important societal groups could come into conflict. For example, in Syria, a small Muslim minority sect called the Alawites exerts control over the military and other political institutions. The majority of the military, however, is not Alawite. The rank and file of the military could (and has) come into conflict with the officers, creating a unique situation where groups integral to the political structure take opposing sides. The fact that the conflict there is still unresolved speaks to the importance of these elite groups during the course of a revolution.

Finally, the specific policy that a government has towards regulation of the conventional and new sources of media seems to be a relevant predictor of potential revolutionary success. Governments across the globe have come to this realization and therefore kept a tight rein on the public’s access to information and news. These restrictions differ from regime to regime, with various results. Regimes that attempt to shut down any dissent or information from the outside stifle other industries and aspects of society; civil society, economics, and quality of life all suffer losses. However, regimes that allow for some dissent and the entrance of outside information run the risk that the population will become dissatisfied with the government they have. Some governments have successfully struck a balance, where the media is partially free, and the government is somewhat responsive to what dissent is allowed to be voiced. This enables some important areas of society to at least develop somewhat. Instead of ruling a backwater, the leaders of these nations often desire to achieve some level of development to gain legitimacy at home and abroad. As has
become evident in many cases, though, regimes that allow some level of press
freedom have experienced unrest and dissent. While freedom of the press is
considered desirable by liberal democratic governments, the fact that press freedom
sometimes results in civic participation and dissent makes it all the more undesirable
to regimes that wish to maintain their grip on power. The decisions that a regime
makes about freedom of the press, whether that press be conventional or new media,
have ramifications for potential social or revolutionary movements.

The State of Civil Society

Saad Eddin Ibrahim draws upon the many academic definitions of civil society
that he has observed, writing:

Civil society is the totality of self-initiating and self-regulating volitional social formations,
peacefully pursuing a common interest, advocating a common cause, or expressing a common
passion; respecting the right of others to do the same, and maintaining their relative autonomy
vis-à-vis the state, the family, the temple and the market.

This definition demonstrates how the political structure of any state, along with
cultural, economic, and other issues, influences the civil society of said state. The
status and development of civil society and civic institutions is a key indicator as to
whether an uprising may succeed in any given country. While academics have studied
social movements both on a structural and an individual level, both of these types of
networks are important. In many cases, it is the “grassroots” type of civic
organizations that successfully lead such movements, be they revolutionary or no. In
Latin America, for instance, civil unrest was led by such social institutions as the

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5 Ibrahim 1998
6 Passy and Giugni (2001) examine differences between “social-cultural and individual-level
determinants of participation” in social movements, and their consequential success or failure
Catholic Church. As Ibrahim writes, these organizations are self-initiating and volitional; a distinction that should especially be made in authoritarian societies where some seemingly civic institutions are, in reality, extensions of the regime.

Authoritarian rulers in various parts of the world have learned to use “democracy language” to deceive both the international community and their own citizens\textsuperscript{7}. A truly vibrant civil society emerges organically, perhaps as a function of government policies, but not through a government initiated program, and not solely as a means to influence or sway the government. In addition, a flourishing civil society can emerge even when the majority of people distrust the government, as a high level of trust among citizens does not by default mean that citizens have a large measure of trust in the government\textsuperscript{8}.

The ability of civil society to grow and flourish depends on many factors, the most important of those factors being government structure and policy. As mentioned above, an authoritarian regime’s policy on free speech and free association plays a definite role in the potential for civil unrest. Government policy also has a direct effect on the development of social capital. Robert Putnam’s book \textit{Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy}, is a detailed look at the development of social capital in Italian society. He defines this concept of social capital as those “features of social organization which improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions – such as trust, norms, and networks\textsuperscript{9}. He also proposes that the level of civic development has important ramifications for

\textsuperscript{7} Albrecht and Schlemberger 2004  
\textsuperscript{8} Newton 2001  
\textsuperscript{9} Putnam 1993
governmental systems and economic progress. The higher the level of social capital and civic participation, the more likely that a society will develop democracy and governmental institutions that value liberal ideals of human rights, transparent politics, etcetera. Among other measures of civic participation, authors dealing with the development of civic society discuss the necessity of freedom of association and movement. Specifically, Palestinians in Jerusalem who have severely restricted freedom of movement explain their experiences that “spatial isolation paralyzes the community, producing uncertainty and ambiguity,” but describe some methods that have enabled them to overcome this isolation to some extent. In any case where a portion of the population is spatially cut off from the public square, the potential for the growth of civic society is limited. While diverse factors could result in this restriction of physical movement, government policies are the most common example of this type of imposition. However, embedded social norms also impact who can access the public square.

This “trust” among individuals that is called social capital is profoundly affected by governmental policy, concepts of citizenship, and culture. The fact that civic society has developed so differently among regions and nations speaks to the fact that issues like history, religion, and economic systems have likely influenced the development of civic society in the long term. Ibrahim examines the development of civic society in Western nations; in the West “the ultimate loyalty of citizens was supposedly to the nation-state as the natural sovereign embodiment of all society, [but]

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10 Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2011
11 Newton, 2001
sub lo
yalties were to follow interests, focused on class, occupation, and residential
community". While this in undoubtedly somewhat true in regions besides the West,
the interplay between government and civic society was unique in the West in some
ways. The development of the governments of these nation-states coincided with
great growth in civil society, whereas in regions like the Middle East, the development
of civil society was greatly influenced by religion. There is no doubt that the Christian
religion had a substantial role in Western development, but the structural factors that
vary between Islam and Christianity could account for these significant differences.
Historical events, as well, play into the development of social capital and civic society.
Revolutionary history, religious tradition, educational structures, governmental
policies restricting information or association; all of these and more have profound
effects on civic society. However, in the literature concerning the Arab world in
specific, authors relevant to this paper largely analyze civil society as it is currently
and the ramifications for modern politics, instead of root causes as to why the Middle
East and North Africa turned out the way they did. In any event, it is civic society as
it is now that has a direct effect on the success or failure of the Arab Spring
movements, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

National and International Economy

While academics have taken different views of the ramifications that economic
development has for specific governmental regimes, there is a universal consensus that
economics at least plays a role in how a national government enacts policy, interacts

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\[\text{Ibrahim 1998}\]

\[\text{Modern civil society is the topic relevant to the uprisings of 2011}\]
with outside, nations, and generally makes important decisions. In developed
democracies, elected officials are held responsible for the health of the economy
directly through elections, but even authoritarian regimes face consequences for a
failed economy. Just as in liberal democracies, the public responds to a shrinking
income, often faster and more passionately than any attack on human rights or groups
of anti-government dissenters.

One of the academic works most commonly referenced in the debate over
economics’ role in political development is Seymour Martin Lipset’s prominent work
titled “Some social requisites of democracy: economic development and political
legitimacy”14. Others succinctly summarize the results of Lipset’s analysis; “the level
of economic development correlated positively with democracy. …[there is] a sturdy
(though not perfect) association between economic development and democracy”15.

Lipset’s work has experienced some criticism, as Lipset and many influenced
by him sometimes place too much stock in the economy’s ability to affect
governmental systems. These critics argue that even if domestic and international
economic development is correlated positively with the formation of democracy, that
there are many other subtle factors in play. Authors such Max Weber, and Guillermo
O’Donnell have illustrated, empirically and through specific case studies, that Lipset’s
conclusions do not hold true in every instance. “…the boundary between the historian
and the social scientist, as well as the limits between the social science disciplines of
economics, sociology, and political science, is obscured” when one looks for the true

14 1959
15 Huber, Rueschemeyer and Stephens 1993
reasons behind a nation’s choice of government. However, even those who criticize authors who place perhaps undue importance solely on economics acknowledge the fact that class structure, availability of resources, and the general economic philosophy of a country influence the relationship between civil society and government.

While one can analyze many different aspects of a nation’s economy, there are only a few issues that are especially important in the discussion of changing social structure and potential for democratization. Three of these features are the balance of class power, the nature of the state and state-society relations, and transnational structures of power. Other important indicators that are often cited, such as employment, economic structure, and demographics\textsuperscript{16} of the nation’s workforce are encompassed in these broad features. While much of the established literature concerning economics and democratization has assumed that a strong middle class was a necessary condition to transitioning to a liberal democracy, Huber, Rueschmeyer and Stephens instead assert that a “strong base of subordinate classes” (lower classes, often with support of the middle class), must balance out the dominant groups to achieve stable democracy\textsuperscript{17}. The middle class plays an important role, but usually, in these authors’ views, the initial impetus for change comes from frustrated lower classes. It is this discussion of classes that the specific demographics of the workforce also become important. In third world and developing countries in particular, the age demographics play an integral role in predicting a nation’s economic potential future. As an example, consider Europe, where fertility levels are

\textsuperscript{16} Winckler 2002, Jamal 2005
\textsuperscript{17} 1993
below replacement rates. In time, if there is no change in government policy regarding social benefits, there will be an undue burden placed on the younger people still in the workforce when older workers retire. This type of economic burden is created in reverse when there are too many young workers\textsuperscript{18}.

The best mechanism to achieve these shifts in power within civil society, as well as between civil society and government, is often economics. “The working and the middle classes…gain an unprecedented capacity for self-organization due to such developments as urbanization, factory production, and new forms of communication and transportation”\textsuperscript{19}. However, when the state chooses a different, less classically liberal economic path, this model of development may not be demonstrated as expected. As we will see, regions such as the Middle East and North Africa experienced a very different path of economic development. This path was greatly affected by history and culture, and resulted in a unique economic situation in the modern era.

\textbf{In Review}

While there are certainly many factors that contribute to democratization, be it gradual or through revolution, the few that have been discussed above demonstrate some of the most common arguments in the academic literature. Political structure, policy, civil society, and the broad economic state of a nation all have sizeable influence on the potential for a successful political transformation.

\textsuperscript{18}Winckler 2002
\textsuperscript{19}Huber, Rueschemeyer, and Stephens 1993
Chapter Two

Conventional Causes of Political Transformation Contextualized

It is important to understand that the Arab Spring, while often defined by observers as a ‘wave’ of political uprisings, still had diverse roots in each nation. Some generalities can certainly be made across the Arab nations, but each of the factors detailed above played varied roles in different countries. The economy and political structure of Syria are quite different from Egypt, even if the desires of the oppressed people on the ground have a universal appeal to all. Before one can examine social media’s role in the uprisings, it is imperative to understand other possible (and less often mentioned) causes of unrest.

Egypt

Egypt has arguably gotten the most attention from both academics and the international media in regards to the Arab Spring uprisings, given its complex political structure and ties in the international community. Notably, Western countries became concerned about the unrest in part because of Egypt’s peace treaty with Israel, which has since fallen apart in the aftermath of Mubarak’s departure. While this aspect of politics has little to do with the causes of the Arab Spring, it is worth mentioning, as it is a key reason why the West took interest. It also affirms the fact that the revolution was fueled by native citizens, as little intervention from the outside took place because of the delicate international situation. This revolution was Egypt’s alone; a fact that the Egyptian citizens have taken much pride as they try to create a new, more equitable and representative democracy.
Political Structure and Policy

Even in the mainstream media, the role of the military was closely followed and analyzed during the uprising. In this instance the media were watching one of the key political players, and that watchfulness in the end lent itself to the success of the protests. The military is one of the elite groups that the academic literature often references; one of the groups whose support is vital to the success of a revolution. While Hosni Mubarak retained the support of the military, he not only effectively retained the exclusive use of force, but he also retained legitimacy in some of the citizens’ eyes. Even if many wished to protest, while Mubarak used the military as his own personal and powerful arm, citizens were discouraged from protesting. During the course of the protests, the military attacked protests on both small and larger scales. Many of the smaller attacks meant to intimidate protesters were carried out by men not dressed in uniform, but it was common knowledge that these violent Mubarak backers were permitted to threaten protesters with impunity.

The military has always been an integral source of Mubarak’s power, and for his predecessors before him. The military coup that was engineered by the Free Officers Movement in 1952 left Egypt with a legacy of a strong military that is still highly visible, even in post revolution Egypt. Gamal Abdul Nasser left an impression on the whole of the Arab world; an impression that was not exclusively negative. However, his reliance on the military that elevated him to such a high political

\[\text{Jamal 2005, Gabriel 1969}\]
\[\text{Middle East Research and Information Project, "The Democracy Agenda in the Arab World" 2012}\]
position has ramifications for Mubarak’s more modern Egypt. While the government of Egypt is, in name, a democracy, it is the military that holds much of the political power. Egypt is not alone in this; the Arab nations spend, on average, the highest proportion of GDP on their militaries in the world. Therefore, if the loyalty of the military wavers, the regime feels the effects of that shift. The military is not the other elite group that mattered in the uprising, but it was the military movements, operations, and support that were closely watched by both the protesters and outside observers.

During the course of the uprising in Egypt, any instances of military defections, or any reticence on the military’s part when it came to quashing protests, were seen as positive signs for the protesters on the ground. There were quite a few instances of Mubarak supporters (possibly military) staging violent attacks against protesters, but these occurred as the main bulk of the military’s support for Mubarak appeared to be waning. As the protests continued for days and weeks, military commanders lost confidence in Mubarak’s regime. More cynical observers have pointed out that the military leadership may have come to the conclusion that the protests had gained too much momentum to be stopped, and therefore tried to preserve their own positions of power by abandoning Mubarak. (The military in post-revolution Egypt took a fairly long time to organize elections and still holds much political power today. Protests against the ruling military council continue in Cairo on

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22 Gabriel 1969
23 Jamal 2005; Average Arab spending on military is 7.4% of GDP, while the world average is 2.4%
a fairly regular basis). Even if the military eventually abandoned Mubarak in order to save its own skin, the change of allegiance was crucial to the success of the uprising.

Although the military was undoubtedly the elite group that had the most impact on the outcome of the revolution, other important groups existed as well. The inner circle of a political leader often has an impact on the success or failure of revolt, as well as other bureaucratic type groups. Egypt’s bureaucratic structure is much more expansive than in many other countries, even in the Arab world. Again, this bureaucratic structure can be traced back to some of Nasser’s educational and political policies. Nasser executed a drastic overhaul of the Egyptian education system (along with many other aspects of the Egyptian government), that, while well intentioned, has left a difficult legacy for modern Egypt to contend with. Nasser’s administration established educational standards for the nation that were meant to lift the country out of poverty and create an educated middle class for a more stable and powerful Egypt. 24

One aspect of the plan included expanding access to quality higher education. As an incentive, Nasser’s administration promised every college graduate a well paying job in the government upon graduation. While many graduates did pursue other private sector endeavors, a large portion of college graduates landed in the political bureaucracy. 25 This policy had many effects on Egypt’s civil society and economy, which will be discussed below.

With regards to the consequences for politics and policy, this bureaucratic structure placed Mubarak in a somewhat weak political position. During the 1990s,

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24 El-Mikawy 2001
25 Posusney 1997
Mubarak’s regime had begun attempts to liberalize the economy, which included laying off many inessential government workers. Even so, the sizeable government that remained was not made up exclusively of Mubarak loyalists. This is in contrast to many other military strongmen who relied solely on their inner circle and who hired government employees based on loyalty instead of merit. While Mubarak no doubt inspired loyalty and commitment from those he placed in power, the rank and file of the bureaucracy were largely educated, middle class citizens who were not, by default, Mubarak supporters. These bureaucrats were not necessarily the governmental elite, but their dissent was noticed and echoed during the protests. Their voices lent a legitimacy to the protesters’ demand that Mubarak step down. In short, the fact that the Mubarak regime operated a large, fairly well educated, and quite meritocratic bureaucracy created a weakness for the regime during the course of the uprising.

Other policies enacted by the Mubarak regime left openings that made the revolution possible. Mubarak underestimated the potency of the people’s anger and perseverance in the face of his intimidation. Like any authoritarian government, the Egyptian government had a measure of control over the lives of private citizens. However, in recent decades the regime had begun to liberalize, as necessitated by pressure from foreign governments. American aid money accounts for a fair portion of the Egyptian government’s revenue, and that money comes with conditions. This liberalization, beginning in the 1990s, was largely experienced in the economy, which will promptly be discussed. The effects of a more economically open society also rippled into the society as a whole as well. While Mubarak’s regime did control state

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26 Nowaira, “Egypt is Still Mubarakstan” 2011
run television, and often suppressed dissent, there was more leniency in Egypt when compared to other authoritarian states of the past. It is in this environment that the introduction of social media could perhaps have a great impact.

**The State of Civil Society**

But first, it is worth mentioning that the development of civil society in Egypt was also foundational to a successful revolt, with or without social media’s assistance. Again, Nasser’s legacy is evident. In an effort to establish a comprehensive education system, and to modernize the economics and politics of Egypt, Nasser left a legacy that enabled civil society to grow by leaps and bounds. Even in authoritarian, theocratic societies, civil society can gain traction, but Nasser’s policies opened up public space in society where academics and intellectuals could, to some extent, be valued. By attempting to achieve a ‘modern’ society that could compete with the West, Nasser valued and nurtured the types of elites that lead to a vibrant civil society. A professional elite of doctors, lawyers, and businesspeople is present in Egyptian society largely as a result of the emphasis on higher education, and the promise of employment that Nasser’s administration implemented. While Nasser’s mostly failed, Communist-inspired economic policies suppressed private sector growth for a long while, he at least laid the groundwork for this potential middle class to be born. In a pre-Nasser Egypt that was largely agricultural and was separated by rampant wealth inequality, this birth of the middle class provided much future potential. Egypt did not follow the path that Nasser had hoped, and the reasons for this have been analyzed often in the academic literature, and will not be recounted here in detail.

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However, the effects of education, press, and economic policies from the 1950s to the 1970s left their mark; Egyptian civil society valued academia and intellectualism enough to enable and retain some semblance of a free public square, even if that public square was attacked by the Mubarak regime before and during the revolution. These professionals may or may not have hoped to form a liberal democracy in lieu of Mubarak’s often oppressive policies, but generally, it is this middle class, educated elite that is aware of victims of oppressive government policies and takes actions to spread the news. For instance, Wael Ghonim gained much fame (or in Mubarak supporters’ eyes, notoriety), during the Egyptian Revolution. Ghonim, a Google engineer based in Cairo, used his website to publicize the murder of a young Egyptian man by police forces. Setting the social media aspect of this story aside for now, one can still see that it is often the educated middle and upper classes that follow these political events and have incentive and desire to change the authoritarian system.

Recalling Putnam’s definition and analysis of concepts like social capital and trust within society, it is easy to see that an environment with some measure of social capital in play is necessary, though not sufficient, for the success of uprisings like that in Egypt. Even in the lower classes, there are relevant leaders that can use the trust of the people to bring about change. Religion is obviously an important factor in a Middle Eastern nation like Egypt. Relationships and networks built through mosques and churches are just as relevant as relationships built through business and professional organizations. While outside observers, mainly from the West, feared

28 El-Mikawy 2001
29 Newton 2001
what a future Egypt might look like if the religious elite led the revolution, these same religious leaders had a role to play in mobilizing the people. As will be shown, social media may have a profound effect on the mobilization and organization of these types of protests, but that does not completely crowd out informal personal networks either. It is in people’s homes and in coffee shops and mosques that people can meet and air their grievances against the government face to face. It is these ‘low level rumblings’ that lay a strong foundation for a successful revolt. And it is only later that the widespread, more broad calls to action have an effect.

**National and International Economy**

As has been observed throughout history, in authoritarian societies and liberal democracies, a lack of economic opportunity for the majority of the population can lead to widespread protests and unrest. This historical pattern holds true in modern Egypt as well. Confronted with few economic opportunities, and seeing little serious action from the government, the Egyptian people took matters into their own hands on January 25th, 2011.

Nasser’s takeover of the Egyptian government via a military coup in 1952 had far reaching ramifications for the economics of the modern nation. Nasser established socialist, sometimes even explicitly Communist policies in the 1950s and 60s with the intention of utilizing Egypt’s full potential by bringing it into the modern era. In addition to education policies mentioned above, Nasser also nationalized many existing Egyptian industries. His nationalization of the Suez Canal is a landmark event in that country, as well as in the West. Social programs established by Nasser
provided some level of a safety net to the poor, accessible education to all, and the political promise of a better, stronger future Egypt. While many of these policies faltered early after their establishment, in the long run Egypt was able to keep its head above water, but only just\textsuperscript{30}. One of the main reasons for the entrenchment of these policies in the long term was oil.

Egypt is not the oil exporting powerhouse that nations on the same scale as nations in the Persian Gulf. However, when the discovery and extraction of oil in Egypt began in the 1980s, the Egyptian government saw the revenue as a way to continue spending on programs that might have otherwise failed. The bureaucracy remained expansive, military and police forces remained large, and the private sector remained stunted. The topic of the ‘resource curse’ that resource rich nations experience is a subject about which there has been much discussion. Egypt, to some extent, fell victim to this ‘resource curse’ in the 1980s, but as the oil boom slowed, it became apparent to both the Egyptian government and the Egyptian people that they could not live off of their oil reserves in the same way Gulf nations were able to do. (Both because the size of Egypt’s oil reserves are smaller, and because Egypt’s population is much larger than that of a nation like Saudi Arabia). This history of unsustainable economic policies manifested itself in the late 1980s and 1990s\textsuperscript{31}, leaving today’s Egypt with a weak economy and a citizenry whose frustration resulted in eventual revolt.

\textsuperscript{30} Posusney 1997
\textsuperscript{31} Winckler 2002; “Following the end of the ‘oil decade’ the Arab economies began to deteriorate
It was the events of the 1990s that shaped the face of Egypt’s economy today. As the oil boom receded, Egypt searched for sources of revenue both inside and outside their borders. Egypt had curried favor with the United States in 1978 by signing the Camp David Accords and establishing peace with the state of Israel. This alliance received much outside support, given the fact that Israel has so few friends in the region. Therefore, when Egypt sought other sources of revenue, America was happy to oblige. During the last ten years, American aid to Egypt has hovered around 1.2 billion dollars a year, mostly for the maintenance of the Egyptian military. One third of the U.S. Foreign Aid budget (in this timeframe) goes to Egypt and Israel, as an incentive to keep the peace established in 1978. In addition, Egypt relies quite heavily upon loans and grants from other nations and institutions. Post-revolution Egypt currently holds $10.8 billion dollars in loans from various sources, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the European Union. This foreign aid money is, as one would expect, such a large amount of money that withdrawal of it would affect the Egyptian economy profoundly.\footnote{Jamal 2005; “Political economic realities like rentierism and soft budget foreign aid – both bound up with mind-boggling levels of unemployment – favor authoritarian consolidation in favor of private sector development” 545}

This reliance on foreign aid money affected Egypt’s economy and politics much differently than its reliance on oil revenue in the 1970s. Receiving loans from the International Financial Institutions (the World Bank and International Monetary Fund) are contingent upon meeting certain requirements or goals. For example, when the I.M.F. grants funding, the receiving country must show that it is making progress in areas such as liberalizing their economy through freeing up markets, or liberalizing
politics through ensuring human rights such as freedom of speech and assembly. In short, the I.F.I.s incentivize economic and political liberalization through granting loans of various amounts to governments that have financial shortfalls. While Egypt had been reliant on financial support from Britain in the past, with the post-war establishment of the I.M.F. and World Bank, they began appealing to the international community at large for funding with varying success.

The International Financial Institutions have been criticized for forcing economic and political reforms on countries that may not be ‘ready’ for them; a criticism that may be applicable to Egypt. Demanding that a country liberalize its economic structure when a country may not have a comprehensive economic plan for the future can lead to long term problems. In the 1970s Egypt used its oil revenue to attempt to establish manufacturing and production centers in the country. Nasser had attempted this as well in the 1960s, with little success. This attempt to jump start the Egyptian economy through oil revenue might have been successful, but Egypt did not choose to develop industries that would be sustainable without oil revenue; industries where they would have a comparative advantage. Therefore, these industries survived only for a short while in the 1970s and into the 80s before failing miserably. It was at this point that Egypt became even more reliant on the International Financial Institutions in general, and the United States in specific.

Again, the Camp David Accords again complicate this financial picture. Bilateral aid from the United States does not come with the same ‘strings attached’ as do I.M.F. funds. U.S bilateral aid to Egypt (and Israel, for that matter), goes largely to

Winckler 2002, CIA World Factbook 2012
the military and security forces, in order to keep the peace between the Arab world and Israel. Whereas I.M.F. funding is contingent upon liberalizing economics and politics, U.S. aid has no such formal requirements. It is true that the U.S. would likely have preferred the Mubarak regime to transform into a less authoritarian state, but the cost of pushing such reforms too hard and fast was potentially high. The Mubarak regime, while an undesirably ally in some ways, was a stable presence in the Middle East. As long as Mubarak was in power, the U.S. could rest assured that Egypt would remain at peace with Israel. The U.S. government no doubt encouraged Mubarak to follow the roadmap to liberalization that the I.M.F. and other provided, but American aid would flow to Egypt regardless of their political policies. It is not only Egypt that has likely used U.S. aid money to repress their own people, but the consequences of providing ‘free’ money to a repressive regime like Mubarak’s are morally ambiguous at best.

This relationship between international and American funding provided perverse incentives to the Mubarak regime. These incentives, and their ramifications for the state of the modern Egyptian economy, played a significant role in sparking the January 25th Revolution. During the post-oil years of the 1990s, the Egyptian government did begin to follow the prescriptions of the International Financial Institutions. Instead of producing goods at home, the government encouraged an economy open to the world in the hope that free trade would be a better route to long term growth. Instead, the Egyptian economy suffered. Most recently, Egypt’s trade

34 Elkin, “Loans to Egypt Hinge on Democracy Issues” 2012
35 Elkin, “Loans to Egypt Hinge on Democracy Issues” 2012; Since the revolution, the US has started using bilateral aid to incentivize the development of democracy, but this is a new development
deficit has grown dramatically\textsuperscript{36}; a deficit that hovered around $2 billion dollars in the early 2000s more than tripled when the global markets suffered in 2008. The I.M.F. encouraged Egypt to open its economy to the world only about two decades before the world economy collapsed. In a country as initially as weak as Egypt, this more open economy had an even more profound negative effect than in the more developed countries of the West. Other I.M.F. prescriptions had included minimizing the public sector, which had an impact at unemployment when the country could least afford it. It is worth noting that by shrinking the public sector, Mubarak alienated some that were loyal to the regime because of their government employment. Unemployment in the private and public sectors both rose, as the private sector did not develop at a fast enough pace to offset the shrinking public sector. In short, the limitations that the World Bank and International Monetary Fund placed on the Egyptian government were not enacted with regards to the larger economic picture. At the same time, the size of the military and police forces remained unchanged, as American money continued to flow into Egypt. The result of international aid money was a weaker economy, battered bureaucracy and middle class, and a strengthened military force\textsuperscript{37}. These same policies that so strengthened Mubarak’s hand may have had a role in the eventual revolt by the Egyptian people.

\textbf{Syria}

The government, politics, and economics of Syria are significantly different from those of Egypt; a fact that has been reflected in the stark contrast in their

\textsuperscript{36} TradingEconomics.com 2012, CIA World Factbook 2012

\textsuperscript{37} Jamal 2005, Huber, Rueschemeyer and Stephens 1993
respective revolutions. While there was most certainly conflict and violence during
the Egyptian revolution, that unrest was nothing compared to the long-running, deadly
campaigns the Syrian military has been executing against its citizens. This wide
variance in the two countries’ circumstances also has consequences for how and when
social media is used, as will be discussed later.

Political Structure and Policy

Syria is, like an Egypt, an authoritarian state. Unlike Egypt, though, the Syrian
rulers have arguably done a better job of integrating some liberal tenants of democracy
and representation into their government while maintaining strong authoritarian rule.
This is partly a result of the political structure that was set up by Hafiz al-Assad.

Hafiz al-Assad gained power in 1971, after two decades of political unrest following
Syrian independence from France. The government that he established in the 1970s
was extremely authoritarian. However, in the decades since, the political structure has
become at least superficially more inclusive, accessible, and responsive.

The Assad family members are all members of a Shi’a sect of Islam called the
Alawis, or Alawites. As in the other Arab states, religion has a strong role in Syrian
politics. But in Syria, the Assad family are in the religious minority. While eighty
seven percent of the country citizens are Muslim, the Alawite sect makes up only
twelve percent of Syrian Muslims. On top of that, the majority of Syrian Muslims are
Sunni, not Shi’a. This puts the Assad family in a much different position than a
leader like Mubarak. From the beginning, Hafiz al-Assad installed Alawites in the
higher levels of political and military power. The lower level career bureaucrats and

38 CIA World Factbook: Syria 2012
rank and file military, however, are largely Sunni Muslims. The fact that so much of the power lies in the hands of the Alawites has not escaped notice, but neither has it been an overly contentious topic of discussion. In fact, it is because of this power distribution, along with other factors, that has resulted in a Syria that allows for the rights of minorities (at least in comparison to many other authoritarian regimes)\(^{39}\). Because the Alawites, as a minority, hold the power, it has been advantageous for the Assad regime to also uphold the rights of other minorities. While not all minorities have fared as well as the Alawites, the Christian minority in Syria has an established place in society.

The regime has also sought to gain legitimacy through other avenues. A large portion of Syria’s economy is centered around agriculture\(^{40}\). The Assad regime made a concerted effort to gain the loyalty of peasant farmers, who at the time made up approximately a quarter of the labor force. Even now, farmers are a significant proportion of the population. Assad, like Mubarak, rules over an expansive government bureaucracy. Here, too, the bureaucracy ensures some level of stability during periods of peace, but does not assure support for the regime during this current period of unrest. Career bureaucrats may not abandon support for a political regime that has provided well-paying employment, but neither will they forget the fact that they are bureaucrats locked in an authoritarian system where they could only advance so far.

\(^{39}\) Hanano 2011, Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004  
\(^{40}\) CIA World Factbook: Syria 2012
The Syrian regime, again like Egypt, attempts to portray itself as responsive and democratic, when in reality the Assad family rules by whim. The nation has does have a Parliament and appointed ministers, but any semblance of true representation falls under the control of the Assad family. Through presenting itself as such, however, the regime maintains some level of legitimacy with the people. For example, Assad can shuffle around the ministers in the cabinet, which is in reality only a good publicity mood that achieves very little real change.

Lastly, the Syrian government largely allowed for a professional middle class to develop fairly unhindered. While this policy choice also had to do with the nation’s economic state, remaining ‘hands-off’ about private, professional groups allowed for some measure of support from the non-military and non-bureaucratic elite. The Assad regime allowed resources such as oil revenues to be used in the development of a diverse services sector, instead of devoting those funds exclusively to government projects and military buildup.

The State of Civil Society

As suggested above, Syria (until the revolution) had a flourishing civil society. Syria is a country with a long and rich history, and this fact is reflected in the attitudes of both the Syrian government and people. Damascus is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, and the citizens of the Arab world regard it as one of the cultural centers of the region. While it is obvious that an authoritarian ruler could merely ignore this legacy, the Assad regime has tried to strike some semblance of balance. Authoritarian rulers can be simultaneously brutal and proud of

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41 Hanano, “Framing Syria” 2011
their country’s history and culture. Even if the regime had the ulterior motive of retaining the support of the public, the result is the same; civil society has been allowed some room to develop.

Assad’s economic strategy also has some bearing on the development of civil society. Unlike Egypt, or for that matter many of the countries in the Middle East, Syria has fairly successfully diversified its economy. While this has ramifications for many areas of Syrian life, one of the most valuable effects is the growth of Syrian civil society. Syria’s main industries are manufacturing and agriculture, which together (in recent years) make up about a third of the economy. Oil exports, which fuel the Syrian economy, are truly what allow for an economy where nearly two thirds of GDP is derived from the service sector. Whereas oil-poor countries like Jordan and Tunisia suffer for lack of revenues and oil-rich nations like Saudi Arabia and Iran often abuse unlimited revenue, in Syria these revenues have had an arguably more positive effect. There is still a persistently large wealth gap in Syria, but these oil revenues allow for the development of a professional class of educated Syrians, many of whom are not fooled by the attempts by the Assad government to portray itself as a legitimate representative democracy. While the presence of an educated elite or middle class is not alone a cause of unrest, once events are set into motion, the presence of such an elite that can lead, mobilize, and publicize the revolt is an asset.

National and International Economy

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CIA World Factbook: Syria; 2012
Salamandra, “Prelude to an Uprising: Syrian Fictional Television and Socio-Political Critique” 2012
Watenpaugh, 2006
The domestic economy of Syria is quite unique within the Middle East. Oil-exporting countries in the Gulf are, whether they like it or not, extremely dependent on their buyers. As was demonstrated in 1973 during the OPEC embargo, these nations cannot very well afford to cut off supply. Other nations like Jordan and Egypt are reliant on foreign aid from various sources; be it from the International Financial Institutions or from bilateral agreements. Syria is different. While Syria does receive some foreign aid money, it is not nearly as reliant on it as many of its neighbors.

As mentioned earlier, Syria has done a respectable job of diversifying its economy, and using its own funds to do so. In fact, within the decade or so, Syria has developed a sizeable, stable banking sector. Damascus’ status as a cultural hub in the region attracts tourists in droves. The tourism industry accounted for slightly less than ten percent of Syria’s GDP in recent years. The service industry makes up around two thirds of GDP, but agriculture still accounts for nearly twenty percent as well. In short, Syria has built a fairly stable and insulated economy, which isolates it from many political pressures that the West might use to influence policy. The government highly regulates the economy through tools such as subsidizes and barriers to foreign trade. While the Syrian economy is far behind the Gulf States in GDP per capita measures, Syria is one of the few countries in the region that has maintained a stable or growing economy without interacting with the rest of the world economically. This incremental growth, along with largely superficial government reforms, has made for a politically stable nation. Anti-government dissent is certainly present, but it is quickly quashed. As has been seen even in America today, it is a
shrinking pocketbook that often results in some political awareness or unrest. The Assad regime had largely avoided that cause of unrest, at least.

At the beginning of the Syrian uprising in April of 2011, one of the first political tools proposed by the U.N. was economic sanctions. These sanctions could not have worked effectively in a country that had done a fairly effective job of sealing off its economy from the global markets. While this economic isolation may not have had a strong bearing on the Syrian citizens’ attitude towards the government at the beginning, the insular nature of the Syrian economy is relevant to the ongoing conflict. Very recently, outside players such as the United States and Saudi Arabia have debated taking action to supply the opposition. The preexisting insular economy has not lent itself well to quick action, as supply lines and logistics take time to form. Essentially, the isolation of the Syrian economy worked fairly well for the advancement of Assad’s agenda and policies, but is presenting its own problems during the ongoing revolution.

**Jordan**

The Middle Eastern nation of Jordan experienced some unrest during the spring of 2011, but, unlike in Egypt, Tunisia, and other countries, the nation saw no regime change. Jordan is similar in some ways to both Egypt and Syria, but also has its own unique characteristics. In the rush to group Jordan in with Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and other nations experiencing unrest, the global media often failed to discuss Jordan’s distinctive circumstances. Why did Jordan remain stable, while so many other countries in the region suffered such unrest?
Political Structure and Policy

Jordan has maintained some measure of stability while the region as a whole experienced unrest in part due to its political structure\(^45\). Like Syria, Jordan has an elected Parliament, although cabinet level ministers are appointed by the king of Jordan, King Abdullah II. The Prime Minister is also appointed by the king. This structure allows for the king to essentially blame political and economic problems on the ministers, and then to fire them, thus deflecting the blame. However, as a result of the protests, King Abdullah no longer appoints cabinet members. Since 2009, Jordan has had four Prime Ministers, three of whom served in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in February 2011\(^46\). Jordan, like any other nation, has had its share of political and economic problems, but the legitimacy of the king’s rule endures, even after suffering some close calls.

While there are many factors at play, there are some key differences that separate Jordan from other Arab states. Unlike Syria, Jordan does not place a minority in power. However, the government of Jordan is, like most semi-authoritarian states, fairly corrupt\(^47\). This is taken for granted by most of the populace, but at least the corruption is concentrated in the upper class instead of a religious minority.

The elite of Jordan are mostly defined by economic status, not religious sect or ethnicity. Like many developing countries, there is a sizeable wealth gap in Jordan. Many live in abject poverty, while the upper class lives a rather lavish lifestyle. The government has enacted policies such as subsidies on food and gas to assist the very

\(^{45}\) Pelham, “Jordan’s Balancing Act” 2011  
\(^{46}\) Black, “Jordan’s MPs Play Musical Chairs as the Arab Spring Rages Outside” 2011  
\(^{47}\) Pelham, “Jordan’s Balancing Act” 2011,
poor, but these policies could easily be viewed as a cynical ploy to keep the people happy and politically unaware. The Jordanian government has tried to diversify its economy in the same manner that Syria had, but Jordan does not have as many natural advantages\textsuperscript{48}. Even so, the government has privatized formerly state owned enterprises, with much financial success. Agriculture is not a viable option, and while resource extraction is a significant industry, Jordan is not an oil-exporting state. This necessitates the development of other industries.

Since Jordan is not in a position to rely on oil revenues like many of its neighbors, the country’s leadership has also embarked on a path of some liberalization in order to stay stable. Often, many attribute some of Jordan’s liberal policies to the personality of King Abdullah II. Abdullah was educated in the West, as was his father. Both men espouse liberal political ideals on the world stage, and this is, to some extent, reflected in the Jordanian government. While press is still restricted, criticisms of Parliament and their policies are published often. Jordan was not completely unfamiliar with protests before the Arab Spring, either. In a country that does possess an educated elite, the king has had to enact some liberal reforms, whether he genuinely wished to or not.

**The State of Civil Society**

Jordan, like Egypt and Syria, has a fairly developed civil society, especially when compared to some poverty stricken countries in the region. The Jordanian economy has played a role in the development of civil society. As in the case of Syria,

\textsuperscript{48} CIA World Factbook: Jordan, 2012: Economy overview details lack of oil or significant natural resources and lack of much industry or agriculture
the development of a diverse economy is important to the formation of civil society. Since King Abdullah II’s ascension to the throne, Jordan has enjoyed economic and cultural growth, and has backed up his rhetorical support of the arts with government funds on many occasions. While there are numerous private sector establishments and sources of funding for cultural events, the arts are also nurtured through government funds and indirectly through the maintenance of universities.

King Abdullah II, and his father before him, placed a measure of emphasis on the arts and education that exceeded many of their neighbors’ commitments. This emphasis has resulted in a skilled workforce that enables the development of both industrial sectors and cultural pursuits. Amman may not be the renowned cultural center that Damascus is, but the Jordanian nation has maintained its national and cultural pride just as passionately as the Syrians. Middle class, educated Jordanians have more options than some other citizens of the region when it comes to participation in non-governmental groups centered on business, culture, or religion\textsuperscript{49}. Religion obviously plays a large part in the average Jordanian’s life, but the Christian minority in Jordan also has cemented rights and freedoms. It is perhaps because of these freedoms, which all Jordanians enjoy, that Jordan experienced unrest but no outright regime change during the Arab Spring.

**National and International Economy**

The presence of a more liberal government in Jordan has also resulted in fairly liberal markets in the country. However, unlike many Arab nations, Jordan does not export oil, and therefore receives its revenue from other sources.

\textsuperscript{49} Watenpaugh, 2006
Jordan is quite reliant upon foreign aid, both from the International Financial Institutions, and from bilateral agreements with Western nations. Jordan has maintained peace with Israel as well, and is well rewarded with foreign aid monies from the U.S. and others. Jordan does possess sizeable military and police forces, but the foreign aid goes to other sectors of the economy as well. Jordan’s environmental problems have been addressed through aid as well. Jordan is an extremely water poor nation, thus the emphasis on environmental conservation and preservation. In short, it is not that foreign aid has been necessarily distributed differently to Arab nations that results in different uses. It is the political structure and the decisions made by a nation’s leaders that determine whether or not the aid money is abused. King Abdullah II has a very different set of priorities than many in the region, and is also not as despotic as some of those leaders. There is a measure of accountability that comes with the presence of an elected Parliament, and with the existence of an educated elite that is politically active. While aid funding has not alleviated Jordan’s problems, it has not exacerbated potential political abuses of power as badly as it might have done.

Jordan still faces the problem of wealth inequality and fairly widespread poverty. Jordanians, like Egyptians, have experienced the dark side of open, free markets in many ways, but protectionist economic policies will not solve anything either. Government policies such as the tax system often only worsen this inequality. For example, a sizeable tax on imported goods is paid by everyone, rich or poor. But the income tax is often only paid by citizens of poor or middle income. The wealthy
have political connections, and there is little incentive for the elites in the government to impose penalties for those who do not pay. Even the poorest of the poor must pay the ‘Value Added Tax’ on imports, while the elite pay that tax and only that tax. In a nation that relies heavily on imports in all sectors, this structure only exacerbates some of the economic problems in Jordan. This inequality that is only perpetuated by government breeds some level of unrest, as incomes and lack of job opportunities for a fair portion of the populace results in many discontented citizens.

There are some signs of hope, however. King Abdullah has built a sustained partnership with the United States with regards to economic development. One successful joint project created 26,000 jobs in Jordan and the U.S. has doubled foreign investment since 2002\textsuperscript{50}. Even before the Arab Spring, observers noted that Jordan’s economy has some measure of potential. Political policies have assisted Jordan’s economy on getting on its feet. Hopefully the trend will continue into the future.

Comparisons Across Borders

Egypt, Syria, and Jordan experienced unrest, but for varying reasons. The leaders of the three countries sometimes acted similarly to respond to problems on the ground, but because of differing circumstances, their actions were not always effective. For example, all three nations had, to some extent, attempted to liberalize the government, but each leader’s personal reasoning, and constraining circumstances, were different. Egypt and Jordan both liberalized in part because of their reliance on outside aid, while Syria did not feel these pressures. Instead, because of Syria’s political structure that kept the Alawite minority in power, Assad was forced to

\textsuperscript{50} Jamal 2005
liberalize the government to protect minorities in general. However, one can see from the ongoing uprising in Syria that despite some liberal reforms, Assad still holds the power of a brutal authoritarian state. The political structures and policy of these three respective nations had a profound influence on the probability of success for the protesters.

Civil society in Egypt, Syria, and Jordan is actually a variable that the three nations differ in the least. When compared to the Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, U.A.E.) or North African states (Libya), these three countries can appear very similar. They all three have a fairly educated populace, a middle class, and intellectual and secular groups. The state of politics in each nation has a profound effect here, as a vibrant civil society lends itself to an inquiring populace. In short, the presence of a strong civil society makes for “good citizens” who question the government, demand change, and actually have the resources to achieve it. The Jordanian government was more responsive to these demands and had engaged in some measure of reform and liberalization even before the Arab Spring. While some Jordanians still have many reforms they would like to see enacted, the majority do not want regime change. It is this dialogue between an educated, engaged civil society and the government that was missing in Egypt and Syria, and made all the difference in Jordan. The engaged citizens of these nations spearheaded uprisings that have achieved lasting change for the region.

Lastly, the economics of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan were a major impetus for the uprisings. Like many developing nations, these countries had great wealth inequality,
high unemployment, and faltering domestic economies. Syria’s economy was in a better state than Egypt’s or Jordan’s because of autarkic government policies, but the effects of growth were not felt by many outside of the elite. The current demographics of the Arab World, where a majority of the population is very young, causes economic problems even in thriving economies. The problem of unemployment is exacerbated when these unemployed youth have pursued education and still cannot obtain jobs, and by the fact that ever growing numbers of women are joining the labor force of the Arab world. In effect, the informed elite that have the resources and desire to question the government is augmented by educated and frustrated youth. While the economics of these nations have many ramifications described above, it is the problem of unemployment and an increasing cost of living that causes the frustrations seen in the Arab Spring uprisings. The structure of these three economies is greatly influenced by their governments, and as such this brings about dissent against these governments. In the year since the Egyptian Revolution, youth concerns have turned from wishing to live in a democracy to the rising costs of living. These economic problems will not disappear overnight, but at least, after regime change, the people’s voices might be heard.

In Review

Hopefully the above case studies demonstrate some of the motivations of the protesters on the streets during the Arab Spring. As the Arab Spring revolutions unfolded, the global media often grouped many nations together when discussing the

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51 Jamal 2005  
52 Winckler 2002  
53 Arab Youth Survey, May 2012
causes and possible outcomes of the protests. However, these mainstream media outlets often overlooked the individual circumstances of the various countries that experienced unrest. There is no doubt that the protests in the region provided some inspiration and motivation to neighboring nations, or that there are similarities in politics, economics, and civil society of these countries. However, it is through examining the specific circumstances that these varied nations face that we can understand why these uprisings happened, and what the future may hold for these newly formed governments.
Chapter 3
Social Media as a Tool for Democratization

The creation and widespread use of the internet has been hailed by academics and laymen alike as a mechanism to achieve greatly societal equality and fairness. This belief that the internet would change the balance of power in society has its merit, but as governments and despots gain more familiarity with the technology, some of these optimistic beliefs have not proven true. What, though, does the internet bring to the table that other forms of communication have been unable to? The theory and practice of internet usage has earned itself a place in the previously existing academic literature, which provides a prism through which one can view the actual, practical uses of the internet during the Arab Spring uprisings.

The internet has achieved the function of the ‘great equalizer’ in some sense. Though discussing the implications of internet adoption across the globe is an immense topic to tackle, it is worth noting in passing that the internet has had profound effects on nearly every area of life in every country in the world. The internet has most certainly left a mark on how governments function and make policy, how business is conducted, and how people interact with each other. While undoubtedly the internet has played a role in government and economics, it is its role in interpersonal communication and organization that is most relevant when analyzing the Arab Spring.

With the internet came an enormous expansion in the size and scope of the public square. While in the past people built their networks in mainly face to face
interaction, now they have other options. Instead of holding a conversation at a coffee shop, one can sit at home but still find the time to communicate with friends, family, and even strangers. Instead of passing out flyers to publicize an event, one can create it on Facebook, and invite a broader range of people at no cost. Social media sites like Twitter and Facebook are the first outlets that come to mind, but message boards and community websites exist all across the internet, dealing with a multitude of different topics. The internet can even expand existing in person networks. For example, Facebook ‘fans’ of a certain physical place (a local business, a museum, etc) can meet and interact in person or on the site when they discover they have mutual interests\textsuperscript{54}. Conversely, one can create and maintain friendships with people across the globe easily. In short, the internet expanded the boundaries that formerly limited the social circles in which people moved. Obviously socially constructed boundaries still exist, but for those with open and curious minds, the internet is an avenue through which people can share their life stories and experiences. When one can experience a level of empathy and understanding for someone a half a world away, society undergoes major lasting change

The internet enables not only the sharing of personal stories, but also the spread of other forms of information. The accessibility of news media in the internet age is a tool that should not be underestimated. While the internet is sometimes a double edged sword in this regard, when utilized correctly the internet is invaluable for citizens seeking information. For example, in nations where freedom of the

\textsuperscript{54} Passy and Giugni (2001) describe the significance of in person networking on the intensity and effectiveness of social movements, and social media can facilitate these meetings
mainstream press is limited, the internet can be a source for unofficial, but accurate news. Personal and professional blogs can document stories that mainstream outlets cannot. Freelance writers have a cheap and easily accessible medium through which to have their voices heard. And lastly, the capacity for individuals to have their stories and concerns gain traction is much higher in the internet age. Abuses of power that may have gone unnoticed before are exposed, as oppressive regimes have difficulty in internet content. Not that they haven’t tried; China, Iran, and others have focused resources on quashing unflattering stories that appear on the internet. Even in nations that have very strong and established press freedoms, the internet is an essential democratic tool, shedding light on abuses that go ignored by the mainstream news outlets and allowing freelancers and amateurs to be heard.

The internet is also valuable as an informational tool outside of hard news. While accessibility to news stories may have important ramifications for countries transitioning to democracy, accessibility to other information is essential as well. Information about everyday life in other nations, the international economy, pop culture, and other varied topics can help to make global citizens of people living under oppressive regimes. The exchange of ideas has been facilitated by the internet, and this exchange only continues on the ground in face-to-face conversations. The expansion of the public square enables a degree of empathy and understanding that was previously impossible, and is an important channel of information when examining social movements like the Arab Spring.
Social media sites lessen the transaction costs of communication in general, but also organizing and mobilizing people in specific. Through social media, an organizer can make and share events with ease, and reach hundreds or thousands of people with one click. Instead of making and handing out fliers or holding meetings, one can publicize or advance a cause for free. And, given the interconnected nature of social media sites, this publicity can spread quickly and easily in a chain reaction of event invites and video shares. The message potentially reaches a different segment of people than it would in the physical world, which the end goal being to information and mobilize a broad based group of citizens.

This accessibility does present some problems, however. The rising awareness of the term ‘slactivism’ in the mainstream demonstrates how social media overload can desensitize people to activists’ causes. Citizens on social media sites feel as if they have made a difference with a click of the mouse, and that they have done their part, when in reality the minute that they took out of their lives had little lasting impact. In this way, it seems that social media may be more viable as an information sharing tool, but not necessarily a tool for mobilization. However, the fact that the message and information is able to reach more people lends hope to the situation. Only a few in thousands will be motivated to take action that makes a lasting change, but if social media enables passionate people to get their message out to the masses, in the end more people will be aware of or active in the movement.

On a similar note, the internet and social media have been criticized as facilitators of self-selection. While social networks can enable people to meet others
from vastly different walks of life, this is often not the actual case. Often, people continue to interact with mainly people of their social strata who possess similar backgrounds as well. Social media have not broken the bonds of class, race, and geographic distance as effectively as many believe at first glance. Internet users self-select the people who they wish to interact with, the causes they believe in, the news they read; they create an environment in which they are comfortable. This comfort sometimes leads to an unawareness of the problems that many others feel passionate about. When attempting to mobilize people from many classes, cities, and walks of life, it is this ‘bubble’ that must be overcome. Social media has the potential to reach and mobilize diverse groups, but too often it enables people to retreat into their comfort zones and never leave.

Lastly, the internet can be a tool to promote governmental change, but that usage is dependent on external factors. Much has been made of the importance of internet penetration (availability, common use, etc) in the academic literature, but recently researchers have been attempting to look at other, less tangible factors. For example, recently the research on the effects of citizens’ ingrained attitudes about government has garnered attention, in lieu of research about internet penetration. While internet penetration is often positively correlated with a higher level of democracy, it may instead be the case that internet penetration and usage is partially dependent on countries’ existing democratic institutions. In short, the presence of the internet and social media does have a role to play, but the already existing attitudes of the citizenry have a bearing on to what extent the internet can facilitate
democratization. This research demonstrates “…the potential of the internet, especially when paired with organizations such as political parties or movements, to promote the formation of “mass” public opinion that demands political change within authoritarian or democratizing states”\textsuperscript{55}.

All of these aspects of social media are important when it comes to understanding the media’s role in the Arab Spring uprisings. It is through this rosy prism of social media that much of the Western media viewed the uprisings. When in reality many a cable news anchor ignored or glossed over the history and circumstances of the countries in revolt, they additionally ignored the shortcomings of social media as an organizational tool.

\textsuperscript{55} Nisbet, Stoycheff, and Pearce, 2012
Chapter 4

The Use of Social Media During the Arab Spring Revolutions

Senior Google executive Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian citizen, was on the ground participating in the Egyptian Revolution from the very start. As a Google engineer, he realized the power that the internet could have in spreading information and mobilizing protesters. In an interview after Mubarak’s fall, Ghonim expressed his appreciation for the role Facebook played in the protests, saying; “This revolution started online. This revolution started on Facebook. This revolution started in June 2010 when hundreds of thousands of Egyptians started collaborating on content. We would post a video on Facebook that would be shared by 60,000 people on their walls in a few hours. I always said that if you want to liberate a society just give them the internet.”

While this view is widely embraced by many, it does appear that the internet is more effective in some circumstances and societies than in others. For example, access to the internet is the first obstacle to overcome; literacy is another. Societal attitudes and standards, government interference, and affordability also matter. The internet can liberate a society, but that same internet does not truly represent a democratic force unless access to it is easy and fairly universal, and the citizenry of that society have the resources to take advantage of the technology. As a rule, these factors influence strongly the attitudes that citizens develop about their system of government, and that in turn can now be voiced via social media.

Surveys of Arab youth conducted in 2011 showed that the youth in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya ranked ‘living in a democratic country’ as a major concern to them.

Hudson, “Thank You, Facebook: The Social Network as Mideast Hero” 2011
(The average number that stated that was an important concern was 68%, while Egypt, Tunisia and Libya were all significantly above 70%). As these countries are demographically very young, it is the sentiments of the youth that is an important indicator of where these nations are heading. 32% of Egypt’s population is under the age of fourteen, and the median age in Egypt is twenty four. And this demographic structure is not unique to Egypt. While this demographic structure has ramifications for many areas of life in the Middle East, there are also implications for internet usage and the average Egyptian’s role as a citizen in the coming future.

However, the current “Facebook generation” has left its mark already, even as new generations are being raised to know the internet from an early age. Before delving into the circumstances of specific countries, it is worth noting that this “Facebook generation” that helped to bring about the Arab Spring is not the majority in any of these nations. The youth may dominate the Middle East demographically, but the very fact that they make up such a percentage of the population makes it impossible to describe their views and concerns in monolithic terms. The youth that are active on the internet, are educated, and that support the formation of a liberal democracy do not make up the majority, but are the best at making sure their voices are heard. The fact that these youth do not make up the majority is reflected in the results of Egypt’s recent democratic elections (May 23, 24 2012), where no liberal, secular candidate made it to the presidential election run-off. The majority of Egyptians used their voice at the ballot box, not via a Twitter account.

Egypt
The origins of the Arab Spring in Egypt began long before January of 2011; it began even online even before the uprising in Tunisia. Wael Ghonim, the Google engineer quoted above, had an important role in turning social media into a mobilizing force against the regime. On June 8, 2010, Ghonim happened upon a photo online. The photo showed a young man, Khaled Said, who had been beaten to death by the Egyptian police. This brutal act galvanized Ghonim to action. He created a Facebook page titled “We Are All Khaled Said,” and with that, he provided a forum through which citizens could express their outrage against the regime. Through this group, citizens began organizing protests and rallies to express their outrage in a more conventional way. The day that the protests in Tahrir Square began, Ghonim’s Facebook group had called for a “Day of Rage.” While certainly not every protester had joined the Facebook event, the “Day of Rage” is what inspired the long running protests that led to Mubarak ouster.

It was during the protests that the choices of the Mubarak regime helped to determine, in part, how effectively social media could help the protesters. The Mubarak regime cut wireless and telephone access during the first days of the protests, but only in Tahrir Square and the surrounding areas. Protesters could still mobilize using other the internet from home or another part of the city, and meet in person at Tahrir. It is in this sense that the public square is simultaneously digital and physical. The key difference between the digital and physical is the level of influence that the Mubarak regime had over one, but not the other. While the military and police could harass the protesters in Tahrir Square, controlling the internet posed a much more

57 Hudson, “Thank You, Facebook: The Social Network as Mideast Hero” 2011
difficult problem for the regime. In fact, Mubarak’s efforts to infiltrate social networks were so clumsy that the regime’s efforts were ridiculed by protesters. When the regime eventually restored full internet access to protesters in Tahrir, it became obvious that Mubarak was making a heavy handed attempt to spread propaganda through Facebook. For instance, there are numerous anecdotes of protesters who, after the beginning of the protests, were ‘friended’ by or conversed via Facebook with supporters of the regime through what appeared to be fake profiles. There are also multiple instances of protesters’ Facebook profiles being hacked, and then modified to make it seem that the protesters supported Mubarak. In essence, Mubarak attempted to take the fight to the protesters online, but the efforts were so insincere or obviously orchestrated by the regime that it only encouraged more unrest.

Many commentators point to the moment when the Mubarak regime restored the internet as the choice that led to the revolution’s success. While the use of the internet made an invaluable impact, it is important to understand why the internet was invaluable. The expansion of the “public square” and the limited control that the regime exercised over the virtual public square enabled citizens to collectively start questioning the priorities of the regime\textsuperscript{58}. However, if not for the underlying factors discussed above, the frustration that the internet so effectively channeled and magnified may not have been present at all. The revolution may have started online, but it is the internet’s capacity as a forum that can encourage people to still take action in the physical world that is invaluable.

\textsuperscript{58} Nowaira, “Egypt is Still Mubarakstan” 2011 examines Mubarak’s attempts to propagandize online during the protests.
Syria

There are many differences from Egypt regarding both the circumstances that led to the occurrence of the Syrian uprising, and the use of the internet throughout the revolution. In fact, cell phone technology, not internet, is responsible for helping the movement gather momentum. The first protests of the Syrian uprising happened in the city of Daraa, which is located in the south of Syria close to the Jordanian border. Fifteen children between the ages of nine and fourteen had painted anti-regime messages on buildings in the city, and were consequently arrested by Syrian police forces. The people of the city rose up in protest at the treatment of these children while they were held by the police forces. Interestingly, it was here, at the beginning of the revolution, that cell phones played a significant role. Unlike Mubarak, Assad was quick to cut off internet and cell phone access to Daraa and the surrounding area. However, Jordanian cellular phone service was still available in the city, and the residents utilized the service to mobilize and communicate plans for protests\(^59\). Even with the military crackdown that swiftly ensued, the people had the courage to continue protests against the oppressive policies that they endured daily. Many commentators have pointed to cell phone communication as an instrumental technology when it came to maintaining the courage and perseverance necessary to spark the revolution that consumes the country today.

A year into the revolution, it has become evident that the use of the internet in the Syrian revolution is unique when compared to other nations. In part, this is because of the Assad regime’s swift action in disabling the internet in regions that

\(^{59}\) Salamandra, “Prelude to an Uprising: Syrian Fictional Television and Socio-Political Critique” 2012
experienced unrest. Syrians used the internet to express dissent against the regime, and to a certain extent to mobilize, but this was before the unrest across the country scared the Assad regime into cutting off the internet entirely in large swaths of the nation. Presently, most of the nation cannot access the internet, especially outside of the major cities of Syria. Because of this lack of internet, it has been less of a tool for mobilization and more of a tool for publicity. While reporters have bravely ventured into Syria to report first hand despite a ban by the Assad regime, much of the video and accounts of events on the ground have come from Syrian citizens and rebels who have managed to cobble together an internet connection independently. These videos and stories are increasingly aimed at governments and citizens abroad, as rebels appeal for outside assistance. No doubt Syrians with internet access can view these reports as well, and are perhaps motivated to rise up and continue fighting. However, in many instances these videos feature citizens explicitly asking outside nations for assistance in stopping the killings that occur every day. In addition, the citizens that most commonly have access to these makeshift internet connections are rebels in the Syrian Free Army, who lack ammunition and resources that only outsiders could help them obtain. Appealing to the people is important to keep the momentum of the uprising, but the internet is not necessarily the best avenue through which to do that, especially given the frequency with which protests have been taking place. There are alternatives to the internet with regards to mobilizing and organizing, but there is little

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60 Fisher and Keller, “Syria’s Digital Counter-revolutionaries” 2011  
alternative to the internet when it comes to publicizing the atrocities taking place in the country.

Cell phones are again important during this stage of the revolution. Even though cell service is cut off in many parts of the country, the fact that many phones can capture video becomes an invaluable tool, as Assad has banned international journalists. Even now, with the presence of U.N. observers, the ability of the average citizen to capture pictures and video of the military’s actions and post them on YouTube and Facebook has an immeasurable impact. Although the media’s coverage of the initial protests in Egypt focused too often on protesters’ posts on Facebook and Twitter to gauge the uprising, the media has little choice but to pay attention to the relatively small amount of information coming out of Syria. While the internet had achieved its purpose of attracting international attention towards Syria early on in the uprising, the world remains paralyzed. The internet continues to act as a lifeline from the rebels to the outside world, and some movement has been seen on the part of the U.N. and nations across the globe. Hopefully, the utilization of the internet will continue to push the international community harder and harder to take more decisive action. In any event, the media’s oft repeated statement that the internet enabled the Arab Spring seems to be disproven by the fact that the revolution has maintained momentum even despite the limited internet access available to the average Syrian citizen. The virtual square may be an important space for citizens to share thoughts and dissent, but the physical public square can just as effective a venue for such demands.

Jordan

King Abdullah II of Jordan is the exception among these three leaders in that his regime did not make a concerted effort to control dissent in the virtual square. Perhaps this is because the dissent that his regime faced was not as vehemently pro-regime change in many instances. Many of the blogs, Facebook posts, and op-ed articles written by the Jordanian elite sharply criticized the Parliament and cabinet (who at the time were appointed by the King). The King also attracted a share of criticism over the state of the economy, press freedoms, and corruption issues. However, despite the average citizens’ frustration with the level of corruption and ineptitude in the Jordanian government, few people were calling for overthrow of the regime. The virtual public square remained open to everyone in the nation that had internet access, even if they expressed dissent. It should be noted that the wealthier, more educated citizens that often have more consistent internet access when compared to the poor, are those that are more likely to support a more liberal regime. While the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to garner support for their agenda, the educated classes continued to push instead for reform of the existing system. As in Egypt, the youth who grew up with the internet strove to create a more liberal democracy. In Jordan this meant encouraging reform of the current system instead of risking that the ultra-religious segments of the opposition would win out.

The Jordanian case seems to have the most parallels to the internet usage that we see in the States. While Jordan obviously has a multitude of political and social

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63 Black, “Jordan’s MPs Play Musical Chairs as the Arab Spring Rages Outside” 2011
64 Pelham, “Jordan’s Balancing Act” 2011
differences, the internet was used in a similar organizational capacity as seen in social movements in America. The media has made much of the Occupy Movement’s use of social media as a tool to voice dissent and to mobilize protests. The Jordanians also blogged and posted on Facebook about the injustices of their political system and demanded some measure of change, and did achieve some change without the overthrow of the system.

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65 Slaughter, “Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring” 2012
Conclusion

It is sometimes easy to forget that the internet has revolutionized nearly all aspects of life in the modern era. However, when the internet and social media are used in new and perhaps uncommon ways, one is forced to stop and reevaluate the immense impact that this technology has had on the world. This seems to be the case regarding the Arab Spring. Western media, academics, and authoritarian regimes all stood in awe of the effects that social media had on these Middle Eastern populations. There is no doubt that the internet had a profound effect on how the events on the ground in these nations were reported to the rest of the world. Citizen journalists took advantage of social media to share personal stories in a way never before possible.

But has the internet been overestimated in some ways? Through examining the underlying factors that influenced each country’s unrest, it seems that the role of the internet in the Arab Spring may be overblown. The oft voiced view that Facebook and Twitter were explicit causes of the uprisings is a view that ignores the individual features of unique countries. Instead, the internet helped along a series of revolutions that may otherwise have only been rumblings of unrest in segments of the population. Facebook and Twitter acted as facilitators of a movement that had a measure of potential already. In Tunisia, it was the self-immolation of a fruit vendor that triggered national protests, not a Facebook event. In Egypt, the internet provided an unregulated public square where citizens did organize long running protests through Facebook, but it was the underlying factors of political structure, civil society, and economics that were the root causes of the dissent against the regime.
The value of the internet during the Arab Spring was its capacity as a communication tool. Whether citizens were interacting with each other, voicing dissent on blogs, or posting videos for the world to see, it was the dissemination of information that assisted the uprisings. The internet provided a forum that was invaluable to protesters in the early stages of the revolution, but it is the protests in the physical public square that result in a true, and hopefully lasting change.
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