Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings

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It Takes Two (or More) to Tango

The Local Coproduction of the Alexandrian Revolutionary Moment

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Abstract

How did the Egyptian Revolution come about? By focusing on a particular set of interactions during one day, January 25, 2011, in Egypt’s second city, Alexandria, this chapter uses a microanalytical approach to shed light on the highly interactive and volatile moments when a revolution starts. I argue that we cannot fully grasp what happened in Alexandria during the first sequence of the Egyptian revolution (what came to be known as the “18 days”) if we only look at macrostructural aspects of protest at the national level. Building on a multiplicity of data (interviews, observations, digital traces, review of the press) gathered during fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2016, this research is a contribution to the microsociology of revolutions.

Keywords: Alexandria, Egyptian revolution, contingency, micro, protest milieu

“It is as simple as that: Past events will always look less random than they were.”

– Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Fooled by Randomness*

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Protest and Politics Workshop (The Graduate Center, CUNY) in New York City in April 2015. I’d like to warmly thank all the participants of the workshop for their feedback, and, more specifically, Luke Elliott-Negri, John Krinsky, and Jillian Schwedler for their invaluable inputs as discussants. I would also thank Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi, Chaymaa Hassabo and Hervé Rayner, as well as Jim Jasper and Frédéric Volpi, for their extremely useful comments on earlier versions of this chapter. Any mistakes or inaccuracies are my sole responsibility.
Late December 2010, Fleming neighborhood (Alexandria). About 30 people are chatting joyfully in the new headquarters of the Democratic Front Party while waiting for a conference to start. In the previous weeks, the party’s apartment has become a gathering spot for most activist groups in the city, regardless of their political orientation (leftists, liberals, moderate Islamists, and so on). The youths (most of those in attendance are less than 30 years old) are saluting each other fondly, joking around, and taking commemorative pictures. There is a clear familiarity in the atmosphere. Later on, two socialist activists are warmly welcomed as they arrive. They have both just gotten out of jail after being arrested on false charges concocted by the police, with whom they have a proverbial personal enmity. They are welcomed as heroes. Indeed, their arrest had quickly become a focal point for rallying all the Alexandrian groups. The two recently released activists, and two others (a liberal and a socialist), give a talk about the political situation in the country, and what should be done in the weeks and months to come. The audience listens carefully and gravely.

Later that evening, a few distinguished guests make an appearance, sparking strong emotions in the group: Khaled Saïd's mother, sister, and niece are here. Their presence is a strong symbol. Isn’t this group, after all, a product of the “Khaled Saïd moment”? As in other events of the previous weeks, an activist (also a singer and a lutenist) does a little performance, singing the classical militant hymns of Cheikh Imâm and poet Ahmad Fu’âd Negm. The evening ends with the customary collective photographs, as well as commemorative pictures with the groups’ “heroes” (the liberated detainees and the martyr’s family). Then, everyone starts cleaning up the apartment, piling up chairs, picking up trash, and enacting, through these small practices, this new collective identity they promote, that of the “youth who really love Egypt,” which differentiates them from the outside world.

This tiny group, described here during one of its activities (fa’āliyya, pl. fa’āliyyāt) is the core of what I call the Alexandrian Protest Milieu (APM).

2 Khaled Saïd was a young Alexandrian man killed by police forces in June 2010, sparking an unprecedented protest wave in the coastal city (Ali 2012; Ali and El-Sharnouby 2014).

3 “Shabāb biyhib masr bigad” (Youth who really love Egypt) is one of the slogans put forward by many of the youth groups.

4 These analyses draw from an ongoing doctoral dissertation on contentious politics in Alexandria (El Chazli 2017). Research was conducted in Alexandria during several visits between November 2012 and February 2016. I conducted more than 50 interviews, participant observation, collected “digital traces,” administered a survey, and mobilized different sources such as the press, blogs, etc. Finally, I consulted a database of 2000+ photographs and videos of protest in Alexandria. Interviews as well as very detailed photos and videos were used to reconstruct sequences prior to 2012 such as the one described above.
In many respects, the APM created the material and symbolic conditions for the mobilizations that took place in Alexandria on January 25, 2011. Not that its members either predicted or, for many of them, even thought these mobilizations possible. But through their actions and their “activist work” (Nicourd 2009), they contributed to the emergence of a local Alexandrian political arena. They also helped create and circulate contentious frames, constructing the police as the enemy, and thus giving a vocabulary to many people to express their discontent (and sometimes discover this discontent). They were the ones who organized, on the ground, the January 25 marches that would end up launching the largest protest wave Egypt had known until then.

We cannot fully grasp what happened in Alexandria during the first sequence of the Egyptian Revolution (what came to be known as the “18 days”) if we only look at macrostructural aspects of protest at the national level. What happened in Alexandria, and the way it happened, was closely related to the particular patterns of relations inside the APM, and also between the APM and other local players (including “traditional” parties and security agencies). By paying attention to how this milieu came to be, and then, on the ground, to how strategic interactions between the different players took place, it is possible to suggest a more empirically based approach to the emergent phases of protest episodes that would be attentive to the sequences of revolutionary conjunctures, rather than broad macrostructural readings of these events.

To do so, I pay close attention to a particular set of interactions during one day, January 25, 2011. I contend that a closer look at specific moments during a sequence is useful, as these moments can produce open-ended conjunctures (when “multiple futures coexist synchronically”), triggering “shifts in patterns of relations” (Ermakoff 2015, 110). By focusing on one day, we can observe and document precisely how players search “for behavioral cues from peers, their wait-and-see attitude, and their desire to align with a collective stance,” which constitute potent indicators of the “emergence of mutual uncertainty” (Ermakoff 2015, 100).

This approach does not position itself as a refutation of the role of “social structures” in explaining revolutionary conjunctures. It simply displaces our focus from causes to microprocesses and mechanisms. In so doing, I want to understand what makes up these conjunctures without resorting to what Rod Aya calls the “two-stage leap of faith […] from social change to grievances, and from grievances to revolt, without explaining either the genesis

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5 Or, in a similar sense, an “infrastructure for collective action” (Ismaïl 2006).
of specific grievances or the conversion of vague and various discontents into drastic but deliberate political action” (Aya 1979, 66). This approach recognizes the specificity of critical conjunctures, where behavioral scripts and routines tend to lose their efficacy, pushing players to rely on what their (immediate or imagined) reference groups do. Understanding what makes a crisis thus necessitates to focus on the microanalytics of the different players’ interactions (Ermakoff 2015).

I first sketch a brief genealogy of the Alexandrian Protest Milieu. Then I focus on how this group crystallized around a police abuse case. Third, I look at how activists approached the preparation of the “Day of Rage.” Fourth, I show how, through an iteration of concurring signs, activists starting redefining what was happening. Finally, I look at how activists were overwhelmed by what was going on, and how the logics of the situation soon took hold.

A Brief Genealogy of the APM

Alexandria, Egypt’s “second capital,” hosted various forms of activism throughout the twentieth century, sometimes in quite radical forms. Yet, after the different student protest waves of the 1960s and 1970s, and the subsequent rise of Islamic militancy in the 1980s and 1990s, the city seemed to lack its previous vibrant political life, following a national decline in contention and street politics, generally interpreted in the literature in terms of political “apathy” and “depoliticization” (for a critique, see Fillieule and Bennani-Chraïbi 2003).

Nationally, this political stalemate lasted until the early 2000s. Local politics in Alexandria had always been inscribed in the “national-institutional” arena. The main players always linked their local activities to national strategies. For instance, the main organized opposition force, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), played a pivotal role in mobilizing Alexandrians on different occasions. During the Second Intifada solidarity mobilizations in the early 2000s, they were able to mobilize tens of thousands in the city. But these efforts were part of the Brothers’ grand strategy. Nothing specifically Alexandrian was at stake.

During the 2000s, Alexandria witnessed a movement similar to Cairo’s, albeit on a smaller scale. The pro-Palestinian solidarity movement (2000-2002)

6 Alexandria is Egypt’s second most populous city, its wealthiest, as well as its most industrial one (Denis 1997, 23; Soliman 2011, 94). Activists, intellectuals, and artists like to call their city the “second capital” (al-‘āssima al-thāniya) (El Chazli 2013).
7 By “national-institutional” I refer to a spatial and legal framework, which constitutes the formal political institutions of the Egyptian nation-state. Due the extreme centralization of the Egyptian state, these political activities are mainly localized in Cairo.
and the anti-Iraq War movement (2003) gave birth to a new political generation, which formulated new ideas and tactics. In the mid-2000s, these different movements coalesced under the umbrella of the Kifāya movement, which was the first to federate intellectuals, artists, human rights activists, members of opposition parties and newly politicized youth from multiple ideological backgrounds (leftists, Arab-nationalists, Islamists, and liberals). However, Kifāya was never as large in Alexandria as it was in the capital. Tellingly, Alexandria activists would go to Cairo to attend protests organized there.

The period that followed saw repression and the deliberализation of the political sphere (Albrecht 2013; for an alternative reading, see Hassabo 2012). Nevertheless, by the end of 2009, rumors of Mohamed El-Baradei’s involvement in politics were circulating but not confirmed. Only in December of the same year did the Nobel Peace Prize winner publicize his will to promote democratic change in Egypt. His return to Egypt in February 2010 would initiate a strong protest wave and a remobilization of the opposition arenas in patterns relatively similar to those of Kifāya, under the banner of a newly formed National Association for Change (NAC) (Hassabo 2012).

In early 2010, a group of activists founded a Popular Campaign in Support of Mohamed El-Baradei (PCSMB) in Alexandria. It was meant to be a grassroots movement, thus differing from the elitist (and rather Cairo-centric) functioning of the NAC. The group grew quickly by capitalizing on the momentum created by El-Baradei’s return to Egypt. The intense online campaign on the behalf of the Nobel laureate was particularly efficient. This heterogeneous group of people had one main goal: inspire as many people as possible to learn about El-Baradei while limiting the possibilities of repression. They learned from past experiences, selecting actions far less disruptive than those of more radical groups (e.g., simply walking in a shopping mall while wearing El-Baradei T-shirts).

In parallel with these dynamics, the radical left was also experiencing changes. The Trotskyist movement (the Revolutionary Socialists [RS]), had helped found a broader leftist platform, named the Popular Democratic Movement (Hachd), aiming at federating all the left-leaning activists in the northern city, without imposing the constraints of being a member of a clandestine organization or the stigma of being “communist.” Other leftist

8 Mohamed El-Baradei was an Egyptian diplomat and later International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) executive and head. He is a Nobel Peace Prize laureate.
9 Many interviewees (most notably those who weren’t previously politically active) recall getting in touch with the group through Facebook. Wael Ghonim, a Google executive who would later create the famous “We Are All Khaled Said” page, managed the Facebook page supporting El-Baradei (Ghonim 2012).
microgroups, such as the Youth for Justice and Freedom (YJF), were also created during that period, as a local “franchise” of the group by the same name in Cairo. In any case, members of all these groups never exceeded 50 people who knew each other, but, somehow, their relations were still governed by the national agenda. For instance, the RS was closely linked to its Cairene counterparts, focusing on their agenda of the “downtrodden proletariat’s struggle” (kifāh al-kādiḥīn), whereas the PCSMB promoted El-Baradei’s project of “democratic change” (al-taghyīr al-dimuqrātī) in coordination with his main campaigners in the capital. It was a local event that changed these tendencies and largely contributed to the birth of a local arena, governed by its own logics, where intergroup relations started gaining importance over the national arena, crystallizing in the APM described above.

Khaled Saïd and the Framing of the Police as a Public Enemy

On a humid Alexandrian summer night, two policemen ventured into a cybercafé in the residential neighborhood of Cleopatra and soon got into an altercation with a customer. The policemen dragged the young man, Khaled Mohamed Saïd, outside the café. If the details of what happened next remain unclear, the result was Saïd’s brutal death. The event, in itself, was anything but new. Cases of police abuse and torture had been commonplace in Mubarak’s Egypt (Seif El-Dawla 2009). The difference in this case lay elsewhere. Several players seized the event and, through their work, constructed it as a public case, while designating an enemy, the police (Ismaïl 2012).

In the days that followed, opposition leader Ayman Nūr, who was visiting Alexandria on unrelated business, learned of Saïd’s misfortune and published a picture of the young man’s disfigured face on his Facebook page. Local leftist players quickly started organizing protests in Cleopatra and the surrounding neighborhoods. The momentum that built rapidly around the Khaled Saïd case, thanks especially to the online campaign launched by the newly created We Are All Khaled Saïd (WAAKS) Facebook page, encouraged local players to create something new to be able to coordinate on the ground. This marked the birth of what came to be called the Youth of the National Forces’ Bureau (maktab shabāb al-quwā al-wataniyya), also referred to as the Coordination Bureau (maktab el-tansi‘). Most of the youth groups active on the ground were represented in the CB. At the time, there was no equivalent institutionalized intergroup coordination in Cairo.
Between June and October 2010, the CB organized many protests, some many thousands strong, something that had never been seen in Alexandria other than during sporting events or regional crises (e.g., support for Gaza.) This collaborative experience was central in bringing the Alexandrian groups closer together despite their ideological backgrounds. The groups were now coordinating with each other much more than with their Cairene counterparts. Groups would sometimes protest with their local allies despite (or against) Cairo’s stance. Typically, when a member of a given political group was facing repression (was arrested or was facing a trial), the others would automatically express their solidarity.

By the end of 2010, the majority of Alexandrian activists personally knew each other and were embedded in a close-knit network of friendships. The relatively small numbers (not more than 50 people) and the common experience (of preparing for protests, getting arrested together, and so on) were the reason that a famous Alexandrian activist used this expression to explain why they all were so close: “You know, Alexandria is a one bedroom apartment! We all know each other, it’s like a small family” (interview with M., August 2013, Alexandria). From that moment on, a stable (and small) population emerged to constitute the Alexandrian Protest Milieu.

In the more general context of political deliberation that seemed to prepare for the upcoming elections (parliamentary and presidential), the regime turned to more authoritarian measures (handing prison sentences to activists, resorting to physical violence more easily, and so on). The harsh repression that hit all political forces by the end of 2010 tied the Alexandrian groups together even more, but it also left them in a state of disarray and hopelessness. After the Khaled Saïd momentum, the political space was steadily closing. Many of them were given prison sentences and were continuously harassed by police forces. This is the context in which the conference, described above, was held.

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10. These were the protests in the aftermaths of Khaled Said’s death.
11. A detailed account of this protest sequence can be found in the second chapter of my dissertation (El Chazli 2017).
12. One leading activist recounted how he would instruct younger activists not to protest, following Cairo’s stance, but would go and participate individually (bi-shakl fardī) in solidarity with fellow Alexandrian activists (interview, January 2013).
13. Delineating the contours of this milieu was done both through interviews and through the consultation of hundreds of photographs and videos of the protests. Friendship relations and interactions (commenting, image tagging, etc.) on Facebook were also used.
14. This would affect their personal lives profoundly. In one case, an activist was suspended from his job. In another, state security officers called an activist’s mother to tell her that her daughter, her daughter’s fiancé, and their friends would all end up in prison.
On January 1, 2011, at around 12:20 a.m., a huge blast shook the popular neighborhood of Sidi Bishr. A bomb had just gone off in front of the Church of the Two Saints, during the Saint Sylvester celebration mass. More than 20 people were killed and many more injured. In a matter of hours, angry protestors started rioting in the neighborhood, and the Central Security Forces (CSF) tried to restore order, with little success. In the following days, the APM reorganized itself and launched many online campaigns, declaring their solidarity with the victims, calling on people to donate blood, and blaming the Ministry of the Interior for the bombing. When a few days later a young Salafi man was killed while being held by the State Investigation Bureau, as a suspect for the bombings, Alexandrian activists exploited the Khaled Saïd frame, pointing out the brutal police practices and the absence of security (El Chazli and Hassabo 2013). Simultaneously, mobilizations in Tunisia were beginning to get more media attention and interest from Egyptian activists. After Tunisian President Ben Ali fled his country on January 14, events unfolded rapidly in Egypt, initiating a sequence of intense organizing and preparation for a newly fixed protest date, January 25, conveniently also known as “Police Day.” This concatenation of events renewed the hopes of many players in the possibility of launching a movement after the repression that had hit them in the previous weeks and months (El Chazli and Rayner 2014).

This is the broad context of January 25, full of feelings of hope and doubt in the possibility of change. Let us now tell the story of how these protests, through different local mediations, slowly developed into the greatest political crisis that Egypt had witnessed until then.

“The Revolution Starts on Tuesday at 2 p.m.,” or How to Plan the Unpredictable

The planning of the January 25 actions was the result of different (sometimes separate) processes. First, it sprang, as was shown, from Egyptian activists’ accumulated experience in mobilizing against the regime (El Chazli 2012). The development of street activism during the 2000s underlined its own strengths and limitations. Activists knew all too well how a demonstration usually ended, and how difficult it was for them to attract more people. Moreover, activists interpreted (rightly) the extreme repression of any
collective form of dissent by the end of 2010 as a signal that it was time for them to calm things down.16 “To be honest, we were in a bad shape by late 2010 because of a great number of arrests. We knew that 2011 wouldn’t go well for us [...] We received very clear messages from the security apparatuses [...] They were basically saying that by September 2011, all of us would be in prison.”17 When the momentum for January 25 started building online and in the media, activists on the ground were concerned about these recent interactions with the police. They planned accordingly. Second, the intrusion of an unknown third party, with a huge influence, changed the game. Unknown at the time, the administrators of the We Are All Khaled Saeed (WAAKS) page played a central role in suggesting protest starting points, usually while anonymously coordinating with activists on the ground.18 Activists had to take into account the page’s tremendous audience when deciding what to do.19 Third, the coordination experience in Alexandria during the previous year, as recounted in the first part of this chapter, proved essential.20

In the continuation of the CB, the different players21 met several times during the days leading up to the 25th. Three broad tendencies could be

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16 After the peak of the El-Baradei and the Khaled Saïd moments, activists organized a public demonstration against the hereditary transmission of power from Mubarak Sr. to Mubarak Jr., a process that many believed to be underway. It was simultaneously organized, on September 21, 2010, in Cairo and in Alexandria. In the latter, an enormous security dispositive was deployed and 37 out of the 50 people demonstrating were arrested. Even more alarming for the activists, the “common folk” (an-nās al-ʿādiyya) were completely unresponsive to their cries for help (one activist kept shouting in a megaphone that if people did not come and demonstrate, the few demonstrators would end up in jail, yet no one came). Most activists interpreted this as a “bad sign,” suggesting it might be time to back down, regroup, and reorganize (interviews with Alexandrian activists between 2012 and 2015).

17 Interview with a socialist activist, August 2013. Other interviewees confirmed this. For instance, one recalled how during protests in late 2010 the officers would mimic the “wait and see” and the throat slitting gestures.

18 The page’s main admin, Wael Ghonim, gives a detailed account of his involvement in his book (Ghonim 2012). Many of my interviewees confirm Ghonim’s account, especially the fact that there was a minimal coordination with them, usually without the local activists knowing who he was.

19 The page had more than 300,000 members on the eve of January 25 and the January 25 “event” had been sent to more than a million Egyptians.

20 Even if, due to the prevailing uncertainty of the situation, many players gave vague information about their plans, or even false information. Nevertheless, when these groups starting meeting on the ground on the 25th, as the day was starting to “succeed,” they fully coordinated their action.

21 There are conflicting versions about who participated. Those who are usually cited as being present at least at one of the meetings are: the PCSMB (which hosted the meetings); April 6
distinguished in those meetings. A loose group of players (mainly the April 6 movement, PCSMB, YFJL) were enthusiastic about the coming day, but thought that the usual protest sites (such as the court house) needed to be abandoned in favor of working-class districts. In contrast, political parties and more established groups (with older members) preferred the downtown option. Finally, a couple of players had their doubts about the event, for very different reasons. The Muslim Brotherhood Youth for instance, despite being present at all the meetings, finally informed the others that they would not be participating. On the other hand, the radical left had its own doubts; for ideological reasons, they were unconvinced by the idea of a “preorganized revolution” as well as the focus on police violations instead of more “social” demands. They eventually decided to participate, but were completely surprised on the 25th:

Our greatest hopes were to initiate a cycle like Kifāya [...] After Tunisia, we planned to launch protests in poorer areas to demand social justice, etc. We were discussing this with someone from PCSMB, and he suggested we should wait for the protests that were being called for by WAAKS [...] We told him that our problem was that we didn’t want to mobilize only with respect to the police issue; we had other demands [...] But the 25th was a real shock. We had gotten everything wrong. We had even decided that we wouldn’t raise the bar too high for our slogans. We thought that if we’d said “Down down...” no one would chant back. It was the opposite. We were saying our chants about minimum and maximum wage, while the lay people were saying “Down down...” and “No to Mubarak,” and so on. (Interview with a socialist activist, August 2013)

The main idea for most of the organizers was as follows: small groups of activists would initiate small-scale protests in different, relatively close locations. They’d bet on their mobilizing efforts on the previous days, as well as the general context (el-gaw el-‘ām – i.e., the post-Tunisia effect, the online campaign by WAAKS), to draw people in. This had several consequences.
On the one hand, instead of having one small protest of about 50 activists (or even 100 or 200) that could be easily repressed, they would have four or five groups of ten people scattered around the eastern districts. This meant that if one of these protests were surrounded by police forces, it wouldn’t be the end of the day as others could still go on. On the other hand, the multiplication of protest sites would force CSF squads to be scattered around the city. In smaller numbers, they would have a much harder time maintaining order, blocking access to streets, and rounding up protestors.

Every player made its own plans and tactics and at the last coordination meeting, held in extreme secrecy, the different groups informed each other of what they would be doing while withholding sensitive information, such as the exact starting location of the protest. And even though most groups ended up using similar strategies, they varied in regard to tactical details and in the way they prepared for the D-Day.24 Between January 20 and 25, the groups marketed intensely for the event. WAKS and other militant Facebook pages posted official protest meeting points and gave out mobile numbers of field coordinators. Many people called to get more information, or to offer their help. The PCSMB thus decided to organize a meeting on the 24th with people who had called. Almost 150 people showed up. This important turnout encouraged the PCSMB to organize differently from in the past; but it also encouraged them to be cautious. Indeed, many of those who had shown up were previously unknown to the activists. The campaign decided to organize three protests to start in the eastern district. “No one knew the starting points of these marches except the politburo of the PCSMB. Even members didn’t know what would happen. We divided these numbers into groups of five, led by one person who would roughly know where the protest would leave from, not the exact location.” Three levels were instituted: demonstrations’ leaders (qā‘id muzāhara), group heads (rās magmū‘a), and protestors. The lowest level consisted of younger, less experienced activists as well as people who had called in the days before and offered their help. They would be told in the morning, by email, which district to head to. The group heads would step in at that point. Around 10 a.m., they would receive an email telling them where to go and a list of ten phone numbers to call. Each was responsible for coordinating with his group of five to ten to meet at a place at 1:30 p.m. They would then wait for their group and make sure they were not followed by police forces.

24 “Every group was to organize according to its own tactics, without really telling the other. The only thing all of us knew is that we would be close to one another” (interview with an April 6 movement leading activist, January 2014).
The idea behind this division of labor was that if one of these small groups fell, it wouldn’t be a handicap for the others. The demonstrations’ leaders, a handful of more seasoned activists, were the only ones (along with the politburo obviously) to know where the final demonstrations would start. Every demonstration leader would call the group heads at 1:45 p.m. to tell them where to meet. They would inform the group heads of their location and wait for them to arrive, then in a matter of seconds, they would pull out Egyptian flags; distribute them and start chanting and marching. All of these tactics had one objective: dodge the police forces.

An Iteration of Concurring Signs: A Microanalysis of an Open-Ended Conjuncture

In a recent article, Ivan Ermakoff argues that “the clue to an understanding of causal disruption endogenous to social and historical processes lies in a systematic analysis of how factors affecting individual agency can bring about breaks in patterns of social relations” (Ermakoff 2015, 66). In these contexts, incidental happenings can become consequential by “induc[ing] shifts in patterns of relations” (p. 110). We must pay attention to apparently minor events (a street protest, like many others) and try to document how, in this particular situation, shifts in behavior and in stances occur, thus creating mutual uncertainty, the basis of contingency. In these moments, “scripts lose their behavioral relevance, and standard procedures become spinning wheels that offer no leverage on the situation for those who confront it” (ibid.). As we will see, in the early hours of January 25, 2011, activists were feeling a mixture of anxiety and excitement. Their previous experiences, that is, their dispositions, moderated their expectations (El Chazli 2012). Yet, as the day started to unfold, an iteration of concurring signs (situational clues observable by players on the ground) would reinforce the belief that *something can happen* and *is happening*. This process can be extrapolated as a hypothesis about how the first participants on the 25th evaluated their risks and slowly experienced shifts in these evaluations, inciting them to participate even more strongly.

On Tuesday, January 25, young Mohamed25 stood in trepidation and anxiety on a rather empty street in eastern Alexandria. He gazed around

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25 Interview with Mohamed, December 2012. Mohamed, born in 1990, grew up in a middle-class family (his father was mid-level civil servant) in the western district of Al-Qabbāry. He notes coming from a “politicized” home, where political Islam wasn’t appreciated even though his
To see any familiar signs of police presence, but sensed none. At 11 a.m. Mohamed started calling the ten phone numbers that had been distributed to him earlier in the morning, thus following the plan established by his organization, the PCSMB. He was assigned to the popular neighborhood of Abū Kharrūf (in the northeast of Alexandria). The then-20 year old instructed his group to meet at 12 p.m. around the al-‘Assāfra hospital.26 “Be there at 12 sharp. At 12:05, we won’t be there,” he reminded them over the phone. Mohamed knew some of the ten people he called from previous political activities. The others had given their numbers to the PCSMB on the previous day. The neighborhood, Abū Kharrūf, had been “prepared” (mu‘ahalla) for the march; on the 24th, Mohamed and others from the PCSMB had distributed hundreds of flyers calling on people to participate in the marches. They had spoken to the “common folk” (an-nās al-‘ādiyya), encouraged them to participate, discussed their opinions and calmed their fears. As anxious as he was, Mohamed was hopeful.27 Although having had to battle with familial constraints, he was determined to participate.28 On the days leading up to the 25th, he actively published (self)reassuring messages on the necessity and possibility of change on his Facebook profile and on his friends.29

Mohamed led his small group to a meeting point, received minutes earlier from the main field organizer of the al-‘Assāfra demonstration, Sameh.30

brothers were sympathizers. His deceased father was a Nasserist. After a series of minor political experiences, he began participating steadily after the April 6, 2008, protest. He considers that he became “what we call a political activist after the death of Khaled Saïd.”

26 Al-‘Assāfra is a popular district on the southern side of Alexandria. Alexandria is commonly divided into a bahari (maritime) side and a qibli (southern) side, that doesn’t really fit into a north/south division. It also tends to equate with a class divide. Abū Kharrūf is a neighborhood in that district.

27 “Pairs of positive and negative emotions form ‘moral batteries’ that indicate a direction for action, away from the unattractive state and toward the attractive one” (Jasper 2014, 211).

28 On January 19th, he changed his profile picture on Facebook, and we can now see him holding a sign stating, “I am participating on January 25 […] I am [a] free [man].” On January 20th and 21st, his Facebook updates show his personal dilemmas. On the 20th, he writes, “My mom doesn’t want me to participate on January 25 […] What should I do????” The next days, he says, “I don’t know what to do: D:D:D after convincing mother of my participation, now my brother doesn’t want to go: D:D:D what should I do now????”

29 He shares on Facebook a famous protest song by the poet Ahmad Fu‘ād Negm (January 23), as well as statuses such as, “If I die, mother, don’t cry, I am going to die so that my homeland can live” or “Bread, Freedom, Human dignity” (one of the chosen slogans for the protests). On the next day (January 24), “Yes We Can” and “For you… For the future of your children and of mine… I participate on the 25th.”

30 Born in the early 1980s, Sameh went through many political experiences during the 2000-2010 decade. From a Muslim Brotherhood background, he then oriented toward liberal/secular
A more seasoned activist, he was supposed to lead the demonstration and decide what to do next according to his evaluation of potential risks. Mohamed remembers, “We started walking around and people would ask us ‘is this the demonstration?’ [al-muzāhara] […] We began chanting around 2 p.m. At that point, we were maybe 15-20-25 […] not more than 30 in any case.” To Mohamed’s amazement, the numbers grew rapidly in response to the chants of the small group. As soon as the demonstration was big enough, Sameh, Mohamed and the others began to lead to the march through the narrow streets and alleyways (pl. hawārī, s. hāra) of Abū Kharrūf.

Little more than a kilometer away from Sameh and Mohamed, Abdel Samad was also getting ready to lead a demonstration from his neighborhood. Until 1 p.m., he stayed in his supermarket, located in his neighborhood, thus giving the impression that nothing was going on. At around 1:30, he started calling up group heads. All of these groups together represented approximately 30-40 people. Also, since he had good relations with some of the Muslim Brotherhood youth, about 15-20 of them decided to join him in the protest as participants (and not in the name of their organization). This demonstration was due to start in front of the ‘Abdel-Halīm Mahmūd Mosque, also in al-‘Assāfra district. Abdel Samad recalls, “As soon as we started walking, the ‘Down, down’ [with Hosni Mubarak] slogan started being chanted. People started chanting their own slogans that even we, as demonstration leaders, hadn’t prepared.”

A few blocks away, yet another protest was being launched almost simultaneously. The April 6 movement (A6M) had prepared its own demonstration, without knowing it was so close to the PCSMB groups. “We were no more than five. We started chanting but for at least 45 minutes people were not responsive. The police started arriving and roughing us up, tried to arrest one of us” (interview with a leading April 6 movement activist, January 2014). It seemed as if it was ending before it even started, as usual. Nevertheless, the activists started talking to people, “Do you remember meat? Do you know how much it costs today? Even the lentils that you could eat, how much does it cost? Can you buy any of that for your son?” (interview with a leading April 6 movement activist, January 2014).

formations such as the El-Ghad Party and the DFP. It was later that he joined the PCSMB and became one of its main leaders.

31 Born in the early 1980s, Abdel Samad had a similar trajectory as Sameh, cycling through some of the liberal opposition parties, while being personally close to Islamists. He was one of the first coordinators of the PCSMB in Alexandria.

32 Indeed, early in the morning, two informers from state security came by his shop and kept an eye on him.
Following up with these discussions, the activists started chanting “social slogans.”33 The people in the market (sū’) started to be responsive. Meanwhile, the Security seemed to have decided it was going to end the protest, and it prepared to engage.

Luckily for the A6M activists, at that moment, ‘Abdel Samad’s demonstration arrived from behind the CSF. “They were confused by our arrival. The officers started talking to us politely, saying that we could do a sit-in but not to get out” (interview with ‘Abdel Samad, January 2014). But, “suddenly, there were 2000 of us [...] The Security changed its tone, and started to negotiate. ‘Do not go outside, they’d say.’ But it wasn’t us anymore, the People were deciding” (interview with ‘Issām, January 2014). For the activists, a new player was in the street, one that they had always imagined, talked about, but never really seen: “the People.” And this new presence was exhilarating for them; it boded well for what was to come next, thus authorizing the activists to step over the previously established red lines. The Security tried to stop the demonstration by splitting the march in two, but failed to contain the movement and eventually had to withdraw from the scene. “We then reached the Gamal Abdel Nasser Avenue [one of the main arteries of eastern Alexandria]” (interview with ‘Issām, January 2014). The demonstrations were now really taking off.

As the demonstration kept growing bigger, Sameh, Mohamed, and the others tried to keep control over the excited crowd. Sameh was sitting on the shoulders of a fellow activist, wearing an Egyptian flag as a cape. Shouting as loudly as possible, he tried to give guidelines to the protestors, “Anyone of you who passes by a car, do not hit it, do not stand on it, do not damage any property, we are good people [nās muhtaramīn], we are a good people [sha’b muhtaram] [Protestors cheer, applaud and wave their little flags] [...] Long live Egypt! [The crowd repeats] Long live Egypt! [The crowd repeats].” As he shouted the century-old slogan, the march started moving again through the narrow alleys. While they kept walking through the maze that is Abū Kharrūf, and more people joined the march, a rotba34 (police officer) approached the apparent leaders of the march, i.e., those chanting the slogans. “‘Don’t leave here, the officer said, stay [in the harāt (district)], it’s just for your safety.’ But obviously, it wasn’t about our safety [...] He didn’t

33 Typically, “they augmented the price of oil, they augmented the price of sugar; tomorrow we’ll need to sell our furniture” to be able to buy food.
34 Rotba literally means a rank (as in lieutenant, captain, general, etc.). It is used in Egypt as a synonym of officers, and more specifically, higher-ranking officers. The rotab (plural) are identifiable by their epaulets.
know how to deal with us [...] The numbers were too big. That’s why he was so polite” (interview with Mohamed, December 2012).

Nevertheless, at that point, they felt that their numbers were still not big enough, so they complied, and marched around the neighborhood, attracting even more people as they went. The protest was now huge. “We felt that he [the officer] was scared, as if 100,000 questions were racing in his head. ‘Where did all these people come from? What are we going to do with them?’” Mohamed recalls. This time, when the officer tried again to convince them to stay “inside,” and not to spill out on the main street, they did not comply. Sameh simply waived in disdain to the astonished officer, and entered the main street. They were exhilarated by the numbers and by the walls trembling under their mighty chants. Taken aback, the police forces stood still as the march passed through, which many protestors interpreted as a good omen: the police were not going to shoot.

“We were now on the main street. When that happened, we saw the numbers for the first time [...] We couldn’t see clearly before that, as we were in narrow alleys. The numbers were huge. Spontaneously, we found ourselves in tears from the sight” (interview with Mohamed, December 2012). In these few minutes, the activists first redefined the situation, “as we started walking, we felt that [...] maybe it’s not a revolution, but it’s the beginning of the downfall of the regime [...] it’s beginning of asking for rights, having demands met.” They observed their surroundings and looked for concurring signs: older people waving and giving victory signs (two fingers forming the letter V) from their balconies; a street vendor using his megaphone to chant “Down with Hosni Mubarak”; people pouring out of buildings to march; the arrival of another protest to join forces, and so on.

Not far away, the other PCSMB group that had joined the A6M one was experiencing a similar trajectory. “The numbers were incredible, unbelievable. We were congratulating each other, as if we had already won. But now what? We were calling our April 6 friends who left from Shubra in Cairo, telling each other about the turnout [...] We were trying to figure out where should we go? What would make sense in Alexandria?” While activists were desperately trying to keep control of the protest, they were facing this typical property of political crises: strategic uncertainty. As most of the tacit rules governing contentious politics were quickly crumbling down, they felt a crippling sense of confusion,

An officer told me, “tell them to stop!” and I said “if you can't control them I can't control them either!” They weren't able to deal with us. They didn't engage, they just stared at us and let us go. When I called
the Operation Room, they said use your best judgment; you’re the one on the ground. We kept on walking without knowing where we were going. When we met again with security forces, they had blockaded a street to prevent us from going back to the Baharī side. Before I could even think of what we should do, people had already pushed back the cordon, and went through. We just followed now. (Interview with ‘Abdel Samad, January 2014)

Carried Away by the People

If the situation’s meaning was starting to shift, another important thing was happening on the ground. It was ever clearer to the activists that it was getting tougher to keep the demonstration “in line.” The numbers were continuing to grow. But more importantly, the activists were already exhausted. Not only because of the efforts they had made in the few previous hours (running back and forth, shouting and chanting at the top of their lungs, lifting each other on their shoulders, and, obviously, walking.) They were exhausted from the past two weeks of intense organizing, both physically and psychologically. “We were not sleeping [...] Fear and horror at the idea that the day would fail [...] And that the regime would unleash its wrath on us because of what we’ve done [...] Imagine if after all of that organizing, no one showed up [...] All of that was a great load on us, a lot of anxiety” (interview with Mohamed, December 2012). Now the demonstration had its own life, its own dynamic. The “regular people’s” chants were much more radical than the list decided by the WAAKS page and even by the field activists.

Simultaneously, news arrived that another protest – one that had started in the downtown district of Manshiyya – had been dealt with violently by the police around the Sidi Gâbir area. “We tried to halt down the march and started explaining what was happening. We told them that our youth [shabābna] was being attacked by the police in Sidi Gâbir, and what should we do? The final decision was the street’s to take. To a certain extent, our mission was over.” A young man shouted that the protest should go and “teet” the police and was acclaimed by the now thousands of protestors. “It was like they weren’t afraid anymore,” Mohamed remembers. The march

35 The PCSMB had created an Operation Room (OR) (ghurfat ‘amaliyyât) composed of three senior activists, centralizing information and communications between the ground groups, and also feeding the internet with information.

36 Mohamed simulates a bleep censor, suggesting an insult.
kept on going on the Corniche Avenue, filling up one side and leaving the other one to traffic. It eventually reached Sīdī Gābir.37 When they arrived, the authorities had cut off the electricity in the neighborhood. CSF were massively firing tear gas.38 The protestors did not flee in face of the attack. Rather, they hid in the multiple alleyways surrounding Sīdī Gābir. People would regroup and start small marches, reproducing what they had just done (maybe for the first time) a few hours earlier. “This was extremely impressive,” recalls Mohamed, grinning. “Our people [the activists] were slowly leaving. Activists weren’t chanting the slogans. The people were. They were the ones leading the marches.”

In his account of the preparation of the January 25 marches, ‘Issām underlined a central feature of street protests during the Mubarak days, “You know, our problem was […] since we started this experience, the security services [(al-amn] would end the protests […] We never had to think of how to end! [Laughs]” Most of the activists quickly found themselves in that strange dilemma; they hadn’t planned for their marches to succeed. So they hadn’t really planned on how the day should end. Their best-case scenario was to leave the alleyways and hold a main street for a few hours. “Before starting, we had to discuss the issue of how to end. How should we end the demonstration? If the turnout is low, and there is not much responsiveness from the people, then we should walk for an hour, and then stop. If the numbers reached a thousand protestors, and that was our maximal hope, we would try to reach 45th Street.”39 For others, such as the radical left, the idea was to create a momentum in a popular neighborhood that would become a social base for subsequent political actions (interview with a socialist activist, August 2013).

Activists had to improvise with little information at hand. “Obviously, at that point, we did not know what was going on on the other side, in downtown. We weren’t really communicating with them.” The scarce news arriving indicated that clashes were ongoing in Sīdī Gābir. This became their “natural” destination. Others decided to head for the governorate (muhāfaza) building, “because this was what represented the state in Alexandria.”

37 This is a 6.7 km walk (4.1 miles). The Google Maps estimate for this walk is 1h 23m.
38 As far as timing goes, this is a first difference with Cairo. On the 25th, the Cairo CSF intervened violently at midnight by charging on Tahrir Square. Up until that point, repression had been present but incidental.
39 Interview with ‘Abdel Samad (January 2014). 45th Street is a main street of the Miami neighborhood in eastern Alexandria.
People were asking me “Where to now?” and the OR had left everything in my hands. They just informed me that there was another protest ahead of us, and one behind us. People in the crowd were suggesting destinations: the security services headquarters, the Muhāfaza, etc. People agreed on the Muhāfaza. It’s very far as you know [laughs], but we were like, why not? (Interview with ‘Abdel Samad, January 2014)

As soon as they got there, the power was cut off in the neighborhood, and the police started to fire tear gas canisters. An activist described the sound of the incessant shooting and of the armored vehicles racing in the streets as “horrifying” (mor‘ib). He then went to a café; “At that point, we decided that the day was over. At least for us” (interview with ‘Issām, January 2014). Indeed, by the evening, most of the activists were exhausted. Feeling that what was going on was out of their hands, they slowly left the streets and started regrouping in cafés and in some of their headquarters, depending on where they were. For the first time, they were seeing the “national” news and images of Tahrir Square. These images confirmed their feeling about what was going on; this was a different scale from what they were used to. The different groups started to communicate heavily and reflect on what should be their next steps. Also, many activists had been arrested around the city on the 25th. People were starting to gather information, heading to police stations, and looking for friends and colleagues who weren’t answering their phones or replying to text messages. The day had taken a strange turn for most of the participants. And as excited as they were, they felt distraught in the face of what might come next. Complete uncertainty was the main feature of the situation. They had been waiting for that moment for a long time, yet, in some sense, they had never really expected it.

Conclusion

I have focused on a few interactions that might seem tangential to a general explanation of “revolutions” or “political crises,” but which are still helpful for understanding the local social dynamics underlying the “revolt.” I am not suggesting that these localized interactions are “representative” of broader causal mechanisms, or that they constitute an alternative explanation to the causes of revolutions. I simply point out certain processes that seem to tell us more (or at least a different story) about how crises start, how they develop, and how they get “out of control.”
If what is usually considered as the causes of revolutions (frustration, unemployment, absence of freedoms, etc.) is observable, most analyses don’t really tackle how these “causes” produce a global political crisis in a given country at a given moment. In a way, political crises (just as wars, and other great events) seem to transcend their causes (Dobry 2009; Rayner 2005). They appear like a different class of phenomena that require explanations of their own. Obviously, a more profound exploration of these insights would require the study of a longer time frame and the interactions of many more players.

In accordance with what social movements studies tell us, it is obvious here that the studied collective actions are “product(s) of learned and historically grounded performances” (Tilly 2008, 4). The players who organized the January 25 actions in Alexandria shared a set of ideas, beliefs, repertoires, and know-how. Even when they chose to do something new, it was generally informed by their past experiences, notably with repression and “failed” previous mobilizations.

If we take into account what players think, perceive, and evaluate, it becomes obvious that most players (both activists and security apparatuses) don’t believe that these mobilizations will amount to anything. Players don’t plan ahead. Activists are extremely skeptical; most of them do not plan an “ending” for the actions they organize. The security apparatuses, on the other hand, don’t imagine that these mobilizations will differ from their previous experiences with protestors; they don’t plan an alternative strategy other than their usual “beat and arrest.” That is why, on the ground, most of the CSF squads just didn’t know what to do; they stood confused and generally didn’t act. In reaction, protestors were free to interpret this inaction in multiple ways: the police is sympathetic to their action, the police has its limits, the police is not as strong as it seems, etc. In any case, the consequences were multiple. In a chain reaction, as more people saw others protesting and not being repressed or beaten up, more started joining, and so on.

The situational decision to radicalize the demonstration on the ground (crossing symbolic or physical red lines) is informed by other “signs” decoded by activists on the ground. Other than the aforementioned case of the police, popular support in the street or from balconies, greater turnout than the usual, participation of “unusual ordinary people” (older women, people of different social classes, etc.) are all interpreted as signs of a shifting situation. “That Egypt was a society in which large numbers of people were discontent was widespread knowledge. But that Egypt was a society of people willing to act on that discontent was a surprise [...] What seems to have changed...”
in January 2011 with astonishing rapidity was less people's understanding of one another's preferences than their understanding of one another's practical commitment to change [...] As soon as such determination was in evidence, demonstrations quickly snowballed" (Brown 2014, 301-302).

The story of the Egyptian revolutionary situation (tracing processes, carving up sequences) needs, in my view, to take into account this multiplicity of simultaneous contingent actions and interactions, which brought a multitude of marginal localized action into great unanticipated consequences. Tracing these contingencies does not, I think, mean that we fall back on an “old eventful history” that obfuscates social structures and their impact (Hassabo and Rey 2015). These contingencies are part of the explanation and should be taken seriously.

References


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