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# FIRE: Agent of Change

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# **FIRE: Agent of Change**

Written by Richard A. Galvin II

**Senior Seminar: Hst 499  
Professor David Doellinger  
Western Oregon University  
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## Introduction

Fire! It changes the shape of things and brings to ashes that which it burns. From those ashes, like a phoenix rising, there is continued hope for renewal and rebirth. While The Arab Uprisings could be shown to have started at many different points in time, the most common place is to say it began on December 17th, 2010 when a Tunisian cart vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi had his vending cart taken away for not having a license. In protest, he set himself on fire, and this was captured in a picture and spread like its own fire through the entire country. This different kind of burning brought out large numbers of Tunisian citizens who also felt betrayed by those who were supposed to protect them and these protesters spread the image of what Bouazizi had done through social media. The chain of events that began with Bouazizi's self immolation and the spread of this image, led President Ben Ali to flee almost a month later in what was called The Jasmine Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

Self immolation protests have been used over the course of history for expressions of personal protest and religious persecution,<sup>2</sup> but more recent ones have been focused on political protest and been chained to revolution as in Tunisia. Even in the face of constant harassment and repression, Mohamed Bouazizi was a compassionate man. He chose to react with violence on no one but himself in response to the harassment he had experienced all his life. Having used every channel of complaint available to him and receiving no respite from his woes, Mohamed Bouazizi self immolated. Social networks are not a new thing, but the addition of social media to social networks is, and the incredibly visual image of his burning as well as video of violent reaction from security forces on the very first protests by his friends and family were uploaded to Twitter and Facebook and told the story in an almost minute by minute accounting of the beginnings of a

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<sup>1</sup>James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings, What Everyone Needs to Know*, (New York: University Press, 2004), pg 43.

<sup>2</sup>James Benn, *Burning for Buddha: Self Immolation in Chinese Buddhism*, (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

revolution.<sup>3</sup> Without the social media component there would not have been a Tunisian revolution for there would have been no Twitter to upload a photo to, nowhere to share the picture that was taken of Bouazizi's self immolation. Like no other revolution before it social media was the tipping point, and the peaceful Tunisian uprising that began as a small protest in the city of Sidi Bouzid had begun.

### **The Words That Have Been Written**

In James Gelvin's book, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everybody Needs to Know*, the author defines the geographical boundaries of the Arab world, and explains why the Middle East was ripe for revolution at this point in time. He goes into details of each of the countries that have had uprisings since December of 2010, and specifically recounts the steps that led to the Tunisian revolution including Mohamed Bouazizi's protest, which was the catalyst of The Arab Spring itself. Gelvin explores the political situations of each of the countries and makes the argument as to why there were so many authoritarian rulers in the Middle East at the time of the uprisings, using the idea of U.S. foreign policy as well as the economic structure as the weakness of these Middle Eastern nations. Using Wikileaks documents as well as *A History of Modern Tunisia* by Kenneth J. Perkins, Gelvin also points out that due to the homogenous nature of the population of Tunisia and that 90% of the population followed the same religious practices, using religion as a catalyst to revolution was not realistic.<sup>4</sup> Amira Aleya-Sghaier continues on in this same vein in his chapter, "The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity," in the book *Revolution, Revolt*,

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<sup>3</sup>Kim Sengupta, "I Have Lost My Son, But I Am Proud of What He Did," *The Independent*, January 21st, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014.  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/tunisia-i-have-lost-my-son-but-i-am-proud-of-what-he-did-2190331.html>

<sup>4</sup>James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings, What Everyone Needs to Know*, (New York: University Press, 2004), pg 35.

*and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, He describes the “miracle”<sup>5</sup> of how the Tunisian revolution came to be and claims the Tunisian revolution to be the Revolution of Dignity. He also acknowledges the contributions of social media to the uprising, suggesting that the use of social media kept the uprising in the public eye, and helped create an “instantaneous” rebellion.<sup>6</sup> Aleya-Sghaier uses many French references such as Frederick Engels’ *Theorie de la Violence*, newspaper articles from *Jeune Afrique*, the Wikileaks communiques as described by *The Guardian*, and personal interviews from youth in the street. Though aspects of the revolution were still in progress during writing, Aleya-Sghaier paints the Tunisian revolution with the brush of positivity with, “the first steps of democracy.”<sup>7</sup> From Mohamed Bouazizi’s self immolation protest, to the local protests in Sidi Bouzid, to the uprising of the entire country and the exit of President Ben Ali. Aleya-Sghaier recounts how Mohamed Bouazizi’s self immolation was the spark that set the Tunisian revolution in motion, and that social media was the flame that kept the fire burning.<sup>8</sup> Diane Singerman talks about a way of thinking in her chapter, “The Networked World of Islamist Social Movements,” that appears in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* that describes the way that people gather together for activism in social networks that form through family ties, religious ties, and community ties. She explains that social movements have used these social networks to form identities where there were none previously, and to find common ground for people who are not necessarily close together in terms of distance. This factor truly comes into play in Tunisia where a small protest against unfair treatment turned into revolution where social networks (Bouazizi’s family and friends) and social activism (Bouazizi’s family and friends protesting) came together successfully with social media (Facebook

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<sup>5</sup>Amira Aleya-Sghaier, “The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity,” in *Revolution, Revolt, and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, ed. Ricardo Laremont (New York: Routledge, 2014), pg 30.

<sup>6</sup>Aleya-Sghaier, pg 34.

<sup>7</sup>Aleya-Sghaier, pg 50.

<sup>8</sup>Aleya-Sghaier, pg 31.

and Twitter) for the first time in world history. Quintan Wiktorowicz further connects social activism and protest in his introduction, “Islamic Activism and Social Movement Theory,” that comes from the same book as Singerman’s. In his introduction to the book Wiktorowicz explains that after the United States decided on its military strategy in the Middle East after September 11th, 2001 protests emerged after people gathered in mosques and if not from the mosque, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood sent the message out through the charitable arms of their organizations. What Wiktorowicz is expressing is the way that people gather and react to situations as they unfold in their daily lives when they go to their place of religious worship, or to work, or to school, or through the arms of the charitable organizations that they support. In Wendy Pearlman’s book *Violence, NonViolence and the Palestinian Movement* explains the many differences between violent and nonviolent protest such as how groups that have a tendency towards non-violence are what she calls cohesive or a group idea that keeps the people involved together. In this way the protests in Tunisia that began in Sidi Bouzid formed a group cohesion that gave the protesters resolve as violence was used against them. Pearlman also explains the opposite of cohesion, or fragmentation and how fragmented groups have more of a chance to end up with a violent outcome because of the divisions within the group, such as the way that Ben Ali’s government fractured in the face of a cohesive protest from the citizens. Pearlman also explains the way that social groups end up beginning these protests and the ways such protest might be successful, very much like Wiktorowicz suggests with the mosque or as Singerman points out, the already established social network. In his book *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, Paolo Gerbaudo expounds upon the relevance of social media and the way it is used in today’s world of social activism, which was the major catalyst that brought the Tunisian revolution to the point where their president left the country. Gerbaudo takes the information that Wiktorowicz and Singerman provide and shows the ways that people evolved

traditional social networks into social media networks that led to protest in Egypt and Iran, then into revolution in Tunisia. Gerbaudo uses *Time* magazine articles, newspaper articles from modern protests in Egypt, Greece, telecommunications records, as well as radio and television reports that show the patterns that emerged as social media took a more prominent role in the Arab Uprisings.

<sup>9</sup> Gerbaudo also explains that part of the reason that social media and the internet have come into such prominence in regards to social activism is the youth movement, and their fascination with technology. This truly brings together the idea of social movement in reference to the idea of the younger generation moving up in the world as the ruling class ages, social media which is this younger generations preferred method of communication, and the social activism that emerged from this convergence.

### **The History that Came Before**

There is not much in regards to history when it comes to the intersection of self immolation, political protest, and social media until more recent studies that have centered on the Arab Spring. Self immolation at it's most basic premise is the idea of a very personal and visual display that generally but not always ends in death for the victim. On *Talk of the Nation*, a National Public Radio program hosted by Neal Conan, Oxford University Sociologist Michael Biggs tells us that self immolation protests have two aims that come from one central point.<sup>10</sup> The first of these is that the person's intention is to reach a wide audience, and the second of these is

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<sup>9</sup>James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings, What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: University Press, 2004), Amira Aleya-Sghaier, "The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity," in *Revolution, Revolt, and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, ed. Ricardo Laremont (New York: Routledge, 2014), Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (London: Pluto Press 2012), Diane Singerman and Quintan Wiktorowicz, "The Networked World of Islamist Social Movements," in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2003), Wendy Pearlman, *Violence, NonViolence and the Palestinian Movement* (New York: Cambridge Press 2011).

<sup>10</sup>Michael Biggs, "Flames of Protest: The History of Self Immolation," interview by Neal Conan, *Talk of the Nation* NPR, February 20, 2013. Transcripts available here; <http://www.npr.org/2013/02/20/172505911/flames-of-protest-the-history-of-self-immolation>



to strengthen the resolve of your fellow people.<sup>11</sup> With political self immolation protests and traditional media this begins in 1963 when a Tibetan monk in South Vietnam set himself on fire in protest of the practices of the Diem regime. Protesting the Catholic Diem regime of South Vietnam and religious persecution,<sup>12</sup> this Tibetan monk understood that to get the attention of the U.S. public would bring attention to his cause, but to do so he would need the help of the U.S. media. Though it took a year, his protest was successful in the end.<sup>13</sup> Six years later a man named Jan Palach who was a Philosophy student at Charles University in Czechoslovakia staged his self immolation protest in front of the King Wenceslas statue in Wenceslas Square in 1969.<sup>14</sup> In response to the brutal Russian crackdown after what has been called “The Prague Spring”, Palach told a doctor as he lay dying, “I want the Czech people to know what the Soviet invasion and the brutal end of the Prague Spring meant for Czechoslovakia”, and as he died he uttered his litany, “do they know why I did it?” Though Mohamed Bouazizi’s intentions may not have been that of reaching a Western audience, or of directly speaking to the people of Tunisia with his protest, he certainly strengthened the resolve of the people of Tunisia, using a very visual protest of which a picture of was spread on the internet under the hashtag #Bouazizi.

With social media and it’s emergence as part of social activism in recent years, especially in regards to the Middle East, and Tunisia in particular, there has been some insight as the role it played . Social media itself as defined by *Merriam Webster Dictionary* is, “forms of electronic communications through which users create online communities to share information ideas, personal messages, and other content (video, pictures).”<sup>15</sup> The use of social media in different

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<sup>11</sup>Michael Biggs, “Flames of Protest: The History of Self Immolation,” interview by Neal Conan, *Talk of the Nation* NPR, February 20, 2013. Transcripts available here; <http://www.npr.org/2013/02/20/172505911/flames-of-protest-the-history-of-self-immolation>

<sup>12</sup>Biggs, “Flames of Protest: The History of Self Immolation,”

<sup>13</sup>Biggs, “Flames of Protest: The History of Self Immolation,”

<sup>14</sup>R. McRae, *Resistance and Revolution Vaclav Havel’s Czechoslovakia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press 1997), pg 21.

<sup>15</sup> *Merriam Webster’s Online Dictionary* s.v. “social media.”

protests throughout the Middle East is documented most notably from Iran during the Green Revolution or the “Twitter Revolution“, and from Tunisia during the Jasmine Revolution. Scholars Christos A. Frangonikolopoulos and Ioannis Chapsos write in their article, “Explaining the Role and the Impact of the Social Media on the Arab Spring” that many media analysts welcomed the introduction of social media into the Arab World as it would allow for people to communicate better and make for easier ways to increase the pressure for political reform.<sup>16</sup> Taking from this and the idea that social media “accelerated”<sup>17</sup> popular uprisings across the Middle East, much credit is given to social media without giving full credit to it’s ability to change the social networking structure of existing social activism. Continuing on with this line of thinking Historians also have divided themselves into two groups, “cyber-enthusiasts” and “cyber skeptics” though the authors of the article, “Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First” suggest this an oversimplification of the whole process.<sup>18</sup> Extrapolating this out means that those who have studied and written about the idea of social media and social networking as regards to social activism are divided about the overall effects that social media has on protest and dissent, but one thing is certain, no one thinks that social media is the most important aspect of modern protest and activism, citing traditional social networks and word of mouth as certainly more powerful tools of mobilization than social media,<sup>19</sup> but in actuality without social media networks, and the activism that sprang from them there would have been no Tunisian revolution.

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<sup>16</sup>Christos A. Frangonikolopoulos and Ioannis Chapsos, “ Explaining the Role and the Impact of the Social Media in the Arab Spring” *Global Media Journal Mediterranean edition* 8(1) (Fall: 2012), pg 10.

<sup>17</sup>Frangonikolopoulos and Ioannis Chapsos, pg 10.

<sup>18</sup>Gadi Wolfsfeld, Elad Segev and Tamir Sheafer, “Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 115: no18.(January 2013) pg 117.  
<http://hij.sagepub.com/content/18/2/115>

<sup>19</sup>Abbas Barzegar, “The Myth of Iran’s Twitter Revolution,” *The Guardian*, June 11th, 2010, accessed June 2nd, 2014.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jun/11/iran-twitter-revolution-myth>

## **Tunisia and The Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring began in Tunisia from self immolation to a picture of this self immolation to full scale revolution, but this begs the question of why here, and why now? The country of Tunisia is located in the Northern part of Africa in between Algeria and Libya, along the southern coast of the Mediterranean sea. It is in larger context part of the Middle East and The Arab World, the geography of which is marked north to south from Turkey to the great horn of Africa, and east to west from North Africa to the western border of Iran.<sup>20</sup>

There are cultural aspects of living in this region depends on which country a person lives in, if a person is of the Muslim religion or not (and if so are they Shi'a or Sunni?), as well as the government they live under. According to author Amira Aleya-Sghaier in his article, "The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity," he says the authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was a police state, and that the president was a dictator.<sup>21</sup> After the picture of Mohamed Bouazizi's self immolation was uploaded to a social media network, friends and family came out to protest. A video that was uploaded to Facebook from Sidi Bouzid showed the security forces of Ben Ali's government being abusive to these protesters, emphasizing the authoritarian nature of the regime.

Tunisia's government, along with other Arab governments, were not very participatory according to a report called *The Arab Human Development Report* that was released in 2002, as well as four more versions of the reports that followed.<sup>22</sup> These reports, released by the Regional Bureau for Arab States of the United Nations Development Programme, pointed out, "that the wave of democracy that transformed governance in most of Latin America and East Asia in the

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<sup>20</sup>James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings, What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: University Press, 2004), pg 1.

<sup>21</sup>Amira Aleya-Sghaier, "The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity," in *Revolution, Revolt, and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, ed. Ricardo Laremont (New York: Routledge, 2014), pg 30.

<sup>22</sup>Gelvin, pg 4.

1980s...Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the 1990s...has barely reached the Arab States.”<sup>23</sup>

So for as much as The Arab Uprisings have shaken the world with revolution, it seems that the rest of the world had already been shaken. The review further interprets that there were a lack of personal and social liberties, limited access to quality public services, which led the people of the Middle East and Tunisia to find other ways to seek these freedoms which social media was able to provide in some small measure by allowing people to share thoughts and ideas without having to do so directly out in public. A view from the people that most of their representative governments were corrupt, and many of the nations were in a constant state of emergency which strips citizens of their rights.<sup>24</sup> This left all but a small portion of the citizenry living in what a 2004 report the Bureau released calls “Black Hole States”<sup>25</sup> with no real options for change, people can only take so much and revolt, revolution or civil war cannot be far behind. The report also found that 91% of the people who live in 17 different countries in the Arab World rated their lives at a low level of human welfare,<sup>26</sup> and this leaves a large amount of the citizenry waiting for something to change, and often those who are waiting, get bored waiting and begin doing. The leader of Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, had been ruling the country for 23 years by the time of the Tunisian revolution.<sup>27</sup>

Authoritarian regimes like that which existed in Tunisia proliferate throughout the Middle East, and this leads historians to ask, why? This question has been asked repetitively, but the classical calling cards of the patriarchal society or the idea that Islam is not compatible with

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<sup>23</sup>James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings, What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: University Press, 2004), pg 5-6.

<sup>24</sup>Gelvin, pg 4

<sup>25</sup>Gelvin, pg 5.

<sup>26</sup>Gelvin, pg 43.

<sup>27</sup>Amira Aleya-Sghaier, “The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity,” in *Revolution, Revolt, and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, ed. Ricardo Laremont (New York: Routledge, 2014), pg 30.

democracy is not the answer;<sup>28</sup> instead it seems to come from two sources. One is American Foreign policy, and the second is the style of economic policy that a government conforms to. Though there was an American presence in the area previous to the beginnings of WWII, American foreign policy in the Middle East began in earnest after the end of the war and the onset of the cold war, mostly centered around the idea of containing Communism and having access to oil.<sup>29</sup> Their presence in the region seems to undermine the United States stated goals of wanting peace in the region, most notably for Israel, and causes conflict between those who are seen to be supporting the United States, and those who oppose them. The second reason has to do with the sale of oil, and the fact that most Arab states are what is known as renter, or allocator states. What this means is that the state gains a great deal of its revenue from sources other than taxation, and for much of the Middle East this revenue comes from oil , though that is not true for all.<sup>30</sup> This gives an unprecedented amount of control of revenue streams outside of the country's tax base to those that have power in the region, and this explains why there are so many heavy handed leaders with no intention of giving up power. In Tunisia itself, there was a great deal of economic control given over to many of Ben Ali's friends and Allies much like his earlier counterpart in Egypt, Anwar Sadat.<sup>31</sup> This leaves little opportunity for economic growth for the rest of the citizens unless you happen to be tied into one of the families that were considered part of the the ruling economy of Tunisia, which was an imbalance of rich coastal areas, and a poor interior. This economy was ruled by what author Amira Aleya-Sghaier called a, "minority mafia" which he describes as a group of families along with President Ben Ali who used privatized

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<sup>28</sup>James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings, What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: University Press, 2004), pg 7.

<sup>29</sup>Gelvin, pg 7.

<sup>30</sup>Gelvin, pg 8.

<sup>31</sup>Dan Rather "Sadat's Troubled Egypt," on *60 Minutes*, segment directed by(August 7th, 1977, United States, CBS).

businesses as well as theft to placate these allies as well as control the country's money supply.<sup>32</sup> In Tunisia a large portion of the populace was on the outside looking in with no visible way towards upward mobility or social movement, as well as a small middle class that is left sitting on the fence. After social media picked up the images of self immolation and protest, this middle class began to feel an obligation to join in with those already protesting.<sup>33</sup>

The Middle East as an entire region is subject to limited political freedom and practices of citizenship,<sup>34</sup> and with authoritarian rule comes the integration of the military, intelligence services, and monarchical and dynastic regimes that close off formal and informal social groups from existing or even starting up.<sup>35</sup> In the modern age, this also means limiting access to the media and communications as well as the internet. In Tunisia these police and security forces only used bullhorns and tear gas at first<sup>36</sup>, then things escalated to torture,<sup>37</sup> and live bullets used on the demonstrators.<sup>38</sup> The Constitutional Democratic Rally Party of Ben Ali or RDC, also had their own militia. Up to 600 militia men dispersed around the country to disrupt and spy upon protesters, and these militia were the main cause of violence during the revolution and violence that occurred after Ben Ali fled the country.<sup>39</sup>

Also under authoritarian rule, people have no avenues to file their grievances, no political

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<sup>32</sup>Amira Aleya-Sghaier, "The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity," in *Revolution, Revolt, and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, ed. Ricardo Laremont (New York: Routledge, 2014), pg 33-34.

<sup>33</sup>Kim Sengupta, "I Have Lost My Son, But I Am Proud of What He Did," *The Independent*, January 21st, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014.  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/tunisia-i-have-lost-my-son-but-i-am-proud-of-what-he-did-2190331.html>

<sup>34</sup>Diane Singerman, "The Networked World of Islamist Social Movements," in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2003), pg 148.

<sup>35</sup>Singerman, pg 148.

<sup>36</sup>Aleya-Sghaier, pg 37, and Malek Sghiri, "Greetings to the Dawn," "Greetings to the Dawn," in *Writing Revolution: The Voices from Tunis to Damascus*, ed. by Layla Al-Zubaidi and Matthew Cassel, (London/New York: I.B. Tauris), 2013, pg 9-48

<sup>37</sup>Malek Sghiri, "Greetings to the Dawn,"

<sup>38</sup>Aleya-Sghaier, pg 37.

<sup>39</sup>Aleya-Sghaier, pg 37-38.

avenues to challenge the modernization of the country or the deterioration of social programs and the infrastructure.<sup>40</sup> According to author Amira Aleya-Sghaier in one of the Wikileaks that came out the U.S. Ambassador to Tunisia saw their government with many of these same qualities, “Many Tunisians are frustrated by a lack of political freedom...Tunisia is a police state with little freedom of expression or association.”<sup>41</sup> The Wiki from Wikileaks is an internet term that has been defined by *Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary* as “a website that allows visitors to make changes, contributions, or corrections.” This type of website allows for people to interact and share information and creates an informal social media network within which people can communicate with each other. Mohamed Bouazizi himself attempted every avenue of discourse with the government and its bureaucracy before turning to self immolation as his answer in protest. His father no longer living with him, his step-father unable to work, and the family home taken away with no answer from the bank or the local governor as to how he could remedy the situation,<sup>42</sup> Bouazizi felt helpless according to his family.<sup>43</sup> After he self immolated, the image of this spread on the internet including under the hashtag #Bouazizi which brought out his friends and family in protest. Some of this initial protest was filmed and uploaded to Facebook, which helped the protest spread outside of the city. Where many times traditional media would have spread the word to the citizens of a country or city, there was no traditional media allowed to report on the situations in Tunisia after Bouazizi’s protest. According to a tweet from @almiraat Aljazeera was not able to report from inside Tunis until January 19th, 2011. Blogger Brian Whitaker, a former editor for The Guardian (British Newspaper) blogged on January 1st, 2011 that there was to be a

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<sup>40</sup>Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Islamic Activism and Social Movement Theory,” in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2003), pg 8.

<sup>41</sup>Aleya-Sghaier, pg 33.

<sup>42</sup>Kim Sengupta, “I Have Lost My Son, But I Am Proud of What He Did,” *The Independent*, January 21st, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014.  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/tunisia-i-have-lost-my-son-but-i-am-proud-of-what-he-did-2190331.html>

<sup>43</sup>Sengupta, “I Have Lost My Son, But I Am Proud of What He Did,”

general strike the next day as evidenced by Twitter.<sup>44</sup> This is where social media such as Twitter and Facebook as well as other social media sites, took over in Sidi Bouzid and all over Tunisia and allowed the people to become the reporters on the ground.<sup>45</sup> The video that was taken and uploaded to Facebook of protesters being abused by security forces was seen by Aljazeera, and shown on traditional media as well, but social media reporters came first. Whitaker points out that though ALjazeera seemed to be the only news organization attempting to cover the events in Tunisia, the push back from the government meant that they had to rely on amateur video and social networking sites to follow the story.<sup>46</sup>

Another factor as to why the Middle East had been ready for revolution is the idea of Post-Colonialism, or even Post-Post Colonialism.<sup>47</sup> In layman's terms this means that the countries of the Middle East and North Africa were ready to divorce themselves from the governments that were put in place since WWII ended. The colonial powers that had been ruling these areas left behind governments in their place, but not governments that were chosen by the citizens of the countries that were left behind. All of this happened at approximately the same time, and the governments the colonial powers left behind varied as Britain left monarchies in her wake (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan) and the French mostly left republics (Morocco was a monarchy),<sup>48</sup> one of which was Tunisia. As these states became independent they formed economies encouraged by the United States, the International Money Fund (IMF), and The World Bank. These economies included combinations of social programs and heavy investment in economic

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<sup>44</sup>Brian Whitaker, "A New Twist to Tunisian Protests," *Brian Whitaker's Blog*, January 2nd, 2011, [http://www.al-bab.com/blog/2011/blog1101a.htm#tunisia\\_the\\_battle\\_for\\_free\\_speech](http://www.al-bab.com/blog/2011/blog1101a.htm#tunisia_the_battle_for_free_speech)

<sup>45</sup>Christos A. Frangonikolopoulos and Ioannis Chapsos, "Explaining the Role and the Impact of the Social Media in the Arab Spring" *Global Media Journal Mediterranean edition* 8(1) (Fall: 2012), pg 10.

<sup>46</sup>Brian Whitaker, "Cyber War Breaks Out in Tunisia," *Brian Whitaker's Blog*, January 4th, 2011, [http://www.al-bab.com/blog/2011/blog1101a.htm#tunisia\\_the\\_battle\\_for\\_free\\_speech](http://www.al-bab.com/blog/2011/blog1101a.htm#tunisia_the_battle_for_free_speech)

<sup>47</sup>Patricia-Goldsworthy-Bishop, Prof. Western Oregon University. 4-23-14 In office Meeting.

<sup>48</sup>James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings, What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: University Press, 2004), pg 12.



development,<sup>49</sup> as well as made certain promises to their populations known as a “ruling bargain.”

<sup>50</sup> In a “ruling bargain” a government promises its citizens how the monies of their economies would be used; such as nationalization of industries, and a distribution of wealth,<sup>51</sup> however it soon became apparent that those that were governing were not about to keep their part of the bargain. Leaders like Ben Ali gave business ventures and economic opportunity to his friends and allies like Anwar Sadat was said to have been doing during his years as leader of Egypt.<sup>52</sup> This resulted in people moving from the rural areas into the cities looking for work, and the inner city infrastructure was not sufficient to sustain the influx. As populations rose in urban areas so did megacity shanty towns, a lack of housing, a rise in commodities prices, and an overall neglect of the people themselves.<sup>53</sup> In Tunisia there was a regional and social imbalance: where much of the wealth but a smaller percentage of the population lived in coastal areas, and in contrast many of the interior cities such as Sidi Bouzid were left in poverty.<sup>54</sup>

There was also a “youth bulge” happening in Tunisia at the time of their revolution. This means that a large portion of the population was under the age of 25 (over 42% ), and even a high level of education did not guarantee any life improvement.<sup>55</sup> Though Bouazizi was 26 at the time of his self immolation, he had attempted to gain a higher level of education until at the age of 19 he was left with no recourse but to go out and try to find a way to provide a living for his family. According to his family Bouazizi had passed his baccalaureate (HS equivalent) but could find no

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<sup>49</sup>James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings, What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: University Press, 2004), pg 13.

<sup>50</sup>Gelvin, pg 12.

<sup>51</sup>Gelvin, pg 13.

<sup>52</sup>Tarek Osman, *Egypt on the Brink: From the Rise of Nasser to the Fall of Mubarak* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), pg 130.

<sup>53</sup>Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Islamic Activism and Social Movement Theory,” in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2003), pg 7.

<sup>54</sup>Amira Aleya-Sghaier, “The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity,” in *Revolution, Revolt, and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond* ed. Ricardo Laremont (New York: Routledge, 2014), pg 31-32.

<sup>55</sup>Aleya-Sghaier, pg 32.

skilled labor and this mirrored many of the experiences of other citizens of Tunisia.<sup>56</sup>

In 2004 when *The Arab Human Development Report* released several polls that addressed what political freedoms people expected in their states, there were a few non-standard messages alongside some of the more normal responses, such as access to free elections, and freedom to form political parties; there were also responses such as, “freedom from hunger”, and, “freedom from inadequate income.”<sup>57</sup> Over time states became burdened with debt from monies borrowed during more flush times as they attempted to maintain their “ruling bargain”, and the economic model was changing in the region to less state management in manufacturing and commercial segments,<sup>58</sup> causing many nations to lose control of their economies altogether. This spiral was seen several times in Tunisia in the 2000’s with minor protests that were put down, one in the Gafsa mining region in 2008, and on the southern border with Libya at Ben Gardane in 2010.<sup>59</sup> These protests were not able to prosper due to the quick and violent response from Ben Ali’s government, as well as its hold on traditional media as well as the internet and emerging social media sites.<sup>60</sup> The Tunisian Government had the reputation for, “being a world leader in the field of internet censorship,” and the regime was able to routinely block any information from outside the country that had any negative or critical connotations.<sup>61</sup> On March 3rd, 2010, in the town of Monastir, Tunisia, a man named Abdesslem Trimech set himself on fire after being harassed on

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<sup>56</sup>Kim Sengupta, “I Have Lost My Son, But I Am Proud of What He Did,” *The Independent*, January 21st, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014.  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/tunisia-i-have-lost-my-son-but-i-am-proud-of-what-he-did-2190331.html>

<sup>57</sup>James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings, What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: University Press, 2004), pg 15.

<sup>58</sup>Gelvin, pg 16.

<sup>59</sup>Aleya-Sghaier, pg 31.

<sup>60</sup>Aya Chebbi, “Not As Soft As Jasmine,” *Proudly Tunisian* (Blog) 2014.  
<http://aya-chebbi.blogspot.com/2014/01/not-as-soft-as-jasmine.html>

<sup>61</sup>Brian Whitaker, “Cyber War Breaks Out in Tunisia,” *Brian Whitaker’s Blog*, January 4th, 2011,  
[http://www.al-bab.com/blog/2011/blog1101a.htm#tunisia\\_the\\_battle\\_for\\_free\\_speech](http://www.al-bab.com/blog/2011/blog1101a.htm#tunisia_the_battle_for_free_speech)

the streets as a vendor,<sup>62</sup> and the government was also able to put a stop to this protest from spreading though it seemed very similar in nature to Mohamed Bouazizi's. The difference here is that there was no picture to capture the moment, and nothing to upload to social media or even to show to traditional media due to the very nature of the Tunisian government's heavy handed tendencies in regards to censorship.

Food or the lack of it, is another factor in the time that led up to the Arab Spring. Even though the Middle East has two regions historically known for producing food, the Nile Basin, and the valley between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The population of the region was growing rapidly and at the same time that water tables were diminishing, and as of 2012 all Middle Eastern nations were net food importers.<sup>63</sup> As governments withdrew their hands from subsidizing businesses and especially food in an attempt to change their economic model, this caused fluctuations in the market that the people had previously not had to deal with, and all this due to the failed ruling bargain, and this has led several times in multiple nations to what have been called bread riots; riots incited by sudden rises in food prices.<sup>64</sup> There were bread riots in Tunisia in 1984, as well as labor unrest in the Gafsa mining region in 2008,<sup>65</sup> though once again the ruling party of Ben Ali was able to put down a full scale rebellion in the latter (he was not the President during the 1984 bread riots).

Though many of the factors that have are mentioned can and have been issues in revolutions around the world, none of them are a conclusive sign that any kind of revolution will occur. The main factor, no matter what the circumstances, has and always will be the people,

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<sup>62</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "How the Tunisian Revolution Began," *Aljazeera*, accessed May 3rd, 2014. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/01/2011126121815985483.html>

<sup>63</sup>James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings, What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: University Press, 2004),pg 22.

<sup>64</sup>Gelvin, pg 22.

<sup>65</sup>Andrew Gavin Marshall, "Tunisia's Unfinished Revolution: Dictatorship or Democracy?," *AndrewGavinMarshall.com*, accessed May 18th, 2014.

<http://andrewgavinmarshall.com/2013/02/11/tunisia-unfinished-revolution-from-dictatorship-to-democracy/>

because people are unpredictable,<sup>66</sup> and in the case of Tunisia, people can even be remarkable. People burn with passion, and people burn with a desire for change when they have been subjected to the heavy hand of authoritarian rule. Though in much of Europe and The United States people may vote for change and at least see some small tangible evidence of such a thing, those in the Middle East could not cast their vote for change, and in Tunisia they took to the internet and then to the streets first in Sidi Bouzid, and then the rest of the country to demand it.<sup>67</sup>

### **The Tunisian Revolution**

Sidi Bouzid is a city of just over 400,000 people with an unemployment rate of educated males at 25%, almost double that of the national average, and for females even worse at 44% unemployment compared to the national average of 19% at the time of Mohamed Bouazizi's protest.<sup>68</sup> The Tunisian Revolution, which has been called both The Jasmine Revolution and The Revolution of Dignity,<sup>69</sup> began with Mohamed Bouazizi's self immolation. This event coupled with local protest and shared on social media brought cohesion to the different groups of people all over Tunisia together in protest. Cohesion according to author Wendy Pearlman is the idea of group "cooperation among individuals that enables unified action."<sup>70</sup> The opposite of that, or fragmentation is also defined by Pearlman as derived from the idea of a fragmented group or polity or political entity.<sup>71</sup> Fragmentation is the fracture of the leadership or idea group of any collective, and it can be said that as the Tunisian revolution picked up steam, the leadership of Ben Ali's RDC fragmented and caused a violent reaction from the Tunisian security forces.

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<sup>66</sup>James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings, What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: University Press, 2004), pg 25-26.

<sup>67</sup>Gelvin, pg 23-24.

<sup>68</sup>Monia Ghamni, "Sidi Bouzid: The City Behind the Tunisian Revolution," *Magharebia*, February 2nd, 2011, accessed on May 5th, 2014.

<sup>69</sup>Amira Aleya-Sghaier, "The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity," in *Revolution, Revolt, and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, ed. Ricardo Laremont (New York: Routledge, 2014), pg 30.

<sup>70</sup>Wendy Pearlman, *Violence, NonViolence and the Palestinian Movement* (New York: Cambridge Press 2011), pg 9

<sup>71</sup>Pearlman, pg 8.

Mohamed Bouazizi was ten years old when he became the main provider for his family,<sup>72</sup> and though he did finish the equivalent of high school he never attended university as opposed to popular belief, however he continued to try to study until the age of 19.<sup>73</sup> He applied for many jobs including military service, but was not hired for any, and continued to work in the marketplace selling fruits and vegetables.<sup>74</sup> Bouazizi worked the streets selling produce while being harassed by the police for months on end, as well as had his wares confiscated more than once.<sup>75</sup> The reason for this harassment is that there is a gray area on whether or not a person needs a license to sell from a cart on the streets of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia. Bouazizi went through the normal channels to try and solve his problems according to his cousin Rochde Horchane, and then he complained to the local Governor who did not listen to him.<sup>76</sup> Bouazizi's mother whom he was supporting along with her disabled husband<sup>77</sup> said that his cries for help to the banks and officials went unheeded and that the, "government drove him to do what he did."<sup>78</sup>

Mohamed Bouazizi was selling his goods on December 17th, 2010 on the streets when he was approached by a female<sup>79</sup> police officer that slapped him in the face when she considered

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<sup>72</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor." *Aljazeera*, January 20th, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014.

<https://wayback.archive-it.org/2323/20110121022155/http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/20111684242518839.html>

<sup>73</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor." This was statement by a man who claimed to be a close friend of Bouazizi named Hajlaoui Jaafer.

<sup>74</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor."

<sup>75</sup>"Tunisian Revolt Sparked by a Police Slap" AP, *The Australian*, January 19th, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/tunisia-revolt-sparked-by-a-police-slap/story-e6frg6so-1225990556122>

<sup>76</sup>"Tunisian Revolt Sparked by a Police Slap"

<sup>77</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor."

<sup>78</sup>Kim Sengupta, "I Have Lost My Son, But I Am Proud of What He Did," *The Independent*, January 21st, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/tunisia-i-have-lost-my-son-but-i-am-proud-of-what-he-did-2190331.html>

<sup>79</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor."

Bouazizi disrespectful.<sup>80</sup> Over the entire course of his life he had been being harassed by officials with one close friend saying that he had been used to it as it had been going on since he was a child.<sup>81</sup> His cry for reciprocity went unheard and he set himself ablaze in front of the local provincial governor's house, dying just short of three weeks later on January 4th, 2011.<sup>82</sup>

Protests come in many different forms and the reasons for those variations differ in time and place as much as the surface of a river may change. In her book *Violence, Nonviolence and the Palestinian Movement*, Wendy Pearlman used the definition, "acts of challenging, resisting, or making demands upon authorities or power holders," to define the word.<sup>83</sup> Violent protest in this context can be defined as a demonstration that "entails exertion of physical force for the purpose of damaging, abusing, killing, or destroying."<sup>84</sup> Nonviolent protest can be said to derive from the opposite of internal fragmentation, and that would be cohesion.<sup>85</sup> A group's internal cohesion it can be argued, leads to a better ability to mobilize greater numbers of people, which is better suited to protest over violent activism. It is this idea of cohesion coupled with social media that was among the differences during the Tunisian revolution. This combination of both a cohesive group and social media is a way for people to form their own social networks where there were and are none. These social movements are ways for which human beings can respond to the stress of social or economic demands that society has put on individuals, or

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<sup>80</sup>Amira Aleya-Sghaier, "The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity," in *Revolution, Revolt, and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, ed. Ricardo Laremont (New York: Routledge, 2014), pg 31.

<sup>81</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor." *Aljazeera*, January 20th, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014.  
<https://wayback.archive-it.org/2323/20110121022155/http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/20111684242518839.html>

<sup>82</sup>Aleya-Sghaier, pg 31.

<sup>83</sup>Wendy Pearlman, *Violence, NonViolence and the Palestinian Movement* (New York: Cambridge Press 2011), pg 3.

<sup>84</sup>Pearlman, pg 3.

<sup>85</sup>Pearlman, pg 11-12.

upheavals in the social or economic systems themselves.<sup>86</sup> What has been found to be true as well in this modern age is that the internet and Facebook, as well as other social media have emerged as a powerful means of mobilization.<sup>87</sup> What they helped deliver were demonstrations that brought face to face the people and the forces and symbols of the state; not in cyberspace, but on the streets.<sup>88</sup> These are social movements that have no cohesive center or, “social movement communities” that work outside the confines of a collective or group but still spread a message and can gather like minded people together in times of need.<sup>89</sup> This gives rise to the idea that the internet and social media allows for more “flexibility” for individuals to act without “central coordination” or “unity” when action is decided upon,<sup>90</sup> and this gives a broader definition to the idea of “the activist” within the group as it’s collective identity is constantly being constructed and reconstructed within the needs of any given society.<sup>91</sup> In Tunisia at the time of The Jasmine Revolution young people were using mobile devices, the internet, social networks and even satellite channels to keep their uprising in the public eye and expose the heavy handedness of their government<sup>92</sup> and also enforcing a group identity that was held together by cohesion<sup>93</sup> due to their treatment by the authoritarian regime they lived under. It was this group identity that began in Sidi Bouzid that started with Mohamed Bouazizi’s friends and family that spread out from the

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<sup>86</sup>Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Islamic Activism and Social Movement Theory,” in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2003), pg 6.

<sup>87</sup>Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (London: Pluto Press 2012), pg 18. This is a quote from Gerbaudo’s book attributed to Laurie Penny, *New Statesman* columnist in a verbal back and forth with Alex Callinicos who was a member of the Trotskyist Workers Socialist Party.

<sup>88</sup>Gerbaudo, pg 18.

<sup>89</sup>Wiktorowicz, pg 12.

<sup>90</sup>Gerbaudo, pg 19.

<sup>91</sup>Diane Singerman, “The Networked World of Islamist Social Movements,” in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2003), pg 152.

<sup>92</sup>Amira Aleya-Sghaier, “The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity,” in *Revolution, Revolt, and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond* ed. Ricardo Laremont (New York: Routledge, 2014), pg 34.

<sup>93</sup>Wendy Pearlman, *Violence, NonViolence and the Palestinian Movement* (New York: Cambridge Press 2011), pg 11-12.

city by using photos and videos of the way that these protesters were treated. In Tunisia what happened is something that was not able to happen in previous social media integrations into protest that happened in both Egypt in 2005 and Iran in 2009, in Tunisia the traditional social network that was described by Diane Singerman truly took the jump to the social media network. Not an elimination of the social network, but a redefining of what that means in today's modern age. The Green or "Twitter" revolution that took place in Iran, though similar in nature to Tunisia with the social media aspect, the protests this spawned were put down. One of the reasons that this happened was the fact that only a small number of Tweets actually came from inside Iran itself. According to Mehdi Yahyanejad who runs "Balatarin" one of the internet's most popular Farsi-language websites, the impact of Twitter inside Iran is nil.<sup>94</sup> The truth is that it was word of mouth that spread the Iranian protest of 2009, and it was an authoritarian Islamic government that used a heavy hand to put it down.<sup>95</sup>

### **#Bouazizi#SidiBouazid#Tunisia**

The exact opposite of the Green Revolution in Iran is that the social media aspect in Tunisia came from within, and not outside of the country. Protest began the very same day that Mohamed Bouazizi self immolated, begun by his large family and led by his mother outside of the governor's office where her son's protest occurred. What brought people in Sidi Bouazid outside of Bouazizi's friends and family was a photo of his self immolation that was uploaded to the internet, #Bouazizi.

As these protests spread throughout the city, videos were taken of security forces mistreating protesters, and in particular, Bouazizi's family. Bouazizi's cousin posted a video of

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<sup>94</sup>Golnoz Esfandiari, "The Twitter Devolution," *ForeignPolicy.com*, June 7th 2010, accessed June 2nd 2014. [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/07/the\\_twitter\\_revolution\\_that\\_wasnt](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/07/the_twitter_revolution_that_wasnt)

<sup>95</sup>Golnoz Esfandiari, "The Twitter Devolution,"



these protests online,<sup>96</sup> and this video was picked up and aired by Aljazeera television. Without social media, Aljazeera would not have had any videos to show, and though it began on social media, Aljazeera picking up the video is important because most people in Tunisia had a fear of sharing such a video, but were not afraid to watch it, and those without internet could now be included in the social network that had begun there, #SidiBouزيد.<sup>97</sup>

The Tunisian government had previously been very successful at controlling the internet by use of technology and people, and this means that the militia and security forces the government employed was active not only in the streets, but also on the web. The government phished (this is a computer term for spying and infesting computers with viruses) and controlled the flow of information both in and out of the country. As they implemented these techniques of controlling the internet they created a whole generation of young people who grew up with the knowledge and the desire to break past the restrictions the government had put on the internet there.<sup>98</sup> Tunisians are one of the most connected peoples on the African Continent at 3.6 million people, almost a third of the population,<sup>99</sup> and were active on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook as well as blogging well before protest began,<sup>100</sup> which allowed for social media networks to already be established previous to protest.

It was cohesive group identity that began in Sidi Bouزيد and started with Mohamed

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<sup>96</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "How the Tunisian Revolution Began," *Aljazeera*, January 26th, 2011, accessed May 3rd, 2014. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/01/2011126121815985483.html>

<sup>97</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor." *Aljazeera*, January 20th, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014. <https://wayback.archive-it.org/2323/20110121022155/http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/201111684242518839.html>

<sup>98</sup> Karim Fahim, "Tunisia, Bouaziz, Sidi Bouزيد, Social Media and the Struggle for Recognition," *New York Times*, January 22, 2011, accessed May 5th, 2014. This information was given to the reporter by Sami Ben Ghabia. <https://wayback.archive-it.org/2323/20110124022214/http://bombasticelements.blogspot.com/2011/01/tunisia-bouazizi-sidi-bouزيد-social.html>

<sup>99</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "How the Tunisian Revolution Began,"

<sup>100</sup>Aya Chebbi, "Lessons from New Social Movements," The CIVICUS World Assembly Blog July 26th, 2012, accessed May 3rd, 2014. <https://blogs.civicus.org/worldassembly/2012/07/26/lessons-from-the-new-social-movements/>

Bouazizi's friends and family that spread out from the city by using photos and videos of the way that these protesters were treated, combining with the people of Tunisia viewing such images through the spread of these images over both social media, and with the help of Aljazeera. This collective identity is shaped by influence such as religious or scholarly authorities, artists of all varieties, and even movie producers.<sup>101</sup> The collective identity in Tunisia was formed by the large educated youth populace that was under or unemployed. This is especially true in societies where, "the state virtually eliminates an open public sphere and organization independent of regime control."<sup>102</sup> Tunisia's government did not impose a complete media blackout in an attempt to mitigate a negative reaction from the people after Bouazizi's immolation. Instead it chose to only target those who openly defied the regime.<sup>103</sup> Tunisia's government had previously hunted down and executed a man named Zouhair Yahyaoui who had run a website named *Tunzine* that criticized the government,<sup>104</sup> and continued to use this approach in censoring the internet over a complete shutdown in the wake of protests. Tunisian President Ben Ali used somewhere between 120,000 and 150,000 police officers that had the run of the entire country as well as Ben Ali's political party, the 2 million member strong RDC or Rally for Constitutional Democracy to spy on everyone,<sup>105</sup> there was nowhere safe to speak, safe to meet, or safe to go, including the internet. The eyes and ears of Ben Ali were numerous and everywhere including the RDC's 600

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<sup>101</sup>Diane Singerman, "The Networked World of Islamist Social Movements," in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2003), pg 152.

<sup>102</sup>Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Islamic Activism and Social Movement Theory," in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2003), pg 12.

<sup>103</sup>Brian Whitaker, "Cyber War Breaks Out in Tunisia," *Brian Whitaker's Blog*, January 4th, 2011, [http://www.al-bab.com/blog/2011/blog1101a.htm#tunisia\\_the\\_battle\\_for\\_free\\_speech](http://www.al-bab.com/blog/2011/blog1101a.htm#tunisia_the_battle_for_free_speech)

<sup>104</sup>Aya Chebbi, "Not As Soft As Jasmine," *Proudly Tunisian* (Blog) 2014. <http://aya-chebbi.blogspot.com/2014/01/not-as-soft-as-jasmine.html> This is information from a blog named Mouse Hunter which is run by a man named Abdelkarim Ben Abdallah.

<sup>105</sup>Amira Aleya-Sghaier, "The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity," in *Revolution, Revolt, and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, ed. Ricardo Laremont (New York: Routledge, 2014) pg 33.

strong secret militia.<sup>106</sup> The ineffectuality of this approach did however leave open the door for Bouazizi's cousin to upload the video of protesters being mistreated to Facebook and Aljazeera to gain access to the video.

During the first day of protests, stores closed, there were demonstrations and strikes, as well as clashes with security forces.<sup>107</sup> This series of events was the spark that set the fire on the social situation in Tunisia that had been waiting for the right moment to burn.<sup>108</sup> Atia Athmouni, who was an opposition party member from Sidi Bouzid said, "I have been an activist for 25 years in the region. I spoke a lot about liberty and equality. Despite the Dictatorship, people listened. So I knew one day it would explode."<sup>109</sup> There were people keeping together through Facebook, and if there was no internet, there were Satellite television channels, and on Twitter, the hashtags progressed from #Bouazizi, to #SidiBouzid, to #Tunisia and show how a local protest emerged into a national uprising.<sup>110</sup> George Washington University's Marc Lynch explains that while during an uprising in Egypt from 2004 thru 2005 the people used the internet, blogs, and social media but things did not expand they way that they did in Tunisia. In Tunisia there was an integration between social media and traditional media, in fact Aljazeera was regularly using content from people who were posting videos picture and words from Tunisia itself.<sup>111</sup> The fact that the uprising in Tunisia coalesced from social media to the streets and was successful is a unique

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<sup>106</sup>Aleya-Sghaier, , pg 34.

<sup>107</sup>Aleya-Sghaier, pg 34.

<sup>108</sup>Aleya-Sghaier, pg 31.

<sup>109</sup>"Tunisian Revolt Sparked by a Police Slap" AP, *The Australian*, January 19th, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/tunisia-revolt-sparked-by-a-police-slap/story-e6frg6so-1225990556122>

<sup>110</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor." *Aljazeera*, January 20th, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014.

<https://wayback.archive-it.org/2323/20110121022155/http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/20111684242518839.html>

<sup>111</sup>Karim Fahim, "Tunisia, Bouaziz, Sidi Bouzid, Social Media and the Struggle for Recognition," *New York Times*, January 22, 2011, accessed May 5th, 2014.

<https://wayback.archive-it.org/2323/20110124022214/http://bombasticelements.blogspot.com/2011/01/tunisia-bouazizi-sidi-bouzid-social.html>

moment in human history, as without social media there would have been no picture uploaded, no protest that followed the picture, no video to follow the protest, and thus no Tunisian revolution. This social media integrated protest was repeated afterwards in Egypt and other countries in the course of the Arab Spring. As word of the revolution spread, “the unions got involved, teachers, lawyers, doctors, all sections of civil society.”<sup>112</sup> The fact that although this began with a poor man frustrated with supporting his family, the fact that the middle classes began to join the protests as word and image spread swung the tide firmly in the protesters favor.

While Tunisia’s revolution was a peaceful one, there is no doubt that there was violence experienced by those on both sides of the fight. As word spread locally, the digital word began to spread on Facebook, Twitter, and on personal blogs raising the cry to levels that were not expected from such a small town,<sup>113</sup> and one that could not be stopped by the government no matter what they tried, which included previously mentioned government “phishing”, selectively targeting anti government internet users, as well as arrests of bloggers and video makers.<sup>114</sup> As protest continued to grow the generation of people who are often overlooked, the youth and the students, they are the ones that pushed the message out to the masses and their involvement helped the people organize.<sup>115</sup> Protests spread throughout the country, and the government continued to react with violence, while never being able to stop social media or the traditional media from spreading the word. The protests eventually made their way to Tunis, where on

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<sup>112</sup>Kim Sengupta, “I Have Lost My Son, But I Am Proud of What He Did,” *The Independent*, January 21st, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/tunisia-i-have-lost-my-son-but-i-am-proud-of-what-he-did-2190331.html>

<sup>113</sup>Kim Sengupta, “I Have Lost My Son, But I Am Proud of What He Did,”

<sup>114</sup>Yasmine Ryan, “How the Tunisian Revolution Began,” *Aljazeera*, January 26th, 2011, accessed May 3rd, 2014. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/01/2011126121815985483.html>

<sup>115</sup>Aya Chebbi, “Lessons from New Social Movements,” The CIVICUS World Assembly Blog July 26th, 2012, accessed May 3rd, 2014. <https://blogs.civicus.org/worldassembly/2012/07/26/lessons-from-the-new-social-movements/>

January 14th, 2011 a massive demonstration that changed the direction of the country was held.<sup>116</sup>

In very early January Ben Ali visited Mohamed Bouazizi in the hospital almost two weeks after his self immolation, and just a few days later on January 4th, 2011, Bouazizi died from burns caused by his protest,<sup>117</sup> and the protest that had begun in the small town of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia had spread across the country, #Tunisia.<sup>118</sup> Once the revolution had truly begun, the government of Ben Ali held nothing back, though the violence they used against protesters escalated over time<sup>119</sup>. As civilian deaths began to mount, the tone on the internet changed in Tunisia, from one that suggested no more than internet freedom, to freedom from oppression and violence.<sup>120</sup> As the protests went on Tunisians used the internet for more than gathering and social construct, but to post pictures of the violence being perpetrated upon them in an almost minute by minute account to refute the government's claim there were no civilian casualties,<sup>121</sup> and for those without internet, the sharing of these pictures and videos was done by Aljazeera whenever the news network could acquire them, which due to Ben Ali's heavy hand, it was not always able to do.

In response to tear gas, torture, personal violence, and death, historian Amira Aleya-Sghiri points out that Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* said, "that the oppressed are liberated by the exercise of violence, and the infliction of pain on their oppressors is a step on the path

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<sup>116</sup>Amira Aleya-Sghaier, "The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity," in *Revolution, Revolt, and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, ed. Ricardo Laremont (New York: Routledge, 2014), pg 34.

<sup>117</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor." *Aljazeera*, January 20th, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014.  
<https://wayback.archive-it.org/2323/20110121022155/http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/20111684242518839.html>

<sup>118</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor."

<sup>119</sup>Aleya-Sghaier, pg 37.

<sup>120</sup>Tawnia Sanford Ammar, "How Facebook Helped Fell the 23 Year Old Tunisian Dictatorship and Fuel the Jasmine Revolution," *Wayback Archive*, January 16th, 2011, accessed May 3rd, 2014.  
<https://wayback.archive-it.org/2323/20110119202327/http://www.opednews.com/articles/How-Facebook-Helped-Fell-t-by-Tawnia-Sanford-Amm-110115-765.html>

<sup>121</sup>Ammar, "How Facebook Helped Fell..."

toward healing.<sup>122</sup> The Tunisian revolution did not work this way, except a few who threw stones, or used sticks to defend themselves against the onslaught of security forces, the youth of Tunisia never used formal weapons.<sup>123</sup> There were repercussions for the unequal spread of wealth across the country, and many of Ben Ali's economic mafia were looted of much of their personal material wealth<sup>124</sup>, in the end the violence carried out during the Tunisian revolution was against these mostly peaceful protesters as more than 330 people were killed and 700 injured between December 17th, 2010 and January 14th, 2011,<sup>125</sup> emphasizing the point that the people of Tunisia remained cohesive and together during the revolution as Ben Ali's government fractured and became less effective.

### **Aftermath**

Hark! You tyrannous dictator  
Lover of darkness, enemy of life  
You mocked the cries of the weak and your palms are stained with their blood  
You set out tarnishing the enchantment of existence  
Sowing the thorns of anguish among the hills  
Slow Down! Let not the spring deceive you  
Nor the serenity of the sky, nor the glow of morning  
For in the vast horizon lurks the power of darkness  
The bombardment of thunder and the raging winds  
Beware! Under the ashes burns the flame  
and he who sows the thorns harvests the wounds  
Think! Whenever you reap the heads of men and the flowers of hope  
Whenever you water the heart of the earth with blood and inebriate it with tears  
The Flood will carry you away the torrent of blood  
and the burning rage will consume you.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Amira Aleya-Sghaier, "The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity," in *Revolution, Revolt, and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, ed. Ricardo Laremont (New York: Routledge, 2014), pg 38.

<sup>123</sup> Aleya-Sghaier, pg 38.

<sup>124</sup> Aleya-Sghaier, pg 39.

<sup>125</sup> Aleya-Sghaier, pg 38.

<sup>126</sup> Aya Chebbi, "Lessons from New Social Movements," The CIVICUS World Assembly Blog July 26th, 2012, accessed May 3rd, 2014.

<https://blogs.civicus.org/worldassembly/2012/07/26/lessons-from-the-new-social-movements/>

Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali ruled Tunisia for 23 years, made promises of democracy that never came to fruition, put his semblance on posters around the country, did not tolerate political dissent, ran a police state, and was brought down by the image of the flames of Mohamed Bouazizi's self immolation protest through social media, flames that fanned the fire of dissent into protest and revolution.<sup>127</sup> With the announcement of Ben Ali's departure, bloody Tunisian flags that had adorned Facebook profile pictures of Tunisians and non-Tunisians alike all over the world were replaced with images of the demonstrations that led to the deposed leader's departure.<sup>128</sup>

Self immolation protests are not the first type of suicide protest, and sadly they almost certainly will not be the last. The very definition of the word immolation has been changed by the rise in protests that use fire, as Michael Biggs explains on *Talk of the Nation*, "classically the word means sacrifice. I mean the etymology is sacrifice," however since the early 1960s it has come to be associated with a fiery death.<sup>129</sup> Though it must be a very painful death, it is also extremely visual and this translates to a modern tech savvy audience extremely well.<sup>130</sup> Thich Que Dong, the Tibetan monk from Vietnam knew that if he self immolated the image of his burning would spread through the media, especially in the United States. Jan Palach self immolated in King Wenceslaus Square after the Soviet crackdown on Czechoslovakian protests in 1969, and he only wanted to know if the people knew why he did what he did, and in the end they realized.

Mohamed Bouazizi's self immolated in front of the provincial governors office after

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<sup>127</sup>"Profile: Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali," *BBC Mobile*, January 14th, 2011, accessed May 5th, 2014. <https://wayback.archive-it.org/2323/20110130022400/http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12196679>

<sup>128</sup>Tawnia Sanford Ammar, "How Facebook Helped Fell the 23 Year Old Tunisian Dictatorship and Fuel the Jasmine Revolution," *Wayback Archive*, January 16th, 2011, accessed May 3rd, 2014. <https://wayback.archive-it.org/2323/20110119202327/http://www.opednews.com/articles/How-Facebook-Helped-Fell-t-by-Tawnia-Sanford-Amm-110115-765.html>

<sup>129</sup>Michael Biggs, "Flames of Protest: The History of Self Immolation," interview by Neal Conan, *Talk of the Nation* NPR, February 20, 2013. Transcripts available here; <http://www.npr.org/2013/02/20/172505911/flames-of-protest-the-history-of-self-immolation>

<sup>130</sup>Michael Biggs, "Flames of Protest: The History of Self Immolation,"

finding no relief in regards to his complaints about his treatment by police or the condition that his family was living in. That very same day his family and friends came out in protest in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, and the picture that spread through social media and the internet rallied the populace to peaceful demonstration and revolution. From those that shared Mohamed Bouazizi's plight of a poor life just barely struggling to get by, protest was joined by unions, lawyers, artists, and thinkers,<sup>131</sup> "on the one hand social media has been the peaceful tool to peacefully mobilize the masses. On the other hand the civil disobedience in the streets has scared the people in power."<sup>132</sup> The people in the streets would not have been there without social media and the social networks that connected them together.

By the time that Mohamed Bouazizi had died on January 4th, 2011, revolution had spread throughout Tunisia<sup>133</sup>, and the police officer who would be the last to harass him had fled town, not to be seen again.<sup>134</sup> Ten days after Bouazizi's death Ben Ali fled the country. The grave is simple, his family misses him, and according to Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) member Mahmoud Ghazlani, "he was a martyr." Four weeks before, that would not have even been possible, to have an opposition party member speak openly in the streets, but that has all changed now.<sup>135</sup>

if I don't burn  
if you don't burn  
if we don't burn  
how can the darkness come to light<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>131</sup>Aya Chebbi, "Lessons from New Social Movements," The CIVICUS World Assembly Blog July 26th, 2012, accessed May 3rd, 2014.

<https://blogs.civicus.org/worldassembly/2012/07/26/lessons-from-the-new-social-movements/>

<sup>132</sup>Aya Chebbi, "Lessons from New Social Movements."

<sup>133</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor." *Aljazeera*, January 20th, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014.

<sup>134</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor." *Aljazeera*, January 20th, 2011, accessed May 4th, 2014.

<https://wayback.archive-it.org/2323/20110121022155/http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/20111684242518839.html>

<sup>135</sup>Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor."

<sup>136</sup>Ali Ates, @aliates, Twitter Post, January 17th, 2011. This is by Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet.



## Epilogue

The government that replaced Ben Ali has also stepped aside as clashes between the ruling party, Ennahda and other groups have resulted in assassinations and protests.<sup>137</sup> In January 2014 Tunisian Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa put a caretaker cabinet in place and stepped down paving the way for this interim government to create a new constitution,<sup>138</sup> once again to peacefully transition into a democratic process of government. This interim government approved new measures to allow for a national election later this year that will allow former members of Ben Ali's government to run for office.<sup>139</sup> Things have moved a long way in just a little over four years since a young man vending fruit set himself on fire as a last resort of protest. A man who many would never know existed if it had not been his spark that set the fire of revolution ablaze. That small piece of a much larger puzzle, that called together other small pieces through the image of his burning spread on social media. Aya Chebbi, a student and activist during the revolution believes that what happened in her country is the way that things will continue to be done when it comes to social activism in the future, and help spread the fires that burn within us all,

I think there are many types of social movements and revolutions during different points in history. However, we have a lot to learn from the 21st century uprisings as they had no leader, no political or religious orientation but they were spontaneous mass mobilizations of people standing up for their rights and freedoms. The reasons for rebellion, in fact, are diverse. They can be immediate and then their course can graduate.<sup>140</sup>

There perhaps will always be tyrants, and they will hurt the people and do what they can

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<sup>137</sup> "Tunisia Approves New Constitution, Appoints Government," Reuters, *ArabianBusiness.com*, January 27, 2014, accessed May 5, 2014.

<http://www.arabianbusiness.com/tunisia-approves-new-constitution-appoints-government-536184.html>

<sup>138</sup> "Tunisia Approves New Constitution, Appoints Government," Reuters, *ArabianBusiness.com*, January 27, 2014, accessed May 5, 2014.

<http://www.arabianbusiness.com/tunisia-approves-new-constitution-appoints-government-536184.html>

<sup>139</sup> "Tunisia Passes Landmark Law on Elections," AP, *gulfnews.com*, May 2, 2014, accessed May 5th, 2014.

<http://gulfnews.com/news/region/tunisia/tunisia-passes-landmark-law-on-elections-1.1327341>

<sup>140</sup> Aya Chebbi, "Lessons from New Social Movements," The CIVICUS World Assembly Blog July 26th, 2012, accessed May 3rd, 2014.

<https://blogs.civicus.org/worldassembly/2012/07/26/lessons-from-the-new-social-movements/>

to gain and take power from those they see as smaller than they, and thus there will always be the need for that spark, that flame to set fire to the old and give a place for things to be reborn. In Tunisia that fire spread from Twitter to Facebook, to Aljazeera, from #Bouazizi, to #SidiBouزيد, to #Tunisia.

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