Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings

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4 Contingency and Agency in a Turning Point Event

March 18, 2011, in Daraa, Syria

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Abstract

Based on open-ended interviews with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Turkey, this analysis of Syria’s first mass street demonstration, occurring on March 18, 2011, in the city of Daraa, seeks to make three contributions to understanding revolts. First, in illustrating how decisions or their intended outcomes might have been disrupted, it calls attention to the contingency shaping when, where, and how uprisings begin. Second, it shows how detailed study of actions and interactions at a specific juncture in time and place allows us to examine the relative weight of both premeditation and spontaneity in the development of protest. Third, scrutiny of participants’ understandings of their concrete choices can help reveal the microfoundations of macropolitical phenomena, shedding the light on the roles of instrumental rationality, values, and emotions in guiding behavior.

Keywords: Syria, contingency, agency protest, revolution, critical events

“In a revolution, as in a novel,” Alexis de Tocqueville famously wrote, “the most difficult part to invent is the end.” This quip finds vindication in the Arab world today, where changes put in motion by the 2011 uprisings continue to surprise and confound observers. Nowhere is this more dramatic than in the civil war raging in Syria. Given the astonishing devastation in the country, it can be easy to forget that the initiation of peaceful protest
also astonished observers at the time. We still have much to learn about how demonstrations began and launched a revolt.

Many approaches in social movement theory elucidate the structural sources of grievance that motivate people to challenge authority, as well as the role of networks and framing in facilitating mobilization. However, they leave us to wonder how these factors come together with particular decisions, in time and place, in order to produce the first acts of protest and sustain them long enough to get an uprising off the ground. Probing such elements, this essay seeks to put such a single, critical contentious episode under the microscope. I do so through original interviews with participants in a demonstration on March 18, 2011, in the city of Daraa, the 100,000-person capital of a predominantly rural province of the same name. This was not Syrians’ first action inspired by the “Arab Spring.” However, it was the first street protest that was sustained sufficiently long to attract large numbers and generate a swelling procession over space. Ending in the revolution’s first fatalities, it propelled daily demonstrations in the Daraa region and hastened nationwide demonstrations after one week’s time. It is thus widely regarded as one of the key “sparks” lighting the national rebellion against Bashar al-Assad (McEvers 2012; Sterling 2012).

In unpacking how this spark itself became lit, I do not wish to imply that, had it not occurred, there would not have been a revolution in Syria. The very occurrence of revolt did not hinge on this particular day in Daraa. Nonetheless, this event is analytically important because it offers a window into the challenges and uncertainty that inhibit protest in repressive circumstances, especially during an early phase in which protest remains extremely rare. Scrutiny of how such moments transform from pre-revolutionary periods to revolutionary junctures can thus lay bare the processes through which would-be protestors overcome constraints in order to get mass mobilization off the ground.

Cascade models of collective action deduce the abstract processes by which a few early risers in protest present new information that leads bystanders to update their calculations of the costs and benefits of dissent, thereby encouraging increasing numbers to participate until a bandwagon generates a critical mass (Granovetter 1978; Schelling 1978; Kuran 1991; Marwell and Oliver 1993). Empirical scrutiny of the start of an actual protest cascade, in context, reminds us of the contingencies shaping these dynamics. Particularly in settings in which the state is ready to quash opposition, first movers must manage to act where and when they can be seen by others. Second movers must decide to follow, even though the risks are significant, the prospects of making a difference are dim, and the still-small size of the
crowd ensures that they are unlikely to pay a reputational cost for remaining on the sidelines (Pearlman 2016). As an uprising grows, there can reach a point at which dissent is routinized and large crowds cease to be surprising. A return to the earliest moments can help analysts appreciate why the initial launch of dissent is often so surprising for participants themselves. It therefore encourages us to take seriously the contingency and complex motivations infusing individuals’ decisions to rebel, even as we enumerate the larger structural causes of revolution.

In taking up this approach, this study stands to make at least three contributions to understanding revolts such as that in Syria and elsewhere. First, in illustrating how decisions or their intended outcomes might have been disrupted, such an investigation calls attention to the contingency shaping when, where, and how uprisings begin. This offers an important complement to explanations of the Arab revolts that privilege either background factors or large-scale processes such as transnational diffusion. Second, detailed study of actions and interactions at a specific juncture in time and place allows us to examine the relative weight of both premeditation and spontaneity in the development of protest. This is particularly puzzling under repressive regimes, where prohibitions make prior planning both more difficult and more necessary, lest an incipient challenge to authority be quashed before reaching fruition. Third, consideration of how individuals explain their choices can help us explore the microfoundations of macropolitical phenomena. While all social theory builds on assumptions about the bases of individual decision-making, empirical scrutiny of participants’ understandings of their concrete choices brings us closer to identifying the actual roles of instrumental rationality, values, and emotions in guiding behavior.

These propositions come to the fore in the open-ended interviews that I conducted with Syrian refugees identified through snowball sampling during three and a half months of ethnographic fieldwork in Jordan (2012, 2013) and Turkey (2013), as a part of a larger project on oral histories of the Syrian revolt (Pearlman 2017). In this essay, I focus on the 58 testimonials that I collected from people from Daraa, and especially on the recollections of a much smaller number of individuals who participated in the March 18 protest. Open-ended interviews create space for people to provide information that researchers might not think to elicit in questionnaires, and thus can offer perspectives and local knowledge that go missing in official histories and universal theories (Patterson and Monroe 1998). Personal narratives, as sources that naturally put actors and action sequences at the forefront, offer particular leverage for tracing the agency driving development of an event in time.
Nevertheless, as a form of evidence, interviews must be analyzed with caution. Individuals’ post hoc explanations of their actions can carry deliberate or inadvertent rationalizations or misrepresentations, harden into social scripts, or assert lofty motivations rather than admit to base ones. Testimonials relayed in the context of an ongoing conflict also might be colored by the attitudes, affects, and discursive terms reigning at that particular juncture during which they are gathered. Even when interviews accurately identify choices that were made in the context of protest, they do not themselves fully reveal the causal dynamics that led to those particular choices. These are important limitations, and any researcher using this kind of data must be vigilant in keeping them in mind. In my work, I have attempted to address the complexities of first-hand narratives by analyzing them with an ethnographic sensibility, in the sense of seeking to glean the meaning of behavior to the actors involved (Schatz 2009, 5) I have developed tools to do so through my general immersion in Syrian refugee communities, which built on years of living in the Middle East over the past two decades. In using interviews to create a chronicle of events in Daraa in March 2011, I have also sought to maximize the accuracy by cross-checking interviews both against each other and against journalistic and investigatory reports on the same events.

Given the much-discussed failure of experts to predict the Arab uprisings (Gause 2011; Bellin 2014), some scholars now call for research that focuses less on retroactive explanation than on understanding the variability in human decision-making that these revolts bring to light (Goodwin 2011; Kurzman 2012). Following their lead, this chapter does not seek to test hypotheses about why the Syrian uprising began where and when it did. Nor does it make the claim that this event in Daraa explains the Syrian uprising. Rather, my more modest aim is to explore what detailed examination of the inception of popular protest can reveal about the motivations, decisions, interactions, and contingencies that shape larger shifts in collective dissent. Meticulous qualitative investigation of the initial steps of a revolution sheds light on the agential dimension of the strategy that structural causes can often obscure. A handful of day-by-day analyses of the Egyptian uprising demonstrate the value of such an approach in that case (El-Ghobashy 2011; Holmes 2012). Yet no such academic research exists on the Syrian revolt, or goes into even more depth to disaggregate the sequences of actions and interactions constituting a single critical day. With this aim, this essay proceeds in three parts. It begins with a review of relevant literature on both social movements in general and the Syrian uprising in particular. It then uses original interviews with Syrian oppositionists, corroborated by
a range of published written, audio, and video sources, to craft a detailed narrative of the lead up to and unfolding of the March 18 protest in Daraa. It concludes with a discussion of what this analysis indicates about the roles of contingency, planning, spontaneity, and a range of individual motives in shaping the launch of an uprising.

The Value of Scrutinizing Particular Events

A leading approach in social movement theory holds that collective challenges to authority emerge when broad socioeconomic developments expand the structure of political opportunities by unsettling existing power relations and/or increasing the leverage of marginalized populations (McAdam 1982). Excluded groups mobilize by using preexisting organizations and networks to recruit members and appropriating elements of culture and ideas to frame their visions in ways that animate support (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996).

The large body of theory and empirical analysis developing these propositions has shed invaluable light on the broad conditions under which, and processes through which, grievance is transformed into action. However, questions remain about the dynamic motivations and behaviors of the real individuals who decide to protest, especially when risk runs high. Any understanding of social phenomena such as collective dissent is incomplete without understanding of such micro-level decision-making. As Daniel Little (1998, 203) writes, “The mechanisms through which social causation is mediated turn on the structured circumstances of choice of intentional agents and nothing else.” Timur Kuran (1991, 16) agrees: “A mass uprising results from multitudes of individual choices to participate in a movement for change. There is no actor named ‘the crowd.’”

Analytical scrutiny of a particular protest event can bring to light these circumstances and choices. Analysis of sequences of actions, and their immediate effect on other actions, offers a window onto the confluences of contextual conditions and internal compulsions that produce the behaviors which, in turn, combine into collectively transformative events. This is valuable not only for crafting a dynamic vision of contentious processes, but also for building explanatory arguments. After all, every choice, as a moment or situation in which individuals or groups pursue one flow of action when they might have pursed another (Jasper 2004), carries a counterfactual. Pinpointed study of specific protest episodes pushes us to think about why people did what they did, how external factors did or did
not facilitate their realization of their intended aim, and how aggregate consequences might have differed had those factors been otherwise.

Empirical scrutiny of micro- and local-level processes at a specific juncture in space and time can make three particular contributions to understanding contentious processes such as those seen in the Middle East in 2011. First, it encourages us to appreciate the contingency inherent in revolts. Many explanations of the Arab uprisings focus on the broad political, economic, and socio-demographic trends that gradually intensified discontent and undermined regimes’ robustness (See, inter alia, Richards et al. 2013). Others explore the availability of new technologies for communicating information and organizing opposition (Lynch 2012), or the transnational diffusion processes that spread revolt across the region (Weyland 2012; Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik 2014). Scholars highlighting these elements aiding revolt are well aware of other factors, namely foreboding security apparatuses, that thwarted individuals’ willingness to act, threatened to sabotage protest planning, or served to suppress protests before they gained momentum. Ultimately, the revolts were made not only by facilitating conditions, but also by individuals who managed to circumvent potential disruptions due to their determination to protest despite risk and their reasoning about the most effective ways to do so. Study of their localized decisions and behaviors, in space and time, can identify the consequential contingency that infused them.

Second, analysis of a particular event pinpoints the relative roles of prior planning and spontaneity in the development of protest. David Snow and Dana Moss (2014, 1123) define spontaneity as “events, happenings, and lines of action […] which were not planned, intended, prearranged, or organized in advance of their occurrence.” They name several factors increasing the likelihood of spontaneous action, one of which is conditions of ambiguity, in the sense that the “scripts” that normally guide protest and police-protester encounters break down or dissolve, or nonscripted square-offs occur. These arguments, crafted largely in reference to the standardization of “public order management systems” in the West, need to be modified for authoritarian environments. In Syria, reigning scripts dictated quiescence to the cult of personality around the president and did not permit public protest (Wedeen 1999). When oppositionists dared to protest nonetheless, they plunged into conditions that were unprecedented and unknowable. On the one hand, this extreme ambiguity forced protesters to draw up scripts anew, which heightened the salience of spontaneous action. On the other, given security forces’ strict regulation of any group assembly and their readiness to quash all dissent, oppositionists could
not depend on spontaneity alone. Without careful planning about timing, location, and tactics, a protest event was unlikely to get off the ground, much less be sustained long enough to attract a crowd. Deductive logic thus suggests that the onset of an uprising in such a setting would involve both planning and spontaneity. Only collection and analysis of evidence about actors’ motivations, decisions, and behaviors, however, can reveal how those elements actually interacted or coexisted, in what sequences, and with what consequences.

Third, scrutiny of agency during the onset of what would become a historic transformation offers a window into the microfoundations of macropolitical phenomena. All social explanations build on assumptions about the underlying bases of individual decision-making. Research on choices in real protest events offers evidence about those bases, and can thereby help us adjudicate among three competing analytical approaches to understanding them. Theories that conceptualize individuals as utility-maximizers hold that self-interested agents obtain information, form beliefs, and then choose the most beneficial course of action (Elster 1999, 285). Alternatively, explanations that see individuals as driven by intrinsic values, identities, and principles suggest that people seek to fulfill human needs for dignity, integrity, and self-respect, sometimes irrespective of utility for achieving external aims (Deci 1975; Varshney 2003). Finally, another trend in scholarship insists that individual decision-making is also shaped by emotions: noninstrumental, subjective, evaluative experiences, which are evoked by external or mental events and carry both physiological changes and action tendencies (Frijda 1986, 4). All of these dimensions, and perhaps others, affect behavior (Etzioni 1986; Shamir 1990). Nonetheless, more research is needed to elucidate how they combine in protest situations such as those in the Arab uprisings and the conditions under which any one is likely to be especially salient (Pearlman 2013).

These points about protest dynamics apply to the Syrian case. Experts agree that a revolution in Syria was anything but guaranteed, yet typically locate that uncertainty in contradictory pushes and pulls at the macro level. After four decades of authoritarianism, Syrians longed for greater freedom, rule of law, economic opportunity, protection from an unchecked security apparatus, and an end to endemic corruption (George 2003; Yazbek 2011; Ziadeh 2011; Starr 2012; Wieland 2012). Assuming the presidency after his father’s death in the year 2000, Bashar al-Assad oversaw neoliberal restructuring that heightened the conspicuous luxury for a collusive elite while cutting subsidies and services that further worsened living conditions among the bulk of the population (Aboud 2013). Mismanaged government
responses to drought exacerbated discontent, particularly among a rural population that had once benefited from the regime (International Crisis Group 2011; Hinnebusch and Zintl 2014).

While these factors suggested Syrians’ readiness to join fellow Arabs elsewhere in demanding political change, other factors predicted the opposite. Indeed, as protest swept other countries in the Middle East, many analysts and Syrians themselves judged Syria to be a “kingdom of silence” immune from the regional tide (Abdulhamid 2011; Bröning 2011; Ismail 2011, 540). Compared to other countries that saw uprisings, Syria’s single-party police state was more repressive, its military more infused with the regime, and its civil society more severely curtailed. Whereas Tunisia and Egypt saw most of society alienated from the government, Syria was an ethnic mosaic in which many members of minority sects supported the president, who comes from the minority Alawite sect. Beyond this, the regime enjoyed assets such as a popular foreign policy, the legacy of a welfare state, and generally high regard for a youthful head of state (International Crisis Group 2011; Hinnebusch and Zintl 2014). The same market reforms that accentuated sentiments of relative deprivation among the masses solidified the loyalty of crony capitalists (Haddad 2012) and led many in the affluent and middle classes to associate their aspirations for consumer comfort with continuation of the Assad regime (Wedeen 2013).

This general picture explains doubts surrounding the possibility of a rebellion in Syria, but attributes them to the precarious balance of forces favoring or disfavoring the Assad regime. Examination of localized decisions and actions can reveal how this uncertainty at the macro level unfolded at the microlevel, where individuals’ will to rebel was met by their fear of repression and the presence of a strong security apparatus encountered the strategic maneuvers of oppositionists to avert it. These issues come to light in a number of studies that examine the dynamics of protest more specifically. Some works consider the mix of opportunities and threats that motivated protestors (Leenders and Heydemann 2012) or the escalatory effects of repression (Droz-Vincent 2014). In several pieces, Reinoud Leenders researches Daraa as I do here, and asks how and why this particular community managed to initiate what became a nationwide revolt. Leenders (2012, 2013b) attributes much of Daraa’s first mover role to its dense social networks organized around clans and cross-border movements for migration or smuggling. These networks generated solidarity, aided recruitment, facilitated framing of themes and slogans, and helped translate perceived opportunities into effective and sustained collective
action. Using the “hidden transcripts” of dissenting views that circulated within these networks, people in Daraa produced framing strategies that not only motivated protest, but also were forms of protest in themselves (Leenders 2013a).

Throughout this important work on the identifiable factors that increased the potential for protest, Leenders and others also discuss how the actual occurrence of protest is infused with elements of contingency, unpredictability, and agency. They insist that opportunities are not given, but perceived and created by people who circumvent constraints, innovate strategy, and ultimately face risk (also see Kurzman 1996, 2004). Detailed descriptive analysis of a specific event can help us identify and trace the decisions and actions that make this possible. Original interviews with those who participated in or witnessed the first mass street protest in Daraa allow us to dissect that turning point into the many micro-turning points that comprised it, and thereby advance this understanding in the Syrian case.

The Making of a Critical Protest Event in Syria

Rebellions in Tunisia and Egypt demonstrated to people all over the Middle East that what was once largely taken as an inexorable truth – that the region’s citizens would not rise up against their governments – was a contingent condition susceptible to change. Though most Syrians remained too afraid to articulate dissent, this newly ambiguous context emboldened some who harbored hope for reform. Observers thus noted some citizens refusing to supply bribes to officials as usual. Others began broaching political topics in conversation, on the internet, and in unprecedented appearances of anti-regime graffiti (International Crisis Group 2011, 8-10).

A man from Daraa described how people there started to push boundaries in increasingly marked ways:

The forced resignation of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia was like a fantasy. It was a dream. I was one of the people in Syria who had tears in his eyes [...] We wondered: could a revolution happen in another country, too? Most people thought it was impossible. Tunisia did not have as big a psychological impact as Egypt did. The Egyptian Revolution was only eighteen days. But there were some guys who didn’t sleep at night. They followed the news nonstop. All day long: Egypt, Egypt, Egypt.
When it was announced that Mubarak had resigned [...] Wow, I remember that day [...] People in Syria were very happy inside. The state did not want to make any conflicts in the street. So people went outside, and they walked around and they started to talk. They talked about Egypt and Mubarak and said “Grace be to God.” They did not talk about Bashar. But they knew inside. Inside them, they wanted their own revolution, too. Outwardly, they just talked about Egypt. Inside they were moved, and had thoughts [...] Then Syrians who had migrated abroad began to write a lot [on the internet]. They wrote on the Syrian revolution pages about the regime’s crimes [...] And then there began other revolutions, in Yemen and Libya, for example, and in Egypt it ended. And the push became even bigger for something to happen in Syria. (Interview with T.A., Amman, Jordan, September 16, 2012)

Around this time, a female doctor from a well-connected Daraa family was detained after a phone conversation in which she reportedly said, in a reference to the uprisings occurring elsewhere in the Middle East, “Let it happen to us, too” (Leenders 2012, 420-421). About ten days later, on March 6, anti-regime graffiti appeared on the wall of a local school. Security forces came to the school and arrested some 15 children, apparently arbitrarily. Journalistic investigations reported that intelligence agents stormed houses and made more arrests for several days thereafter (McEvers 2012; Fahim and Saad 2013).

Elders from the families of the detained children appealed for their release by making a formal visit to local officials, including the provincial chief of political security, Atef Najeeb, a cousin of Bashar al-Assad with a history of corruption (Sands, Vela, and Maayeh 2014). Najeeb’s abuse of power was predictable given his position in a political economy unchecked by rule of law. The particular provocativeness of his response to the relatives of the arrested children, however, was contingent. When they pleaded for their release, the security chief reportedly dismissed them, saying: “Forget your children. Go home to your wives and make more children. And if you do not know how, bring your wives and we will show you” (Macleod 2011; McEvers 2012; Sterling 2012).

The impact of these words, whether they were actually spoken as such or persisted as legend, cannot be underestimated. Nearly every person whom I met from Daraa could quote them verbatim. “Everyone in Daraa knows each other,” a man explained. “So everyone found out. And people were really angry when they learned what had happened” (interview with
A. Sh., Ramtha, Jordan, October 6, 2012). His wife elaborated: “We felt like those kids were our kids. And those women [whom Najeeb insulted] were just like us” (interview with U. Sh., Ramtha, Jordan, October 6, 2012). These references to dense social ties speak to the importance of the structure of social networks. Yet they also speak to what McAdam (2003, 297) refers to as the contingent factors that operate within networks and serve to animate network-based processes. In this case, networks enabled the flow of information, but the impact of that information on people lay in the values and emotions of indignation and empathy that they triggered.

While this “moral shock” reverberated in Daraa, citizens elsewhere in Syria were responding to other impetuses. A spontaneous demonstration erupted in Damascus’s commercial market when a police officer slighted a merchant and a large crowd gathered to support him in an “unprecedented” show of defiance (Abbas 2011, 1; International Crisis Group 2011, 9). Syrians held a handful of vigils in support of other Arab revolts. These grew in size from an early sit-in of about 15 people in solidarity with Egypt (Human Rights Watch 2011a) to a later gathering of some 200 outside the Libyan embassy (Williams 2011). Each protest was violently dispersed when security forces beat protestors. In early February, activists based outside Syria called for protests under the slogan “Day of Rage,” but they lacked connections to citizens in the country and nothing happened (Sands 2011).

The regime unbanned Facebook that month, and a new group rallied tens of thousands of supporters under the call for a revolution against Bashar al-Assad. When the group called for another “Day of Rage” for March 15, many more people were ready to participate. Various localities witnessed events, yet security personnel promptly dispersed the assemblies and arrested dozens (Abouzeid 2011). The following day, a peaceful demonstration outside the Interior Ministry calling for the detainees’ release was again forcibly dispersed (Human Rights Watch 2011b). “The culture of protesting is not present here. They oppressed it until they killed it,” an activist lamented (New York Times 2011).

Back in Daraa, politically minded citizens were also increasingly eager to protest. “There was strong hope for change,” a young man then in his late teens recalled. “We, the youth, knew that if we did not rise up at this time, it would be impossible to rise up for another million years. We had to do something in Syria. We had to have demonstrations, even without prior planning” (interview with I. M., Irbid, Jordan, September 17, 2012). Others with more experience, including some of these young men’s fathers and uncles active in leftist opposition groups, recognized a need to plan. A member of that older cohort explained:
We consulted and communicated with each other. We were all people who were involved in political work. It would go something like this: I have some political awareness. I come to talk to you. You are convinced that we need to do something and you commit to bringing ten people who you trust. Then a second person does the same, and then a third. So there developed a circle, a group that had the capacity to do something. In the beginning, this circle reached about 50 or 60 people. (Interview with W.T., Irbid, Jordan, August 14, 2013)

These oppositionists, along with their sons and others, secretly circulated a plan to hold a demonstration in front of the central court building on the March 15 “Day of Rage.” Would-be protestors took various precautions in anticipation of repression. Some sought to avoid attracting security forces’ attention by traveling to the site individually rather than in groups. Others, eager to contain the impact of any crackdown, made calculated decisions about who should participate. “My brother went, but he did not let anyone else go,” a young man explained. “That way, if just one person goes and gets arrested, only one person from the family is lost” (interview with C.J., Irbid, Jordan, August 25, 2013).

Careful premeditation notwithstanding, the demonstration’s success was contingent on activists’ ability to shield their plans from the knowledge of the intelligence services, informants, and their multiple means of surveillance. Such did not come to pass, as one attendee described:

We’d spread the word very secretly, by word of mouth, person-to-person. One person would whisper the news to someone else; only those people he knew really well and trusted fully. Many people came, but the security forces were already there and ready. They quashed it before it even began. People came, saw the security forces, and left immediately. They didn’t even stop. So there was no demonstration. We decided that we needed to try again. (Interview with L.M., Amman, Jordan, August 17, 2013)

A small group met that night and decided that their next attempt to organize protest should take place at the mosque that Friday, March 18. “Why Friday prayers?” a Daraa resident asked rhetorically. “Because, in Syria, it is prohibited for more than five people to assemble without prior security approval. So prayer inside the mosque is the only opportunity people have to gather” (interview with T.A., Amman, Jordan, September 16, 2012). The decision to hold a repeat demonstration at a mosque was one strategic choice. The next choice, of no less strategic significance, was which mosque. The city’s
main religious institution, the Omari mosque, a symbol of pride and piety for the entire region, regularly attracted a large crowd of worshippers. For the same reason, it was sure to attract a large security force presence. As such, activists selected a smaller house or worship: the Hamza wa Abbas mosque, located in the Mahata neighborhood:

Security forces watch mosques very closely. But we chose a mosque that had just newly been built, so security forces had not yet established any significant surveillance presence there […] The same young people who were committed to protesting on March 15 came out on March 18. One of the young men was in charge of starting it. He eventually became a martyr, God rest his soul. He was told that after the prayer finished he was supposed to stand up and shout, “Allahu Akbar, God is Great!” The idea was that just one man would start, and then the other young men who were with him would stand up and repeat [the chant] with him. The plan was that people would come out from Hamza wa Abbas, and a few people would also start chanting at Omari. Then crowds from both mosques would meet in a city square. The planning was very precise. We were living under this regime and knew not to leave any detail to chance. We had studied the matter carefully. We knew the surveillance situation.

(Interview with W.T., Irbid, Jordan, August 14, 2013)

Adding to the security advantages of the mosque was the social density of the neighborhood in which it was located. “Everybody in Mahata knows everybody else,” explained one of the activists, who lived in that area. “Most of the people are relatives. Relations are close and the houses are very close together” (interview with L.M., Amman, Jordan, August 17, 2013). These words again pointed to the importance of social networks. Yet they also suggested the diversity of mechanisms through which they aid mobilization: here the contribution of preexisting social ties to protest did not turn on recruitment as much as the protection it offered from regime infiltration. Apart from these benefits, selection of this particular part of town held other advantages that were more serendipitous: it was also the neighborhood in which the school with the graffiti incident was located, and some family members of the arrested children, already angry and primed to protest, would to be at that mosque for Friday prayers, as well (interview with D.L., Amman, Jordan, October 9, 2012).

March 18 arrived. A man not involved in the planning described how the event unfolded as hoped by its planners:
The Friday prayer ended. People greeted each other as is customary, saying "Salam wa Alaykoom, Salam wa Alaykoom, Peace be upon you." Then one person got up and said “Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!” He said it three times. Older people in the mosque started to run away! Can you imagine? They started running out of a door here and a door there. Two people started. And then another person and another person got up. They formed a small demonstration, of about just ten people and left from the mosque.

All of this happened in a short amount of time. They started chanting: “God, Syria, Freedom, and nothing more!” Under Bashar al-Assad, there was the chant, “God, Syria, Bashar, and nothing more!” So what did they do? They substituted the word freedom for Bashar.

People were watching from their windows and balconies. It was an amazing thing. In decades, people in Syria had never gone out into the streets unless to say, “Bashar al-Assad, forever!” or “Hafez al-Assad, forever!” But here was a demonstration not in support of the regime. And not with the permission of the regime. And asking for freedom. And there the barrier of fear began to break.

Some people didn’t participate. Many people were just standing there and watching, afraid. But other people were really manly and brave. They got on other people’s shoulders and were clapping and chanting. (Interview with T.A., Amman, Jordan, September 16, 2012)

While careful premeditation was crucial for getting the demonstration off the ground, planning ended with the idea that one man would begin chanting and the hope that others would follow. “The most important thing was that we started,” the senior oppositionist explained. “But could anyone know or anticipate what was going to happen after that? The answer is no” (interview with W.T., Irbid, Jordan, August 14, 2013). The unscripted context of a street demonstration opened a larger role for spontaneous action, which took over where that of planning ended. Confronted with the unprecedented sight of a street demonstration, bystanders responded in ways they could not have predicted in advance. Some fled, some were immobilized, and some jumped in. While their choices might have been informed by strategic reasoning about the costs and benefits of protest, they were also moved by values and emotions. Some were inspired by the collective euphoria of the chanting and clapping, or felt the need to prove their masculinity and courage. Others could not overcome feelings of fear. Still others were caught between fear of repression and an inner compulsion to raise their voices.
In such highly ambiguous circumstances, bystanders negotiated confusing and contradictory impetuses. One man who saw the march as it passed by his home, and decided to join it, reflected:

The walk from the Hamza wa Abbas Mosque to the Omari Mosque is maybe 30 minutes, if you're walking slowly. Our house is along the way. We saw people marching. And they were chanting, "We want our children! Reform! Freedom!" And people came out from their houses. We would be cowards if we didn't march with them. At the same time, we were afraid. You felt like you were standing against the unknown. It was very, very difficult. You knew that anything could happen. They could arrest you. They could kill you. They could kill your family. People were afraid, but at the same time, we knew that we needed to do something. (Interview with A.Sh., Ramtha, Jordan, October 6, 2012)

The demonstration reached Omari mosque, where many more joined the crowd. One of the younger activists explained that he was confident that most bystanders shared the basic frustrations that motivated the protest, but had not foreseen the degree to which they would act on them:

We expected that people would sympathize with us, but we were surprised that it only took one minute for everyone to know what was going on when they saw us marching. People joined us and started chanting. People came from everywhere, from houses, streets from other mosques [...] And at that point, we lost control of the situation. We were not responsible any more. It became a public matter. (Interview with D.L., Amman, Jordan, October 9, 2012)

The march grew and, within an hour or two, a crowd of several hundred had gathered (Macleod 2011; YouTube 2011). It stopped at the edge of the valley that separated the demonstration from the section of town where governmental institutions were located and a security deployment had been called to the scene. Regime officials attempted to negotiate with the demonstrators and a security officer threatened to arrest protestors. When this failed to disperse the crowd, they then fired tear gas, water cannons, and bullets (YouTube 2011; Human Rights Watch 2011d). Two protestors, Hussam Ayash and Mahmoud Jawabra, were killed. A third, Ayham Al-Hariri, died of his wounds a few days later (Human Rights Watch 2011c).

Lethal violence shocked and outraged the crowd. “I believe that was the tipping point,” one activist said. “After they witnessed the blood,
there was no going back” (interview with W.T., Irbid, Jordan, August 14, 2013). Another agreed. “At this time, a new stage of the Syrian revolution started,” he reflected. “That night many people of Daraa might have gone home and tried to find another solution if the regime hadn’t fired on the demonstrators and killed people” (interview with D.L., Amman, Jordan, October 9, 2012).

The next day, those who had been killed were laid to rest. Like Friday prayers, the funerals offered a rare permissible opportunity for large numbers to gather and voice political dissent. This funeral attracted a crowd several times the size of the prior day’s demonstration, and it too joined in impassioned chants against the regime (BBC 2011). One attendee explained that, far from instilling fear that deterred participation, the lethal violence of the previous day appeared only to convince people to seize what might be a once-in-a-lifetime chance to mobilize a collective cry for change:

We were afraid to go out. Then the chance came to us. We were not going to let it pass [...] If we lost it, does that mean we’d never be able to go out again? Also, we knew that if we went back, the regime would come and arrest all the young people who went out the first day. They’d all die in prison. So there was no backing out. We knew if we went back, everyone would die. They’ll leave no one. So there was no choice. We entered a road with no return. (Interview with C.J., Irbid, Jordan, August 25, 2013)

Discussion and Conclusions

Though March 15 is typically regarded as the start of the Syrian rebellion against Bashar al-Assad, the events of March 18 in Daraa were no less crucial and transformative in the making of what became a nationwide mobilization. It is possible that, had events not unfolded as they did in Daraa, other events in other places might have served the same function in launching a revolution in Syria. The fact that these events did happen where and when they did, however, allows us to scrutinize that incident for clues about the agential dimensions of a revolution’s launch. Study of this case offers us a chance to disentangle the mix of foreseeable conditions, social interactions, and individual motivations that, against a backdrop of structural causes, combined to shift a critical mass of persons from silence to voice.
Analysis of how this momentous shift was hastened in Syria reveals how the Daraa turning point was the product of myriad choices that were also turning points for those who made them and the community transformed by their consequences. My analysis of this event does not offer a comprehensive portrait of all the varied dynamics at play in shaping it; scrutiny from other perspectives, such as those emphasizing gender or socioeconomic class, might produce different kinds of insight. My focus on agency and contingency, however, has sought to make three contributions to understanding rebellions in Syria and elsewhere. First, examination of the specific decisions and actions entailed in a critical protest event reveals the contingency shaping each step of its development. Explanations of the Arab uprisings that focus on political and economic structures, technological advances, or transnational diffusion can create the impression that popular uprisings were inevitable. We ought not forget the real possibility that the initial will to rebel might have been stymied, quashed, or derailed. In Daraa, what if there had been no graffiti on the school or no arrest of the children? What if the police forces had not insulted their families or had released the children more promptly? What if activists had gone forward with the March 15 demonstration outside the courthouse and all been arrested? What if the security apparatus, alerted by the week’s earlier calls for “Day of Rage,” had posted agents at the Hamza wa Abbas mosque that Friday and successfully deterred the demonstration or overwhelmed it before it attracted a bandwagon? What if the young man designated to begin chanting on March 18 had lost the courage to play that role, or too few people followed him? These and many other such questions call attention to the contingency that accompanied the first tentative events that helped spur a nationwide revolt. Attention to these elements captures the real uncertainty and hazards with which individuals coped as they undertook the risk of protest.

Second, careful disaggregation of a protest episode into a sequence of interactive decisions allows us to assess the roles of both prior intention and spontaneity in defining its course. The Syrian case affirms arguments that protest conditions that are ambiguous, as opposed to defined by “scripts” for permissible dissent, expand the role for consequential spontaneous action. Yet they also remind us that when this ambiguity is due to prohibition of dissent, spontaneous action alone is unlikely to be sufficient to transform an incipient initiative into large-scale collective action. Given pervasive state

1 The children were released later that week, showing signs of torture. See Human Rights Watch 2011d; Sterling 2012; Fahim and Saad 2013.
surveillance, oppositionists in Daraa brought deliberate premeditation not only to the task of planning protest, but also to the challenge of planning about how to plan. They thus made carefully calculated choices about how and with whom to talk about a possible demonstration, and also about where and when to attempt a second demonstration when the first was foiled. Without such strategic preparation, learning, and adaptation, a protest might never have gotten off the ground. At the same time, protest would not have gotten very far off the ground without the spontaneous participation of a much larger number of citizens not privy to such preparations. It was their joining en masse that transformed an incipient initiative into collective action with revolutionary potential. This close reading of the March 18 protest does not aim to derive definitive conclusions about the sequencing, interaction, and relative salience of planning and spontaneity in uprisings against authoritarianism. However, it offers inductive insights of use for future research crafting and testing hypotheses about these dynamics.

Third, empirical scrutiny of agency brings to light the diverse bases on which individuals decide to participate in protest and how they do so. Evidence from Syria lends support to each of three main approaches to understanding the microfoundations of contentious collective action. Some citizens made choices based on strategic thinking about the rationality of protest. For example, one man judged that large numbers attended the funeral on March 19 on the calculation that they would be punished regardless of whether they participated and, if there was ever a time to push for political change, it was then. Others acted on values and identities, such as manliness, courage, or a sense of obligation to join a collectivist effort. Beyond utility and values, emotions also motivated action. Given acute awareness of the regime’s capacity for repression, it is difficult to imagine that Syrians who protested did not experience some degree of fear. Some were pulled through that fear by the euphoric collective effervescence of street protest. Others were pushed past it by sheer indignation in the face of what they perceived as humiliating insults and, even more powerfully, illegitimate killings. This research on Daraa thus supports those scholars calling for pluralization of understandings of the microfoundations of contentious politics (Varshney 2003; Pearlman 2013). It encourages continued thinking about how different logics complement, supplement, or combine with each other to motivate high-risk political action.

Syria’s first mass street demonstration in March 2011 was hence a product of both long-held grievances and contingent sparks, prior planning and spontaneous action, and complex motivations shaped by instrumentality, values, and emotions. The Assad regime responded to peaceful protests
with violence, oppositionists gradually took up arms, the regime escalated its reprisals, a range of external state and nonstate players intervened, and a full-fledged civil war engulfed the country. Analysis of the first stirrings of this conflict reminds us that what has evolved into unspeakable horror began with very localized acts of political acumen and hope. They also entailed sacrifice. Of the oppositionists whose words are excerpted here, one has since lost his life and one lost a limb. All have lost loved ones and struggle with the trauma of violence, forced migration, and watching their country tear itself apart. In this context, listening to their stories is not simply an invaluable source of academic knowledge about processes of social mobilization and political change. It is also a way to honor the human spirit that moves people to face risk to challenge injustice and call for freedom.

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