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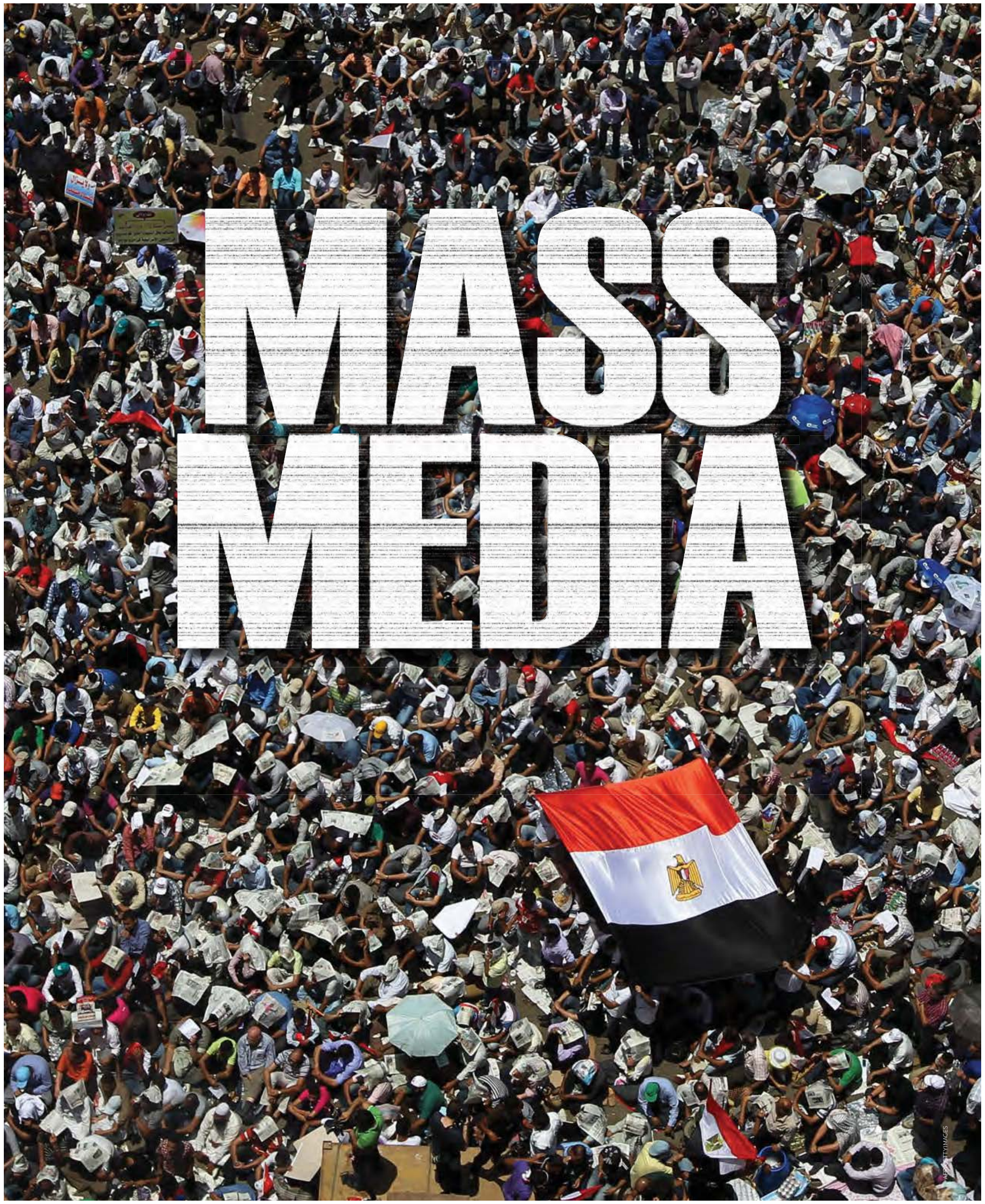

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BY DAVID M. FARIS, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR DAVID FARIS, WHO HAS BEEN TRAVELING TO THE MIDDLE EAST SINCE 2003, RETURNED THIS SUMMER TO FIND THE REGION TRANSFORMED BY A SERIES OF UPRISINGS. IN AN ESSAY, HE DESCRIBES HOW THE CHANGES CAME ABOUT.

I tasted the Middle East long before I ever saw it. When we would drive to my grandparents' house in Fall River, Mass., my grandmother, Amelia, would feed us as soon as we would walk in the door. "Eat, eat, eat!" My brother and I complied, developing an enduring taste for tabbouleh, kibbeh and spinach pies that would serve as my family's only real connection with the Lebanese ancestry on my father's side.

My father and his siblings were assimilated seamlessly into American culture, as was customary at the time, and spoke no Arabic. I latched onto my Lebanese identity as a way to differentiate myself in the New Jersey suburbs, but I knew next to nothing about my heritage.

As an undergraduate at Drew University, though, I took a Middle East politics class and found myself so hooked on the region that I applied for a PhD program in political science. My first Arabic class was the day before Sept. 11. On Sept. 12, our little band of 10 students sat in stunned silence, haltingly sharing our feelings. I thought to myself, "What have I gotten myself into?"

The first time I flew to the Middle East was from Moscow to Beirut on an Aeroflot Tupolev-154, the workhorse of the Soviet air fleet. It was the summer of 2003, just four months after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq that would unleash so much chaos across the region. The cramped cabin suggested a world of smaller dreams and tight control.

And it was fitting that a Cold War relic transported me to a region still suffering from the aftershocks of that twilight struggle – smothered by authoritarian rulers, many of whom dated back to the '60s and '70s, and who were supported by the Americans or Soviets at one point or another.

Most countries in the region were still controlled either by these rulers, including Moammar Qaddafi in Libya, by their half-wit children, like Syria's Bashar Al-Assad, or by dull functionaries like Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, who inherited the banal instruments of repression from his predecessors. I was headed to the only moderately democratic state in the Arab world, but one that had been ripped apart by a 16-year civil war and whose dynamism had subsequently been subdued by an informal Syrian occupation.

My summer in Beirut was dedicated to studying Arabic at the American University in Beirut, situated right on the Mediterranean in West Beirut. The city which had once been hailed by the jet set as "the Paris of the Middle East" was when I arrived a shell of its former glory, haltingly rebuilding, its energy poured into the ostentatious downtown area known as Solidare. Weary Syrian soldiers of Bashar Al-Assad's authoritarian regime patrolled the streets, and when night fell, wealthy Beirutis wearing tiny dresses and tight black shirts poured out of their homes into restaurants, nightclubs and discos, where tables that only minutes ago had served food now hosted high heels, black shoes and gyrations.

My parents fretted about my safety but I told them not to worry, because there was a man with a machine gun on nearly every downtown corner. Inside, though, I was terrified. Those soldiers were a living, breathing representation of governance in the region. A Kalishnikov on every corner.

Lebanon was (and remains) haunted by the specter of violence, premature death, decay and repression, which were the bitter fruits of the country's civil war. On a bathroom stall in downtown Beirut, someone had scrawled, in Arabic script, the words "Die of natural causes." It was not a lament but rather a plea for a country so often ravaged by civil conflict, warfare, external intervention and catastrophe.

It was a plaintive request to be allowed just to exist. I ended up having a blast that summer, but when I left, I could not have imagined the horror that would visit the country just three summers later, when Israel invaded the South (again) to crush the insurgent group-turned-political party Hezbollah. That conflict, like so many others, was an indirect result of the failure to resolve the larger geopolitical questions of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

My research eventually took me away from tiny Lebanon and its Byzantine politics, and toward Egypt, the heart of the Arab world and its most populous and influential country.

When I first visited Cairo in the summer of 2006, I found a city stifled by corruption, overcrowding and frustration.

Some 15 million people were stuffed into an area no larger than metropolitan Chicago, and much of this sprawling growth had taken place unplanned in the past 30 years, as millions of Egyptians moved from the countryside to the country's overburdened capital, looking for work. Two meager subway lines did their best to serve this teeming megalopolis.

But most of daily life was conducted on ramshackle bus lines, minivans, and most of all, black-and-white taxis – ancient Fiats and Peugeots, dubbed "flying coffins" by the locals. The pollution from this impromptu transit system made breathing Cairo's air like smoking two packs of cigarettes a day, which many Egyptians did anyway.

The misery of Cairo's poor would often boil over in the streets in the form of impromptu dust-ups between cab drivers, shouting matches that could snarl traffic for a mile. But typically it was sublimated in a barely-expressed hope for change. Egypt's prisons still held thousands of political prisoners, and the regime of Hosni Mubarak was notorious for the gleeful lawlessness of its police forces.

Perhaps just as ominously, the government could not figure out how to put its graduates to work, meaning young people were caught in a marriage-less limbo, from which there was often no escape but resignation and bitterness. Even so, this tinderbox of a city would be transformed every evening, as restaurant-goers flocked to open-air eateries on the Nile, couples walked together down the corniche, and street vendors stayed open until the early morning.

It was on this first trip, too, that I met young Egyptians who were using the Internet to coordinate and publicize downtown demonstrations against the perfidy of their rulers, and I crafted a research project to understand what they were doing and how it was working.

I took a series of long trips to Egypt between 2006 and 2009, including a year-long stint during which I rented an apartment on the Nile island of Zamalek, meeting other Americans who were in Egypt to study everything from Arabic literature to democracy promotion.

I interviewed courageous young Egyptians who were using the Internet as a kind of alternative public sphere – bloggers writing about the rights of women and minorities, activists organizing and coordinating illegal demonstrations downtown, and the leaders of a Facebook group known as the April 6th Youth Movement, who were demanding an end to the authoritarian practices of Mubarak's regime.

Unlike countries like China and Saudi Arabia, the Egyptian government never really tried to shut down or block these web sites, preferring to scare the activists with brief jail terms and harassment. The very lightness of their punishment in comparison to the torture and indefinite detention meted out to members of the Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, revealed the regime's belief that Internet activism was not a serious threat.

Even so, my meetings with these activists would often be cloak-and-dagger. One interview with an April 6th leader named Ahmed Maher in the summer of 2009 took place in the middle of a labyrinthine street in downtown Cairo, and he spent the entire hour furtively looking around for spies from the Egyptian secret services, known as the Mukhabarat.

The Middle East to which I returned this summer has been utterly transformed by a series of popular uprisings, often coordinated and publicized on those very digital platforms that the regimes took so unseriously.

They started first in Tunisia, where a fruit-seller named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest his treatment by state authorities. Within weeks Bouazizi's spectacular suicide drove millions of Tunisians into the street and sent longtime dictator Zine el-Abadine Ben Ali into exile.

In Egypt the catalyst was not just the Tunisian revolution. It was also the killing, in June of 2010, of Khaled Said, a small businessman who was dragged out of an Internet café by regime thugs and beaten to death in front of mortified onlookers. When they finally dumped his body back with his family, they claimed that he had died swallowing a bag of marijuana, the kind of up-is-down claim that might have held water in a bygone age, but that was preposterous in the era of citizen journalism and YouTube.

ACROSS AN ARAB WORLD WHOSE PEOPLE HAVE FOR SO LONG BEEN DENIED DIGNITY, VOICE AND REPRESENTATION, GOVERNMENTS WILL NOW RISE AND FALL ACCORDING TO THE DICTATES OF POLITICS AND CIRCUMSTANCE.

NADIM AUDI

UPHEAVAL IN EGYPT Assistant Professor David Faris says digital activists played a major role in the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak.

An activist named Abdel Rahman Monsour – barely out of college when I met him in 2008 – started a Facebook group called We Are All Khaled Said, capturing the imaginations of a generation tired of being detained, roughed up and tortured with almost no legal recourse. Over the summer of 2010, they staged a series of memorable demonstrations, including one in which they stood on the corniche in the coastal city of Alexandria and turned their backs on the city, on authoritarianism itself, facing the ocean in silent, aching protest.

We Are All Khaled Said was perhaps the most mature expression of the kind of digital dissent that had become routine not just in Egypt but also in Bahrain, Lebanon, Jordan and Tunisia. As one Egyptian newspaper editor had told me bluntly in 2008, digital tools were "voices for the voiceless."

For years, bloggers like the almost unimaginably brave Wael Abbas had posted videos of police harassing citizens, or of young men harassing women in the streets, resulting in a series of serious scandals that embarrassed the regime and revealed to ordinary Egyptians the true character of their government. In Egypt these digital activists, together with various factions of the harried official opposition, selected Jan. 25 for a nationwide protest. It happened to be a holiday – Police Day – which had taken on darker and darker undertones over the years as the extent of the torture gulag constructed by Interior Minister Habib El-Adly became clearer to the public.

We Are All Khaled Said, managed by Monsour and a Dubai-based Google executive named Wael Ghonim, proved invaluable in providing information to protesters, producing the discourse of dissent, and updating both Egyptians and international observers about the unfolding events.

Of course, some of this organizing took place offline to evade detection by ever-watchful state minders, but some of the credit for its success is owed to the tools of digital activism. For years most ordinary citizens made the perfectly reasonable choice to go about daily life, to avoid politics and to try to make a living in incredibly difficult circumstances. But this all changed on Jan. 25, when tens of thousands answered the clarion call of the digital elite.

REVOLUTIONARY COALITIONS THAT SURVIVED TENUOUSLY DURING THE PERIOD OF TRANSITION WILL FALL TUMULTUOUSLY APART UNDER THE STRAIN OF REAL POLITICS.

Digital activists coordinated a brilliant tactical maneuver by which activists took control of Cairo's Tahrir (Liberation) Square. There they stayed for 18 long days, braving the counter-assault of Mubarak's plainclothes thugs, who rode in on horseback and murdered hundreds of protesters. The people were not deterred, erecting an ad-hoc utopian commune in Tahrir, known as the Republic of Tahrir, and other locales across the country. And finally Mubarak resigned on the evening of Feb. 11, unleashing a celebration of unparalleled public joy, and leading to a future that nevertheless remains tense and uncertain.

In June and July I revisited many of these activists, who are no longer dissidents but rather participants in Egypt's brand-new democracy. Ahmed Maher is no longer hiding in alleys but negotiating with regime elites about the shape of the new constitution. In late June, I sat with Bassem Fathy, one of the leaders of what became of the Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution, who had coordinated the difficult logistics of supplying the protesters at Tahrir Square during the 18 long days of the uprising.

He noted that the revolution was the culmination of a long period of digital activism that first flowered during the second Palestinian intifada in 2001. "We were using the Internet for 10 years," Fathy told me, "and it was the only open space we had."

These activists are now scrambling to find their place in normal politics, where grassroots organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood have the upper hand over the millions of Egyptians who do not have Internet access and don't necessarily want to turn their revolution over to youthful activists.

Since the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, what journalists have dubbed "unrest" has spread to Syria, Bahrain, Morocco, Yemen – to nearly every corner of the world's largest authoritarian oasis. In June, longtime Yemeni dictator Ali Abdullah Salih fled to Saudi Arabia for treatment and has yet to return.

In Syria, where in 1982 the government unapologetically murdered 20,000 people in Hama and then literally paved over their mass graves with concrete, people have once again taken to the streets, in Damascus, in suburbs like Daraa, demanding that Bashar Al-Assad step aside like his counterparts in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. Their calls for justice will prove to be irresistible in the long run. Even if Assad survives another year, or another five, his mandate is over, as is the mandate of dictatorship across the region.

In Tunisia and Egypt, and perhaps soon in Tripoli, Damascus and Manama, across an Arab world whose people have for so long been denied dignity, voice and representation, governments will now rise and fall according to the dictates of politics and circumstance.

To be sure, these new leaders will face enormous, perhaps insurmountable, economic and social challenges. But Arabs will now be led by elected representatives rather than by tyrants. Parties will squabble over the proper role of Islam in public life, and politicians will accuse one another of perfidy and betrayal.

Revolutionary coalitions that survived tenuously during the period of transition will fall tumultuously apart under the strain of real politics. Such struggles are often considered desultory in longstanding democratic societies, where individuals long to be left alone in their gated solitude.

But here these convulsions will be beautiful, precisely for how extraordinary they will be. For unlike Khaled Said and Mohamed Bouazizi, Arab governments will finally be allowed to die of natural causes. They will die in their political sleep, after peaceful transitions, and sometimes they will die suddenly in disgrace, in votes of no-confidence and scandal.

And those will be, at last, deaths worth celebrating.

David Faris received his PhD in Political Science from the University of Pennsylvania in 2010, and his BA from Drew University in 2000. His scholarly work has been published in *Arab Media & Society*, *Middle East Policy*, *Technology & Politics Review*, and the forthcoming *Routledge Handbook of Participatory Culture*. He is the author of *Dissent and Revolution in a Digital Age: Social Media, Blogging and Activism in Egypt*, forthcoming from I.B. Tauris and Co., which explains how digital activists helped end Egyptian authoritarianism. He also serves as a strategy advisor and blogger for the Meta-Activism Project, which seeks to build foundational knowledge about digital activism. At Roosevelt, he teaches Introduction to Political Science, Comparative Democratization, Power and Politics in the Middle East, Egyptian Politics, International Relations of the Middle East, Terrorism and Political Violence, and Mobiles and Mobilization: Global Digital Activism. He is a frequent contributor to Egypt's leading English-language newspaper, the *Daily News Egypt*. You can contact David Faris at **dfaris@roosevelt.edu**.

FALL 2011

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PHILANTHROPIST LARRY GOODMAN acknowledges applause from Chicago Alderman Robert Fioretti (under the Lakers' sign) and others at a groundbreaking ceremony on July 26 for the Lillian and Larry Goodman Center, Roosevelt's new field house. Goodman's $3 million lead gift will allow Roosevelt to construct a two-story facility on the southeast corner of Congress Parkway and Wabash Avenue that will be used for intramurals, physical and wellness activities, club sports and varsity basketball and volleyball.