

# THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION, ONE YEAR ON

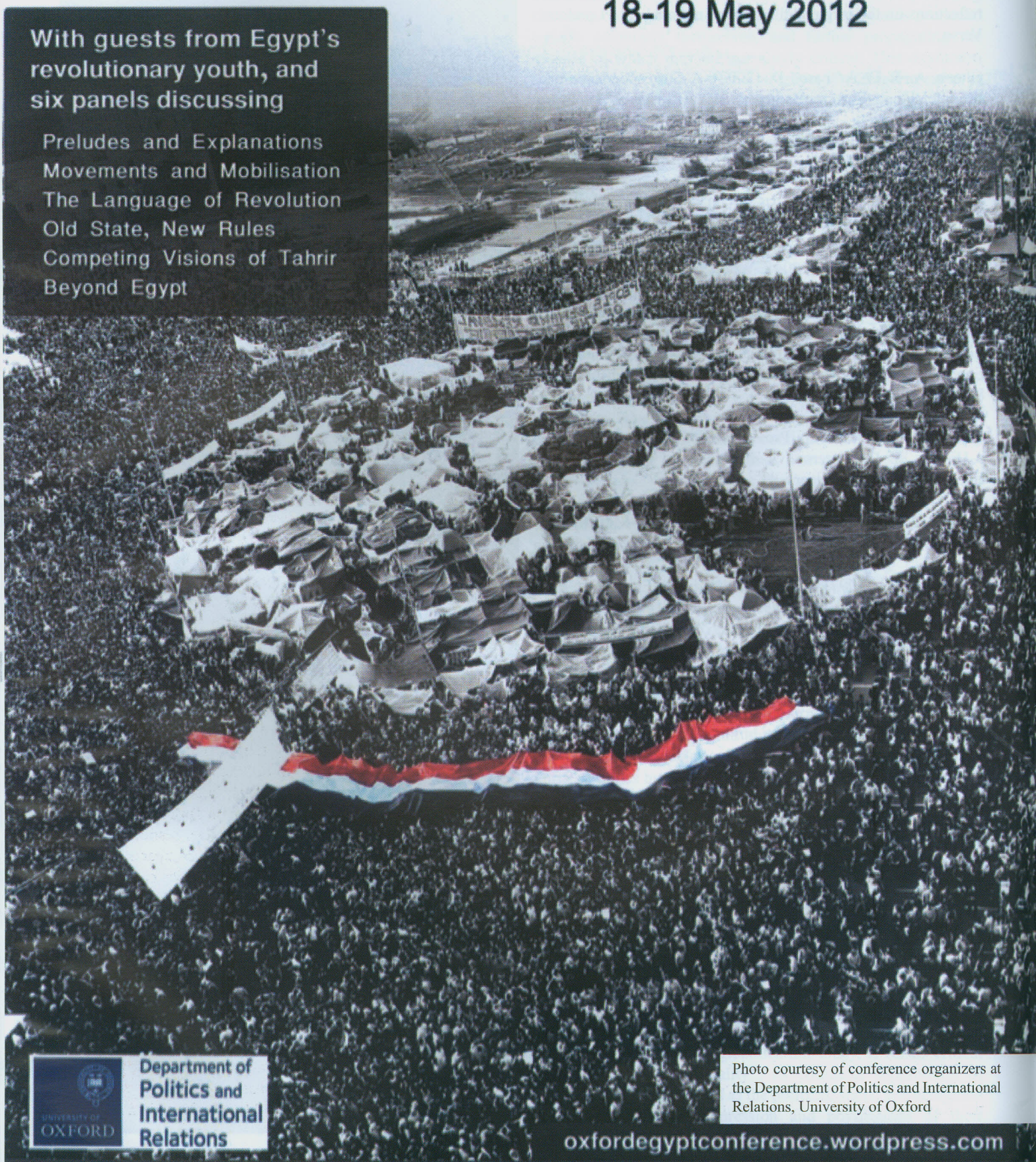
## Causes, Characteristics and Fortunes

A conference at the Department of Politics and  
International Relations, University of Oxford

18-19 May 2012

With guests from Egypt's  
revolutionary youth, and  
six panels discussing

Preludes and Explanations  
Movements and Mobilisation  
The Language of Revolution  
Old State, New Rules  
Competing Visions of Tahrir  
Beyond Egypt



Department of  
Politics and  
International  
Relations

Photo courtesy of conference organizers at  
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Spotlights on

## **The Egyptian Revolution, One Year On: Causes, Characteristics and Fortunes, University of Oxford**

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On May 18 and 19, 2012, the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford held an international conference, *The Egyptian Revolution, One Year On: Causes, Characteristics and Fortunes*. The conference brought together an interdisciplinary group of over twenty scholars from national and international universities; from Egyptian universities (Cairo University, The American University in Cairo), UK universities (Oxford University, School of Oriental and African Studies, London School of Economics, University of Coventry, University of Warwick, University of Aberdeen), US universities (University of California Santa Barbara, Miami University, Mills College), in addition to Gulf University of Science and Technology, University of Amsterdam, as well as a few Egyptian political activists. Marking almost the one year anniversary of the Egyptian Revolutions, over the course of two days, participants presented their research in six panels "Preludes and Explanations", "Movements and Mobilisation", "The Language of Revolution", "Old States, New Rules", "Competing Visions of Tahrir", "Beyond Egypt", and a special session on "'The Revolution Continues': A Conversation".

The conference constituted a rare opportunity for Egyptian and foreign scholars to interact, learn about and learn from each other's work. The conference presentations covered a wide array of topics and themes. In an attempt to understand the underlying causes of the revolution, Marie Duboc traces labor action in two textile companies and how this can be used as a lens to explain the evolution and augmentation of people's desire to voice their grievances that culminated in 2011. Alternatively, Adam Hanieh offers a regional dimension. For Hanieh, in order to understand the Egyptian revolution, a closer look to the adoption of neoliberalism policies that facilitated the internationalisation of Gulf-based capital is vital, more specifically, the growing role of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states. Hanieh gives empirical evidence from the Egyptian Economy in the banking sector and land and

real estate sectors. The importance of this argument is also key to understanding the attempts by several political forces to guarantee the investments of GCC countries, undoubtedly, a main player in the struggle.

Like Hanieh, several papers were dedicated to contextualizing the revolution within its regional framework and international context. Fred Lawson examines the repercussions of the Egyptian revolution that resulted in what seems to be a reconfiguration of Egypt's foreign policy relations with some of its neighboring countries as well as others countries on the regional level, from forming new relationships with some countries, to a reversal of policies and giving a cold shoulder to others. Lawson demonstrates his thesis with Egypt's diplomatic and strategic relations with Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Turkey as examples. In Kerem Oktem's presentation, he focuses on the fallout of the Arab Spring and particularly the Egyptian Revolution on foreign policy debates in Turkey and examines how the Arab Spring and the Egyptian revolution contributed to revolutionizing Turks' perception of themselves and their role on the regional and international level; in addition, he alludes to the effect of the Egyptian Revolution on Turkish government as they fear the peoples' demands for 'social justice'. Another perspective is given by Andrea Teti, who compares between the European Union's (EU) discourse and its commitments to democracy-promotion in Egypt with the discourse of pro-democratic opposition NGO organizations in Egypt based on narratives from both groups pre and post January 25, 2011. Teti proceeds that for Egyptians NGO and other opposition groups, central to the understanding of democracy is considering social and economic issues as human rights, a perception that contrasts the EU's notion of democracy.

In an attempt to explain the characteristics of both the revolutionaries and the revolutionary process that started in Tahrir square on January 25, 2011, 'Horizontalism', 'Anti-



structure', and 'S factors' were used successively by John Chalcraft, Mark Peterson and Heba Raouf Ezzat in their presentations. Indeed, in John Chalcraft's analysis, the relations of power and the mobilization of large constituencies has taken a more decentralized and 'horizontalist', a 'power from below', form of representation that started on January 25 and is still ongoing. On the other hand, Mark Peterson examines the symbolic meaning of the spirit of Tahrir and the unity that brought together people from different ideological and social backgrounds during the first eighteen days in terms of Victor Turner's concepts of 'liminality', 'communitas' and 'anti-structure' (where the structure of everyday life has been disturbed and overturned while new structures has not emerged yet). In Heba Raouf Ezzat presentation, she attributes the repeated violent clashes during the transitional phase and even the call for democracy on January 25, as a result of the conflict between the notion of state and the notion of the republic. She admits to the failure of political theory and tools to predict the revolution and proceeds to propose several 'S' factors/concepts that need to be examined; such as, 'surface' (indicators at the bottom as the indicators on the surface did not reflect what was going on below at bottom), 'space' (the urban dimension), 'size' (power of small groups to protest), 'sovereignty' (concept of 'we are the people' Elsha'eb yoreed), securitization (the rise of a new type of religiosity), to mention a few.

The Egyptian revolution has certainly aroused scholarly interest across the world and one compelling complex question that concerns scholars, followers of the unfolding of events in Egypt and undoubtedly Egyptians themselves, is the complex question of its end. Did it end with the toppling of Hosni Mubarak on February 11 or will the revolution end the day it leads to a more stable political order and a more democratic regime that fulfills the demands of the people in 'eesh, horreya, 'adala egtema'eya, karama ensaanea (bread, freedom, social justice, human dignity) the first chants on January 25, 2011? Is it an 'unfinished revolution', 'the revolution continues', or rather an 'incomplete revolutionary process'? In Alexander Kazamias's presentation, based on the assumption that what started on January 25 was an incomplete revolutionary project, he gives a preliminary assessment of the effects of January 25 revolutionary process on the state and explores the 'Praetorian Parliamentarism', describing the compromising relationship between the state and the political parties that aim at representing this revolutionary movement. On the other hand, Mustapha Al-Sayyid presentation also focuses on the transitional phase but offers a comparative perspective assessing the management of the Transition phase in four countries of the Arab Spring (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen), and the challenges to its performance (ensuring the transitional justice, revolution of rising expectations [economic and political demand], shaping a map for a new political system, keeping the state together, regional and international actors).

Finally, a reflection on the title of the conference, Egyptian Revolution, One Year On: Causes, Characteristics and Fortunes, is due. First, while perhaps a minor issue, I think it is worth noting that while the word 'Egyptian Revolution' appears in the title of the conference, and some of the conference participants used the term 'Egyptian Revolution', many presenters opted for the use of 'uprising', 'political movement', 'revolutionary process', while several others avoided the use of any term altogether. While it is minor note, perhaps it is worth further investigation as to whether this reflects the presenters' own conviction of

the historical significance of the Egyptian revolution while being in 'front seat to history' that is yet to unfold. Second, how expressive was the content of the research presented at the conference of its title Egyptian Revolution, One Year On: Causes, Characteristics and Fortunes? In summary, almost all of the presentations were very relevant to the title. Indeed, a few presentations looked from different angles at the causes of the revolution, a chunk of presentations were concerned with explaining the unfolding of events in Egypt starting January 25 using different tools and concepts such as 'horizontalism', 'anti-structure', and seeking new ones as with the 'S' factors, to mention a few. Also, some presentations focused on the regional and international repercussions of the Egyptian revolution. On the other hand, another major contribution of the research presented was geared towards looking into the identity and the characteristics of different emerging political actors since January 25; the revolutionary youth, the "Ultras" (the unusual suspects as in Robbert Woltering's presentation), to Taufiq 'Ukasha, (as a counter-revolution tool as in Walter Armbrust's work), and how Egyptians used expressive art in the form of jokes to reflect their changing perception of the revolution, as per Hebatallah Sallem's work, as well as exploring the Archival poetics and Egypt's revolution, as presented by Tahia Abdel Nasser.

Yet, finishing up this article in anticipation of the result of the re-run of the Egyptian presidential elections between Ahmed Shafiq and Mohamed Morsy, on June 19, 2012, with contesting results regarding Egypt's first post-revolution president, one cannot but constantly be reminded of the relevance of Mustapha Al-Sayyid's concluding remarks to this historical moment. Indeed, it is a reminder of the complex combination of differences between the major political actors that goes beyond conflict of interest to value and ideological differences making it perhaps highly unlikely that the presidential elections, perceived by several as a milestone in the transitional phase, will be more stable than the transition itself. Uncertainty and surprises still remain to be the overwhelming feeling since the eve of January 25, 2011. Perhaps what remains to be certain is that there is a continuous on-going process of change in Egypt that makes it difficult to make any predictions of the future. The Egyptian revolution has certainly empowered ordinary people who now have access to information and want to take part in shaping Egyptian politics making it impossible for politics to be a monopoly of a minority of people.

The two-day conference has certainly provided much food for thought when thinking of the January 25 Egyptian Revolution. To end, special thanks are due to the conference organizers and their team for their vision, dedication, tireless efforts and support, warmth and creating a most friendly inspiring atmosphere, Reem Abou-El-Fadl, the conference convener, Mezna Qato, Kerem Öktem and Mustapha Kamel al-Sayyid, the Conference Advisory Board, and Mariya Petkova, for conference assistance.<sup>1</sup>

1 For more information about the conference, please visit [oxfordegyptconference.wordpress.com](http://oxfordegyptconference.wordpress.com)  
For audio and video podcasts, please visit <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/egyptian-revolution-one-year>  
Conference poster and website designed by WebPlanet, Gaza





Conference Photo by Mariya Petkova

# University on the Square Documentation Project: A glimpse into the Economic and Business History Research Center's Contribution

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On January 25, 2011 thousands of Egyptians marched on the streets of all major cities chanting 'eesh, horreya, 'adalaegtema'eya (bread, freedom, social justice) leading to the toppling down of the then president of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, on February 11.

The movement afforded the opportunity for researchers to occupy a "front seat to history" and it wasn't long before several projects were conceived that aimed to document the January 25 revolution. In an email to the American University (AUC) community on February 7, 2011, President Lisa Anderson announced "...a university-wide project to collect testimonies, photographs, audio recordings, ... and other documentary evidence of the events.."

Our project, University on the Square: Documenting Egypt's 21stCentury Revolution "...seeks to preserve the history of the momentous events of early 2011 in Egypt through the eyes of the AUC future historians, activists, students, and the general public."<sup>1</sup> the oral history component of the project, a year later, as at 2012, the total number of interviewees in the university wide 137 with 107 hours of recorded narratives. So, while, the oral narratives has a value in and of itself, it also can be research inquiries. As the description of the project implies, focuses on the documentation of the revolution through the AUC community. Using oral histories collected by Economic History Research Center (EBHRC) as the main research attempts to shed some light on the identity of Egypt's EBHRCstaff collected 71 hours of recordings from 43 interviewees. Of the EBHRC interviewees, six are AUC faculty, three of whom were members of the committee of the wise,<sup>2</sup> ten AUC students and alumni, 18 AUC staff, and 9 non-AUC members who also have very diverse backgrounds. As a disclaimer the time frame of this paper covers 18 days (January 25-February 11); in addition, the majority of EBHRC interviews were conducted during the months of February, March, April, and May 2011.

**University on the Square: Documenting Egypt's 21st Century Revolution "... seeks to preserve the history of the momentous events of early 2011 in Egypt through the eyes of the AUC community for future historians, activists, students, and the general public."**

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While interviewees are by and large affiliated to AUC, it may be argued that they are at least in part also representative of the different constituencies within Egypt: the youth, political activists, the intellectuals, and the working class. Having said this, it is important to acknowledge the difficulties associated with defining such constituencies, even more significant is that such constituencies may not be mutually exclusive. This article is based on a sample of ten of the oral narratives<sup>3</sup> conducted by EBHRC<sup>4</sup> (two AUC faculty (one of whom a member of the committee of the wise), three students and alumni, three AUC staff, and two non-AUC members). The work at hand explores some of the narrators' perspective on factors leading up to January 25 events, the escalation of events from a demonstration to a

1 University on the Square website: <http://www.aucegypt.edu/onthesquare/Pages/ots.aspx>

2 A group of prominent Egyptian independent figures formed this committee in February 2011, and joined the national dialogue with Suleiman and opposition parties, in an effort to promote a solution to the country's crisis.

3 Oral narratives used for this article can be found at <http://digitalcollections.aucegypt.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15795coll2>

4 Titles of narrators used in this article are relevant at the time of conducting the interviews



revolution, the description of Tahrir Square, the interactions between people on the Square and division of labor inside it.

### Factors leading up to January 25 events

Prior to January 25, several events and factors paved the way whether directly or indirectly to partially explain the demonstrations on January 25. While each interviewee had a different perspective, they all shared sentiments of discontent, dissatisfaction, generally leading up to the impossibility of a status-quo of the current economic and political conditions of Egyptians prior to January 25. For Ibrahim Awad, a professor of public policy and practice at AUC, the mounting police repression and intervention with the Khaled Said incident were manifestations of years of abuse and repression. Another immediate factor was the attack on the Church in Alexandria.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Awad believes that one important buildup factor is the failed neo-liberal economic policies that lead to enormous discontent for the victims of these policies.

ElHeimili shares the same feelings as Awad that the situation in Egypt could not be maintained any longer. Yara ElHemili, an AUC graduate student, goes a step further and talks about her earlier apolitical attitude with a minimal contribution on facebook. She had a conviction that it would only take a revolution for Hosni Mubarak to leave the presidency of Egypt as had he even died, people around him would conceal his death and still rule in his name. She felt provoked and undermined from the results of the November 2010 elections, humiliated from being repeatedly harassed walking down the streets knowing that if she complains to the police, the police force itself will either disregard her complaint or, ironically, harass her themselves!!

For Madiha Doss, a Linguistics Professor at Cairo University, she confirms that the daily life of Egyptians was very tough and the suppression of the regime to the people was unbelievable. There was suppressed anger in the people which did not manifest itself at all before January 25. On that day, January 25, a day that started for her as a small demonstration (a group less than 50) where she was standing with other colleagues from Cairo University in front of the ministry of higher education, the chanting, the shouting, the tones of voices even were different! Something was different on that day as it marked the explosion of this bottled anger, with the group expanding to hundreds of people. For Malak Labib, a researcher and a PhD candidate, the spark that characterized this particular day, January 25, was the result of increasing political awareness from the appearance of ElBardai in the Egyptian political scene, together with the effect of the 6th of April movement that has had a significant impact on raising the political awareness of the Egyptian middle class. She also adds that the effect of facebook with its creation of a much larger forum for debate for people and the inspiration from the Tunisian revolution were two detrimental factors in igniting the fuel of the demonstrations on January 25.

Interviewees may disagree on the short-term, long-term, direct, and indirect factors that led to the unusually high response of people to the different calls to join the demonstrations. However, they all attest that conditions were demeaning, and humiliating in terms of the lack of some of the basic human rights needs of decent economic, political, and social standards. Indeed, in terms of economic conditions, while in the above section the interviewees belonged to middle-upper class, they unacceptable living conditions that people from less-fortunate backgrounds extended beyond the incapacity of the state to provide for its citizens' basic of the legal and security apparatuses at times and the demeaning of the when it came to political rights and democracy. Also, most of them were were followers of "We are all Khaled Said" webpage

### From a demonstration to a revolution

While the preceding section focused on the buildup of events leading to this section focuses on the escalation during the first eighteen days of the with particular emphasis on January 28.

Mohamed El-Beltagy, an AUC graduate student --from middle-upper parallel contribution to the escalation of events but clearly did not ignite On the contrary, prior to January 25, he along with probably thousands apolitical by default, or were fully aware of the sufferings of the people meaningful contribution from their side so opted for living in their bubble.

participation stems from their ability to keep the flames burning throughout the whole eighteen days in January 2011. Elbelagy, an AUC alumna, and a faculty member in Cairo University, recalls being fully aware of the suffering of some of his students who came from all sorts of backgrounds from the poor-lower class backgrounds to middle, and upper middle class students. This feeling of bitterness did not motivate Elbelagy to join the demonstrators on January 25 in spite of his awareness of the calls for participation on facebook. He even went a step further and discouraged some of his younger relatives from participating in the demonstrations. However, he vividly recalls this inner call that struck him on January 27 driving through Cairo's ring road, and passing through some slums. He recalls this "pain, this echoing pain" as if a cry of help from the people that he should do something to elevate their agony. It was an emotional moment and was associated with a feeling of great responsiveness and responsibility towards the people and also towards Egypt itself. On January 28, ElBeltagy joined the protesters and the image of decent, caring and refined Egyptians was engraved in his mind from that day. "On the twenty-eighth, [being amongst] all the protestors, I felt that they were my brothers and I felt if I were to die, that day or any other day being with those, being in such a noble company then I'd die happy and I have never felt that way before".

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January 25 demonstrations, revolution till February 11,

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Out of all the narratives EBHRC has collected, Awad's narrative gave immense weight to February the forth, as it marked the day that lower class people joined the square in increasing numbers and with great determination. Awad emphasizes the fundamental role that the victims of economic policies played from this day till February 11. From his point of view, the expectations of the regime that the demonstrators will get bored and tired failed against the reservoir of revolutionaries present in this constituency, the victims of economic policies

While on the theme of the escalation of events, interestingly, unlike the majority of narratives, the perspective of the AUC security staff on the escalation of events on January 28 is uniquely compassionate with the Egyptian police force. General Mokhtar Ragab, assistant security

<sup>5</sup> At least 21 people were killed in an attack on al-Qiddissin Coptic church, which happened during a New Year's Eve service minutes into the first day of the new year, January 1, 2011



manager, AUC, in charge of the Down Town premises, presents another constituency, and explains an incident that led to the fuming of the people on January 28, the burning of the first police vehicle on that day. In his narrative, Ragab explains that police's withdrawal from the square was in his opinion due to the loss of contact with their superiors as their talkie-walkies must have needed charging at this point. Because of the crowds, this was only feasible by drivers' of such vehicles reversing. He proceeds that, first, by default of such big vehicles, visibility is almost non-existent, and second, some youth blocked the way behind the vehicle then in front of it completely putting it to an absolute halt, finishing up by one of them jumping on top of the vehicle with a bottle of Molotov. For Mokhtar, this incident ignited matters because the police started attacking the protestors and some dropped dead resulting in series of burnings from these youth of anything in front of them. Ishaq Zikri, a security guard at downtown campus, confirmed that some youth trapped a policeman in this vehicle, and threw a Molotov bottle inside it, and there was no way that this policeman, could have left the police vehicle! Gamal Abdel Halim, a security supervisor at downtown campus at the Rarebooks and Special Collection building overlooking the ministry of the interior, talks about the fear of some police officers. He mentions a story of a diabetic police officer who pleaded him to allow him to rest in the AUC campus and told him that he doesn't want to be a martyr and die, he wants to live, he wants to live to raise his children.

While the views of AUC security staff give a different perspective and talk of immediate on the ground causes of escalation of events on January 28, the driving force behind the evolution of events from a demonstration to a revolution seemed to be attributed to the participation of large segments of the people, from both middle-upper class and those who are economically deprived joining forces with the protestors of the first few days, January 25 to January 28.

### **Interactions between people on the Square and division of labor**

When it came to describing the interaction between people in Tahrir square itself during the first 18 days of the revolution, most of the narrators seemed to agree on one sentiment, harmony. For Awad, harmony between different classes, different cultural backgrounds, and different religions. For Sarah Abdel Rahman, an AUC graduating senior at the time of the interview, her most memorable moments were most insightful conversations with specifically Muslim brotherhood members.

For Malak Rouchdy, AUC assistant professor in sociology, "the square was born the moment people crossed the bridge on the twenty-eighth. As a newborn space, the square shaped itself gradually and depending on the events. [It evolved into] divisions, partitions, the media center, the cultural corner, the stands, the stages, particularly after Wednesday the second, Battle of the Camel". The square became a self-sufficient unit whose livelihood had to be organized and a daily routine gradually developed as well.

People coexisted and cooperated in the square. Most of our interviewees recall, working in teams and distributing responsibilities, as the square represented democracy, equality, and social justice. Tens of teams formulated for various tasks such as securing the entry to the square, connecting mobile phones to electric poles, managing the garbage, and getting medical supplies for the hospitals, to mention a few. Rouchdy, together with friends and colleagues in her circle had yet another mission to accomplish, to sustain the influx of people to the square in a recognition of the importance of keeping the square fully occupied to exert pressure, to avoid violence, and to keep up the moral of people in the square. Rouchdy recalls also her anxiety on February the second, "the battle of the camel", where she received repeated pleas from stranded friends and acquaintances in the square urging her to reach well-connected diplomats abroad in order to exert pressure on the army to allow the injured and the kids to safely exit the square. Rouchy eventually succeeded in reaching a French vice minister of foreign affairs for this purpose.

It is worth alluding to the fact that Awad's contribution is of particular interest as a member of the committee of the wise as mentioned earlier, and another reason for his emphasis on the importance of January the forth. The committee's main mandate was to maintain a dialogue or negotiations between the regime and supposedly representatives of youth movements who had a major role in igniting the revolution. Awad, added his voice to several other members of the committee of the wise that they had a duty and obligation to protect the revolutionaries in the square and grant them a safe exit – and entry—from and to Tahrir square. To this end, the majority of committee of the wise members went to Tahrir square on that day, January 4, hand in hand in order to protect the youth in the square as they realized that their presence in the square will in itself shield the people in the square against any possible danger.

While the committee did not succeed in reaching an agreement between the regime on one side and the revolutionaries on the other, as a member of the committee of the wise, another important contribution Awad is proud of is how this committee in a way paved the way for some of these youth to set up the "Revolutionary Youth Coalition" E'telaf Shabab al-Thawra"! Awad recalls with pride a meeting the committee had with eleven representatives of five youth organizations. Since this group were amongst the youth that had organized, staged and initiated the whole protests, they all came from middle-upper class backgrounds, had good jobs and clearly had favorable living conditions, all adding up to unusual characteristics of initiators of revolutionary movements!

Throughout the narratives reviewed for this article and talks with people since January 2011, who has been to Tahrir square, all attest to the harmony and sense of equality, cooperation, and co-existence that visitors and inhabitants of Tahrir square felt towards each other. This sense of unity is the shared view amongst all the narratives.

### **Conclusion**

The above sections of this paper were mainly a review of some of our narrators' responses to questions about their opinions about factors leading up to the revolution, what motivated them to contribute to the revolution, the degree and method of their involvement in the revolution, and their description of their experience in relation to and thoughts about the dynamics of being in Tahrir square during these eighteen days with the aim of providing some insight on the identity of the revolutionaries. Embarking on this study, I originally planned on a critical examination and analysis of some of the extracts of a sample of the narratives collected at EBHRC. An integral part of the research process rotated around the selection of the narratives and later extracts from each. The span of this article allowed me only to give a glimpse of some of our narrators' comments that can be illuminating if further investigated about the identity of the January 25 revolutionaries. Preliminary results indicate that people from all facets and layers of the Egyptian society contributed to the revolution i.e. in terms of class



-- lower, middle class, and/or upper class--, educational and intellectual level--intellectuals, literate and illiterate— and different political and religious ideologies -- liberal, secularists, and a spectrum of religious ideologies from moderate, extreme, Muslim brotherhood, to just conservative—together with the activist, and the apolitical. They differ in the level of involvement and in their contribution but they all unite under sentiments of cooperation and harmony, and one cause, the fall of the regime. As it stands, the narrative extracts and results are meant to provide food for thought for future research. The value and use of this collection is multi-faceted and has been informed by our belief that, “History is dependent on the “supply” of archival and other primary materials and on the “demand” of historians for these materials...”<sup>6</sup> That is to say, as with all oral history projects, its use and real value stems from the end users of the material, be it historians or researchers from other disciplines. During the interview, both the narrator and the interviewer exert a shared authority of the interview. The interviewer’s main mission is to work with the narrators by intriguing them at times, reassuring and encouraging them at others eventually leading them “into telling a fascinating story of their individual lives; of women and men who are no longer simply voices but individuals with their own complicated histories.”<sup>7</sup>

Finally, it is important to note that the University on the Square project is still ongoing and new voices are contributing to the project with new interviewees on one side of the microphone and other faculty, staff, students, and volunteers’ on the other. The value of The University on the Square project is yet to unfold.

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6 Weiss, Carayannis, Emmerij and Jolly. *UN Voices*. (Indiana University Press, 2005), ix-x.

7 Ibid, x.