

**TAHRIR '15
YOUTH**

**LEADERS
OF A**

**LEADERLESS
REVOLUTION**

**AUC
PRESS**

RUSHA LATIF

Tahrir's Youth

LEADERS OF A
LEADERLESS
REVOLUTION

RUSHA LATIF

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Designed by Westchester

For my special brother, Mohammed,
and our beloved parents, Monira and Abdellatif,
with gratitude for illuminating my way to *tabrir*

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Acronyms

IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NAC	National Association for Change
NDP	National Democratic Party
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
NSF	National Salvation Front
NSMs	New Social Movements
RYC	Revolutionary Youth Coalition
SCAF	The Security Council of Armed Forces

Acknowledgments

I never expected to write a book, let alone one about a revolution. But I did because something unexpected happened: millions of Egyptians took to the streets, daringly and full of hope, and inspired this unlikely author. I must therefore start by thanking them—the activists, the protesters, the martyrs and their families—for their struggle and sacrifice, for giving me a story to tell, a story for the history books, a story that drew me in and forever changed me. To the ten activists profiled in this book in particular, I am especially indebted. As a long-lost Egyptian who grew up continents and an ocean apart from you, there was something I needed to learn about my life experience through yours. You have been my teachers; in sharing your personal and political trajectories with me, you have guided me on mine, and I can never thank you enough.

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thrive as a published author. My prayer now is for it to be *sadaqa jariya* for him. My heart will forever be with him and the wife he leaves behind, my mother, Monira Hadi, who carried me with so much grace over the course of this project despite my many shortcomings as her daughter. Long before I encountered Egyptian revolutionaries, she taught me by example as a special needs mom what it means to serve and fight for the most vulnerable and excluded among us. The debt I owe her is immense, but greater still is the one I owe the special young man with cerebral palsy she spends her days and nights caring for. My brother Mohammed cannot read, but I wish to address him anyway: Thank you, *habibi* Duksha, for everything you have taught me about myself, the world, and my place in it. Thank you for filling our lives with mercy and meaning and light.

I offer my final and most heartfelt gratitude to my Creator. I thank Him for His countless blessings, the greatest being His final messenger, my beloved guide, God's peace forever be upon him.



Map 1. Map of Greater Cairo showing the major districts cited in this book. Map courtesy of CLUSTER.

Introduction

Deadly clashes between protesters and police had been raging on Muhammad Mahmud Street off Tahrir Square for nearly four straight days as I made my way to the vicinity, which I had done daily since the battle first erupted. It was Tuesday, November 22, 2011, and activists had called for mass protests nationwide to force the generals of the Security Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), who had been ruling Egypt since the fall of President Hosni Mubarak, to relinquish power immediately to a civilian transitional government. Dubbed the “Second Revolution,” the demonstrations were the largest Egypt had seen since the president stepped down earlier that year on February 11 and exposed SCAF’s vulnerability and failures at governing. The activists hoped to press the advantage the new November uprising had given them to wrest control of the country from the generals and set it back on track toward their revolutionary goals. I was eager to return to Tahrir to find out the latest developments and learn how the revolutionaries were organizing themselves and their new sit-in to capitalize on this unexpected and hopeful political opening.

After disembarking at Sadat metro station and passing through the dimly lit underground tunnels, I emerged from the exit near Qasr al-Nil Bridge to find Tahrir basking in the glow of the last bit of sunlight before dusk. In the distance, near Hardee’s and Pizza Hut, a thick cloud of tear gas and black smoke hovered over the street where mostly poor, young men hurled their righteous fury at bullet-firing police in the form of stones, Molotov cocktails, homemade bombs, and the fuming tear-gas canisters also shot at them by police. A swarm of spectators had convened to spur them on from behind. The rest of the square was jostling with the thousands of Egyptians who had turned out to show their solidarity—many of them provoked by the footage that had just surfaced of soldiers coldly dragging the dead bodies of protesters across the concrete and piling them

on mounds of trash—but also to enjoy the convivial, street-fair atmosphere typical of Tahrir protests. Most incongruous was the cotton-candy man, whose enormous pink cloud of spun sugar floating over the sea of demonstrators offset the intensity of the smoke-filled scene with a bit of whimsy. Ambulances and volunteer motorcyclists transporting the scores of injured from the field clinics to the hospital rushed in and out of the precinct (a total of fifty-one killed and three thousand injured during the Muhammad Mahmud street clashes meant this was the worst incident of state violence against protesters since the revolution's start).¹ Meanwhile, wailing sirens and explosions near the protesters sporadically ripped through the murmur of conversation, battle racket, and revolutionary chants against the army—*“al-sha‘b yurid i‘dam al-mushir!”* (The people want the execution of the field marshal!) was just one of the refrains the more militant protesters shouted during this latest revolutionary upsurge. Near the center of the square, an effigy of Defense Minister Muhammad Husayn Tantawi dangled by the neck from a high lamppost, illustrating what they meant.

What stood out to me the most that day was not the conflicting elements of the scene—by then I had grown accustomed to Tahrir's discordant violence and ebullience. Rather, what caught my eye was a giant, white banner that was newly raised in this seemingly ever-morphing square. Unlike the usual banners that articulated the revolutionaries' demands for the state elite and greater public beyond Tahrir, this one addressed the protesters onsite. In large Arabic letters, it read,

Rules of the Square

1. It is absolutely prohibited to establish any independent stage in the square.
2. It is absolutely prohibited to raise any slogans pertaining to any particular political party or movement.
3. The square has one microphone. No other is permitted.

One voice . . .

One battle fought by us all under the slogan
“Sovereignty for the Egyptian people!”
We are all Egyptians!

The sign was oddly captivating. The voice behind the text was crisp; it spoke rightfully and authoritatively but also anonymously. It was as if its creators

were trying to incite the people to take ownership of these rules as though they had written them, to stir their consciousness as a unified, revolutionary, collective actor. To me, this nondescript sign evoked the behind-the-scenes struggle of Egypt's leading revolutionaries to impose order and organization on the movement and give it direction without stepping to its forefront as leaders. In many ways, the artifact spoke to the paradoxical story of the simultaneous presence and absence of leadership in the Egyptian revolution that had fascinated me since the revolutionary movement first erupted. It might not have been clear to the average protester where this sign had come from, but I had some idea. It had all the markings of the youth activists I had been following for my fieldwork, the leaders of this leaderless revolution.

The story of how this movement first erupted is familiar to many by now. On January 25, 2011, the people of Egypt burst onto the stage of history and improvised a spectacular eighteen-day drama in revolutionary resistance that captured the imagination of audiences around the world. The rage that drove them was fueled by at least a decade's worth of crushing poverty, government neglect, political repression, police brutality, rampant corruption, and an enduring foreign policy subservient to US imperial interests and impervious to their own. Armed with nothing but their grievances and the righteousness of their cause, Egyptians of every stripe shook off their fear and joined hardened activists in the streets and city squares to challenge the people and system that oppressed them. Their resistance culminated in the spectacular fall of Mubarak, the man who ruled them for thirty years like a pharaoh, hastening what felt like an irreversible turn toward a new era of openness, accountability, opportunity, and political freedom. Excluded, demoralized, voiceless for decades, Egyptians unleashed a wave of hope with their revolutionary upheaval, which ripped across the region and evoked the faith of believers and skeptics alike in the power of the people. In so doing, they quickly became global heroes.

In the wake of this extraordinary event, one nagging question occupied observers of Middle East politics: how did this happen? How did a people berated for their apathy and stereotyped as politically backward and unready for democracy suddenly come together in one of the most astonishing revolutionary mobilizations of our time and manage to evict their deeply entrenched leader in less than three weeks?

There is no single answer to this question. Revolutions are, after all, complex processes that lend themselves to many readings, and Egypt's

revolutionary movement has been no exception. Early attempts to explain the sudden outburst celebrated it as a spontaneous expression of popular frustration that was facilitated by technology such as the Internet, especially social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. They also cited the significance of its leaderless nature, noting the remarkable absence of a single galvanizing charismatic leader—think Lenin, Mao, Castro—or a vanguard organization at its helm as has been the case in most revolutionary movements. On the other hand, the role of youth as a collective that ignited and spurred this movement has been duly noted. However, discussions about young people's role have been problematic for several reasons. First, their story has often been limited to how they used Internet tools to organize. Second, discussions about youth have mostly referenced them as a homogenous category, overlooking significant structural differences that have historically separated them, such as class, gender, and religion, in addition to other factors that might have shaped their trajectory into politics and their organizing activities during the movement. Third, they have offered little insight into how individual youth leaders—the actors in real time and space—organized for the January 25 uprising and attempted to sustain it the following eighteen days and ensuing revolutionary period.²

This book's reading of the revolution, then, focuses on its youthful leadership. I examine the unfolding of the revolutionary process from the perspective of the young, organized activists who were some of its main drivers. As I illustrate in this book, this process does not begin on January 25 but stretches back much further, deep into the lives of these activists and the history of their country. Specifically, I focus on those activists based in Cairo who played an instrumental role in instigating January 25 and would become the leaders of the Revolutionary Youth Coalition (RYC). The RYC was the first revolutionary entity to announce itself from Tahrir Square during the early eighteen-day uprising and functioned as one of its main nerve centers. It was comprised of the political youth groups that had been the most active before January 25 and whose collaboration had begun long before the revolt. Together, they reflected the diverse political ideologies that existed in Tahrir. In telling the story of these young protagonists, I complicate the discussion on leadership and leaderlessness in Egypt's revolutionary process. In keeping with Antonio Gramsci's contention that there is no such thing as a truly spontaneous movement,³ I argue that the existence of the RYC and the organizing its members undertook before and during the eighteen-day uprising demonstrates that the uprising was not

entirely spontaneous, leaderless, or rooted in social media, but led by young activists with a history of political engagement predating the revolution.

I have chosen to emphasize the narratives of ten RYC leaders who reflect the diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, ideological leanings, personal histories, and subjective transformations of the youth activists who participated in this movement. I trace the trajectories of these activists from when they first became politically conscious and active before the revolution up until about 2015, after they had endured nearly four years of intense revolutionary struggle against four different regimes: first Mubarak's, then SCAF's, then the Muslim Brotherhood's, then the ascendent General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's. In the process, I reconstruct the stories and emergent revolutionary subjectivities of these youth leaders, taking into consideration questions of gender, class, religion, and ideology. What emerges is a nuanced portrait of revolutionary youth leadership that challenges the dominant media constructs circulated in the early days of the revolt. The RYC leaders I profile in this book differ from those who appeared frequently in international news media outlets during the initial uprising. Mostly secular, upper-class cosmopolitan youth who garnered fame outside of Egypt for their English updates on Twitter, very few of these latter activists appeared to have acted in a visible leadership capacity on the ground as organizers before or during the revolution. The RYC activists differ in this respect, and in that many of them identified as members of the subaltern communities whose grievances were the main thrust behind the revolt. Through the experiences of this cohort and an understanding of their motives, hopes, visions, and struggles, we can access many of the forces that shaped the emergence of Egypt's revolutionary movement and get a sense of the people and the political ideas that will continue to compete for the country's future.

What that future will look like has always been unclear, but as of this writing, it appears far less fluid than it did during the heady days of the eighteen-day uprising. Back then, as Egypt's masses started to command more and more power and the long odds against them started to shift in their favor, the revolutionary movement's prospect for sweeping away the old order and ushering in the kind of radical social and political change the activists aspired to felt excitingly promising. But the story turned out quite differently. The unbridled optimism and creative energy that animated revolutionaries during those triumphant days would melt into bitter disillusionment, despair, and even trauma as they watched the hard-won gains

they had made toward a more open, free, and fair society disappear and the dictatorship they thought they had dealt a permanent death blow prevail. Indeed, if the question analysts were asking in 2011 was how this remarkable revolutionary struggle erupted, the question that would occupy them after the coup in 2013 is how the movement was so roundly defeated by the counterrevolution. This book addresses this question too. Understanding the challenges these youth leaders faced early on in trying to direct and sustain the revolution offers one explanation for why the movement unravelled. Most notably, as we will see, their decentralized and diffuse leadership structure had its advantages in the early days of the revolt but proved a liability later, as stronger organization was needed for the movement to assert its dominance and capture the state.

Consistent with wider global trends in antisystemic movements that had moved away from rigid mass organizational structures characteristic of twentieth century struggles, activists in Egypt had adopted this fluid, horizontal, informal mode of organizing typical of New Social Movements (NSMs) in the decade before January 25 as a radical reaction to the oppressive, top-down power structure of the state and formal opposition parties.⁴ At the time, this NSM approach to resistance was appropriate, given the activists' focus on developing tactics to disrupt authoritarian politics as usual and pressuring for reform. But as this study will illustrate, it had its limits when their status suddenly changed from activists to revolutionaries and they were faced with the overwhelming task of wresting power from a heavily armed state, dismantling the regime, and building the polity anew. It was one thing to challenge the regime and its institutions, they would learn, and an entirely different matter to topple and replace it. Simply put, that was never part of their plan. It was a task that required organizational capital and skills, strategic visions and transformative projects outlining a radically new social order, and schemes for taking over governance that they simply did not have and could not easily develop within the span of eighteen days. Indeed, strikingly absent from the activity of Egypt's January 25 revolutionaries during the uprising were the kind of features and radical undertakings that we have come to associate with revolutions: there was no revolutionary guard ready to seize power when it fell in the streets, no "storming of the Bastille" or takeover of other strategic institutions like state media, no attempts by revolutionaries to take up arms against the state and muscle their way into power by force. These activists had dreamt of revolution, but they had never seriously entertained the possibility and were

therefore unprepared when it suddenly presented itself. Remarkably, the revolutionaries were able to push out Mubarak, but when it came time in the period that followed to compete with the mighty military establishment and the highly organized Muslim Brotherhood to take charge of Egypt's future, they were at a loss. In the end, both the revolutionary youth and the Brotherhood would lose this high-stakes political contest; far from being uprooted, the authoritarian order Egypt's masses rebelled against recovered its grip on power that had been loosened by years of political turmoil. In fact, not only does that order survive unchanged, but it appears stronger than ever under Sisi, whose regime is widely regarded as more repressive than Mubarak's.

Egyptians commonly refer to the eighteen-day uprising in early 2011 along with the turbulent cascade of events that followed as the "January 25 Revolution," and this is how I refer to it in this book. But the resilience of the neoliberal authoritarian order after the fall of Mubarak and its reassertion post July 3, 2013 under Sisi have led many to question whether the word "revolution" is appropriate, and it is for this reason that I often use the term "revolutionary movement" in its place. No doubt, Egypt had experienced the kind of massive uprisings and dramatic changes that come with revolutions—not the least of which was the politicization of broad swathes of society and a shift in the way people understood their relationship with the government—but ultimately, the upheaval failed to produce the kind of radical social and political structural change that informs classical definitions of the term. I am referring here to Theda Skocpol's conceptualization of social revolutions. Limiting her study to a handful of "great revolutions," she defines the phenomenon as "rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures . . . accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below,"⁵ the implication being that revolutions can only really be categorized as such on the basis of their successful outcomes. Her definition was the most widely accepted until a host of new and very different revolutions⁶ from the 1970s through the 1990s defied this state- and class-based understanding of revolution, prompting the search among scholars for a new approach.⁷ This study aligns with the view of scholars like Charles Tilly,⁸ who suggests we are better served in our analysis of revolutions by less restrictive definitions that accommodate a wider array of cases, including those in which, as he puts it, a "revolutionary situation" occurred but did not result in a "revolutionary outcome,"⁹ a description that accurately captures what transpired

in Egypt. Consistent with this idea are scholarly works on Egypt's 2011 rupture that make the distinction between "revolution as process" and "revolution as change" in their analyses of the movement's trajectory.¹⁰ The benefit of this framing, as these works demonstrate, is that it allows us to meaningfully examine the January 25 phenomenon as a revolutionary movement that was unsuccessful in the short term, without diminishing its significance as a momentous turning point in a deeper social process underway in Egypt long before the uprising, one that arguably still holds the potential to bring about revolutionary transformation. Adopting this perspective, this study sets out to understand how Egypt's revolutionary situation emerged and make sense of why it unfolded the way it did during the eighteen-day uprising and the period that followed.

In foregrounding the people behind January 25 and the micro-processes they engaged in, this book does not dismiss the many macro structural explanations for the struggle's eruption that have traditionally been the focus of theoretical literature on revolutions. Some of the most common identified by Jack Goldstone¹¹ and others—demographic change, shifts in international relations, uneven or dependent economic development, new patterns of exclusion against particular groups, changing urban landscapes, and the evolution of personalist regimes—all played a role in precipitating Egypt's historic rupture. But macro structural explanations alone are not enough; in privileging the vulnerability of the state over the agency of actors, their capacity to explain the causes and outcomes of Egypt's upheaval is limited. Drawing on social movement theory as it relates to leadership, I lean toward a more holistic approach for understanding the emergence of the revolution, one that accounts for the conscious agency of some of the key grassroots actors who mobilized within their structural contexts and constraints to drive it from below. After all, as Eric Selbin argues, "people's thoughts and actions—even if haphazard or spontaneous—are the mediating link between structural conditions and social outcomes. . . . Structural conditions may define the possibilities for revolutionary insurrections or the options available after political power has been seized, *but they do not explain how specific groups or individuals act, what options they pursue, or what possibilities they may realize.*"¹² This study is premised on the notion that revolutions are fundamentally "human creations—with all the messiness inherent in such a claim—rather than inevitable natural processes."¹³ Following this claim, it illuminates the messy, human, relational side of Egypt's

revolutionary movement through an exploration of the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the youth leaders who were some of its main creators.

Not all analysts of the revolution place as much emphasis on youth, let alone the RYC, as I do in this book. Of course, there were many other actors who played a critical role in propelling the movement. They included workers, farmers, intellectuals, student groups, professional syndicates, human rights activists and organizations,¹⁴ Ultras football fans, cyber-activists, political parties, citizen and professional journalists, and other civil society groups, as well as the plethora of non-activist protesters representing a radically diverse cross-section of Egyptian society. Along with the RYC, they formed the constellation of actors who sustained the eighteen-day uprising and worked in varying degrees to drive the struggle forward in the months and years that followed and to advance its agenda. But the youth from the RYC deserve our attention because, as this book illustrates, they were consequential for the movement in ways the others were not. Without their organizing efforts, for example, it is difficult to imagine how January 25 would have achieved the critical mass that transformed the pre-2011 protest movement into a revolutionary one. The RYC was also one of the first and most effective initiatives of its kind in Egypt where liberals, leftists, and Islamists attempted to bridge their deep political divides and work to realize their shared vision for a more just, equitable, and democratic Egypt. In the early days of the struggle, this gave them a degree of legitimacy and clout in the eyes of the public and state actors that other groups did not enjoy. As such, it held the most promise as an organizational model for advancing the revolutionary movement toward the realization of its goals. As we try to assess the factors that led to the defeat of the revolution and identify how the cause might be salvaged, we must take into account the RYC and consider its challenges, both internal and external. Focusing on them as a pivot in the revolution is one way to bring into focus the set of changing political, social, and economic dynamics as well as the shifting alliances that precipitated and ultimately thwarted the revolution. Indeed, as an important contemporary experiment in revolutionary vanguardism, the RYC deserves our attention for the lessons it offers in revolutionary leadership and the viability of participatory democratic practice as its praxis, not just for Egyptian revolutionaries, but for social and revolutionary movements across the world.

Leadership in Social Movements

My focus on leadership in the Egyptian revolution is informed by an understanding that the agency of leaders is critical to movements, making them indispensable to our understanding of how such movements unfold. Leaders help movements and revolutions turn from prospect into reality by recognizing favorable political and economic circumstances—or the right structural opportunities—and taking appropriate action to exploit them. Defined as “strategic decision makers who inspire and organize others to participate in social movements,”¹⁵ leaders perform a number of functions at different levels that are crucial for the mobilization, development, and outcomes of these struggles. Their roles vary: (1) there are people-oriented leaders who frame grievances and articulate the vision and aspirations of the movement, inspiring others to participate and stay hopeful, unified, and committed during the setbacks they will invariably face on the path toward change; (2) and there are task-oriented leaders who manage the practical side of the movement, devising strategies, mobilizing resources, organizing constituents, and implementing plans.¹⁶ Indeed, a movement’s success—as Egypt’s recent experience with revolution confirms—rests in large part on how effectively its leaders are able to perform these functions. Leadership is vital to movements and revolutions because it is the “key mechanism by which people transform the individual resources they have”—including their backgrounds, finances, networks, knowledge, skills, and tactics—“into the collective power they need to get what they want.”¹⁷

This study of the RYC fits in with a handful of others that have developed our understanding of the various ways leadership manifests and functions in movements, demonstrating how different leadership modes have both empowered and disempowered activists to advance and undermine their struggles.¹⁸ As alluded to in the previous section, these leadership arrangements range from rigid, centralized structures to loose, decentralized formations that are “shifting, interactive, and fluid” in nature.¹⁹ Also highlighted in these studies is how leadership roles within these configurations are gendered and classed. They note, for instance, how gender inequality in the societies and institutions of the challenging group usually translate into the preponderance of men in the top, formal layer of movement leadership and women in the informal, intermediary layers.²⁰ The literature also calls our attention to why movement leaders tend to be from middle- and upper-class backgrounds: class privilege provides them with the resources

needed to lead movements—namely, money, contacts, and time. But more importantly, their class privilege provides them with educational capital. Education is critical because the tasks involved in leading social movements, such as recognizing opportunities, devising tactics and strategies, and framing grievances and demands, are seen as intellectual in nature, and the skills required to carry out these tasks effectively—reading, writing, analyzing, and public speaking—are usually developed in formal educational institutions. The significance of education is demonstrated in the fact that those from working-class backgrounds who have been able to rise to leadership in movements have generally attained a higher level of education than their peers, a trend that is reflected in the experience of the RYC leaders.²¹

My study follows the path of previous scholarship by critically examining how gender and class dynamics play out in the Egyptian revolution's leadership processes. However, the historical conditions of Egypt demand a more nuanced analysis of how these variables intersect with and are influenced by a third: religion. In Egypt, Muslim religiosity²² is seen as an indicator of class and is associated with a well-defined gender normativity. Moreover, Islam has historically played a significant role in political movements and has been a major issue of contention between self-described secularists and Islamists. An examination of leadership in this context would therefore be incomplete without an investigation into how religion informed the participation and ideologies of youth leaders and how they might have negotiated it as they attempted to come together to realize their shared goals.

This study takes as its starting point the importance of learning more about those who come to take on leadership roles and how their different backgrounds and experiences inform their participation and leadership strategies. Understanding the process through which leaders shape movements and are shaped by them allows us insight into the movements themselves.²³ Here, the changing subjectivities of the actors involved becomes relevant as a window into this dialogic process and will therefore occupy an important part of the following analysis on youth activism in the Egyptian revolution. By subjectivity, I am referring to the "inner life process and affective states"²⁴ of social actors, or more specifically what Sherry Ortner describes as "the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, and fear that animate acting subjects . . . as well as the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought, and so on."²⁵ As she puts it, subjectivity matters in our analysis of political struggle

because it is the “the basis of ‘agency,’ a necessary part of understanding how people (try to) act on the world even as they are acted upon.”²⁶

In keeping with this idea, my analysis of Egyptian youth leaders will emphasize in chapters 4 to 6 that movements are not just gendered, but *gendering*. Gender, after all, is “not fixed in advance of social interaction, but is constructed in interaction,”²⁷ and social movements are a key site where this dynamic plays out. Through their participation in movements, activists might contest the social and political meanings of gender and rework them in their own subjectivities, which in turn reflects back on their activism, reshapes the landscape of the movement, modifies its agendas, and generates new meanings of femininity and masculinity for the wider public.²⁸ In short, the study of activists’ masculinities and femininities is critical to understanding movements, since “their making and remaking is a political process affecting the balance of interests in society and the direction of social change.”²⁹ The same can be said of the study of activists’ subjectivities in terms of class, religion, and ideology, as demonstrated in the following chapters.

Youth as Agents of Revolution

A study on youth requires a definition of the term. I understand “youth” as a socially and culturally constructed category, not a universally agreed-upon fixed age group or a natural stage in human development. “Youth” denotes the liminal phase of life between childhood (a time associated with dependence, innocence, and vulnerability), and adulthood (a time associated with independence and responsibility for oneself and one’s own family). In premodern times, young people transitioned through this stage quickly, as families married off their children shortly after the onset of puberty and charged them with the responsibility of maintaining the family’s agrarian livelihood. But with the onset of modernity and the forms of mass schooling that its capitalist production system required in order to thrive, marriage was delayed, and the period of youth was considerably extended and associated with new ways of being young.³⁰ Some observers argue that the prolongation of youth has reached new levels today in the Middle East, where economic crisis and lack of employment opportunities have made it difficult for young men to marry, extending the age of youth well into the late thirties.³¹ However, while the ability to provide for a family is seen as an important marker of manhood, it is also important to note that in Arab culture, one is typically considered a youth until the age of forty, employment and marital status notwithstanding.

One of the main concerns of this study is how youth acquire their political consciousness and activist agency, the kind we saw on remarkable display in Egypt and across the Arab world in 2011. Observing Egyptian youth activists through the lens of political generation as conceptualized by Karl Mannheim in his classic thesis³² allows for an understanding of this process. He describes generation as the dynamic interplay between the biological life-cycle and the evolving sociocultural context it is embedded in. For Mannheim, a generation is comprised of a cohort of people who share “a common location in the historical dimension of the social process, . . . predisposing them for a characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action.”³³ Accordingly, what defines a generation are the pivotal events and trends its members live through in their youth—economic crises, wars, revolutions, natural disasters, and other social ruptures—and the social solidarity that arises among them as they develop a consciousness of their common circumstances and plight. In other words, much like members of a social class, members of a generation achieve “actuality” when they realize their problems are not personal but social.³⁴ This realization might in turn awaken them to the knowledge of their collective power and trigger their political action, as we witnessed in Egypt and other Arab countries in 2011.

The youth life stage figures centrally in Mannheim’s schema as the formative moment in the life of a cohort. He saw that the young were the most likely to become agents of change, free as they are from the burden of responsibilities that come later in life with marriage, parenthood, and career. Compared to adults who have settled into their social roles, youth are more malleable, more willing to take risks, more susceptible to new ideas, and more prone to social change and historical reorientation. Mannheim also emphasized that youth are not as easily socialized into the status quo. As they grow autonomous in their engagement with the world and its challenges, the young begin to rely more on their direct experiences for meaning and less on the “appropriated memories” of older generations—the social norms, attitudes, and value systems imparted to them through schooling, family, and media.³⁵ Mannheim speaks of “fresh contact,” a history-catalyzing process whereby the young encounter the received social and material order anew and evaluate it from the perspective of their novel context. In response, they might grow to oppose the structures they have inherited, and, to the extent that they become conscious of their shared sentiment, take collective action to change it. Whereas their elders might be more gray in their

views about justice and jaded about the efficacy of action and possibility of change, youth tend to see right and wrong in black-and-white terms and are more compelled to act on the idealistic belief that the justice of their cause will prevail.³⁶ Fresh contacts are important because they facilitate the regeneration of society and polity through the critical participation of youth, inspiring them to steer us away from “that which is no longer useful” and toward “that which has yet to be won.”³⁷

While the focus of this book is not on generational agency per se, Mannheim’s ideas help us understand why youth were the impetus and leading actors in the Egyptian revolt. Chapter 3 takes its cue from his ideas. It highlights the youth activists’ embeddedness in the historical dynamics and sociopolitical circumstances of Egypt, noting the formative experiences—or “fresh contacts”—that provoked their political consciousness and activism. One of the main themes of this chapter is how the multiple symptoms of neoliberalism and authoritarianism—what Mannheim would characterize as “a process of dynamic destabilization”³⁸—played out in their personal lives. Of course, not all members of a youth cohort will experience and react to the problems of their age in the same manner. Mannheim addresses this inconsistency with his notion of “generation units,” positing that structural differences like race, gender, class, religion, ideology, and geography will separate members of a generation into subgroups that will have varied if not antagonistic responses.³⁹ Chapters 4 to 6 will examine the youth activists’ subjectivity formation as revolutionary leaders during this pivotal historical moment along these axes of difference.

What Follows . . .

In this book, I tell the story of the revolutionary movement specifically as it relates to the youth protagonists who were so central to its unfolding. I begin in chapter 1 with a discussion of my research methodology, explaining my personal trajectory into this research, my positionality in the field, and the challenges I faced trying to collect data in Cairo’s revolutionary environment. This discussion provides a clear window into the dynamics of the revolutionary process and illuminates the challenging context the youth actors found themselves in as they attempted to sustain this movement. It ends with a discussion of my interviews and interviewees. Chapter 2 provides context for the rest of the study by examining the historical processes from the 1952 revolution onward that shaped the emergence of this movement. It focuses on the erosion of the social contract that locked the

people of the newly formed Egyptian republic into a relationship with the state that was based on the exchange of political quietude for social welfare, giving special attention to the political and economic developments under Mubarak that led to the final severance of that pact. It also traces the emergence of the military and the Muslim Brotherhood as two of Egypt's strongest political players and describes the decade-long resistance movement that paved the way to the January 25 uprising and forged the nation's new generation of revolutionary youth.

Chapter 3 is an attempt to look past the Facebook and Twitter tropes that have been associated with the youth who instigated this movement to tell the deeper story of their revolutionary becoming. It begins by profiling the ten activists whose stories are the focus of the study. It then goes on to highlight their trajectories into the revolution, examining the formative experiences and circumstances that shaped their early politicization and budding activism. I highlight the recurring themes in the various narratives I collected and the specific circumstances that drew this disparate group of youth actors together into a network. This chapter illustrates that the revolution was not spontaneous in the sense that it erupted from nowhere, but that it was at least ten years in the making and initiated by activists who were deeply embedded in the historical processes that gave birth to the uprising.

Chapter 4 details the eighteen-day uprising as it unfolded from the perspective of these youth activists who were deeply engaged in it, focusing specifically on their organizing efforts and challenges. This process was characterized by a series of ups and downs as well as the complex dynamics of a fluid, changing reality involving the interaction of activists, protesters, workers, the non-protesting public, the state, global powers, and international sympathizers. It unfolded in phases after critical junctures, which forced the actors involved to constantly negotiate and act around two recurring, corresponding questions: "What is happening?" and "How should we act?" It was in response to these questions that the youth activists formed the Revolutionary Youth Coalition and attempted to create other revolutionary vehicles from the square that would see the demands articulated by the people through to their realization. Why they ultimately failed in this endeavor becomes clear in this chapter and those that follow.

Chapter 5 examines the transformation in the personal and political subjectivities of the RYC leaders over the course of their engagement before and through the eighteen-day uprising. It begins with a discussion of the ways in which their sense of selves changed as a result of their participation

as leaders in the movement. It also considers the ways in which gender, class, and religion shaped their participation and agency in the revolution and how their attitudes with respect to these categories changed or remained constant. It ends with an examination of the political imaginaries that drove their activism, especially their visions for the new nation-state. This chapter illustrates the kind of subjectivities this upheaval fashioned and offers insight into the development of the movement and where it might have been headed had it not been derailed.

Chapter 6 reviews the most crucial findings of this study, especially as they relate to the multiple expressions of leadership in the revolution with respect to youth as an analytical category, class, gender, and religion. It also provides theoretical insight into the organizing challenges youth activists faced and why the Egyptian revolutionary movement continued to struggle after the eighteen-day uprising.

Chapter 7 closes this book. It offers a synopsis of the major political developments since I conducted my field research in 2011 (including the eighteen months under SCAF transitional rule, President Muhammad Morsi's brief tenure, and the coup in the summer of 2013 that led to Sisi's ascent as president) and discusses what happened to the revolutionary movement and the youth who were its early leaders. It incorporates a fresh set of interviews with these activists conducted in the aftermath of the summer of 2013 crisis to illustrate the continuities and changes in their political subjectivities since our first formal set of interviews. These narratives offer insight into the predicament Egypt found itself in almost four years after the January 25 uprising and what hope might exist for the revolution's reemergence.

1

Encountering Revolution: Expectations and Reality

I was inspired to pursue this study during the revolution's early days, before fate determined that it would quickly come to a head, after two and a half weeks, and draw Mubarak's reign to a dramatic, unexpected close. In fact, the title of this book came to me when the final outcome of Egypt's turbulent uprising was still anyone's guess. When protests erupted in Egypt on January 25, something inside me was lit up. Along with observers around the world, I was captivated by the movement unfolding before us carrying the emblematic weight of history in the making. Obsessively, I followed the deluge of network news coverage, citizen journalism, and academic commentary on Facebook and Twitter. The gripping story Egyptians were telling in collectively speaking truth to power was the stuff of legends, complete with astonishing scenes of underdog heroism, cross-class camaraderie, religious coexistence, national pride, and beloved community. Taking in all of this from afar (namely, the small suburban town that was home to the University of California, Davis, where I was a student), I not only felt the stirrings of a longing, but also a beckoning. I knew I had to return to Egypt and make this movement the topic of my research. In this chapter, I explain why.

My Trajectory

I was born and raised in the United States, yet Egypt is the source I spring from. My parents were born and came of age in a small village in the Sharqiya governorate northeast of Cairo in the Nile Delta region. As adults, they studied, worked, and lived in Cairo and Alexandria before marrying and migrating to the United States in the late 1970s. Though I did not visit Egypt often growing up, nor did I know much about its history or culture, or even speak its language very well, I had an unwitting sense

that home was *there*, not so much *here*. It felt inaccurate to call myself an American. This of course had something to do with the fact that though I was not there, Egypt had managed to ground and shape my experience here through the cultural expressions and everyday practices of my parents, their language, food, dress, and religious observance. It also had something to do with my large, extended family being there, not here. But even more, my sense of belonging to Egypt was reinforced by my own exclusion in the United States.

Unlike my second-generation peers from other non-Arab immigrant backgrounds, my struggle negotiating my dual American and Egyptian identities was embedded in the larger world, a highly polarized geopolitical context in which my two worlds were often in conflict. My decision to wear the hijab as a young Muslim woman not only highlighted and emphasized my difference in my Western home but made the anonymity that eases a person's integration seem like an impossible feat. Because of my hijab, I was identified as a member of that place over there whose people were angry, violent, uncivilized, women-oppressing, freedom haters. The anti-Arab, anti-Muslim climate that emerged post 9/11 only made my feelings of exclusion more acute, as comments like "go back to where you came from" and the sudden appearance of confederate flags dislocated and alienated me further.

I visited Egypt with my family a few times growing up. I even lived and went to school there for a year when I was nine years old. However, I did not come to fully appreciate my country of origin until I ventured there alone in my early twenties and took up residence in Cairo from 2003 to 2007. I had just completed my undergraduate studies and wanted to learn formal Arabic, study my faith tradition, and reconnect with my family in the countryside, whom I had not seen in seven years. But this was not the only pull. On a subtle level, my return to Egypt was driven by a desire to make amends with a country and a region that I had never quite understood and had grown to view negatively for making my life in the US difficult. I wanted to give it a chance to redeem itself. I needed to understand it on its own terms and see it differently.

And I did see it differently, and by extension the larger Middle East, and I became empathetic. I saw that Egypt was not backward, but a country with a rich civilization and culture that had become suffocated by a corrupt government and a world order that would not let it develop and flourish. More poignantly, I also learned that my other country, the United States,

for its own selfish interests, was largely implicated in sustaining such an unjust world order. I understood that the anger misinterpreted as the natural, primordial disposition of Arabs actually stemmed from the intolerable socioeconomic conditions that had made their lives miserable and driven them to the brink—rising food and living costs, staggering unemployment rates, a disastrous lack of adequate public services, and the like. In reality, they had a great deal of warmth, good will, and tolerance, which, remarkably, they had managed to preserve despite their difficult circumstances.

During my stay in Egypt, my own day-to-day experiences and engagement with ordinary Egyptians led me to understand intuitively the deep socioeconomic frustrations that would later turn average Egyptians into revolutionaries. Ironically, it was this experience in Egypt that sparked my interest in positive social change and my desire to learn how I could play a role in it. This experience set me on an academic trajectory that, to my surprise, would eventually bring me back full circle, intellectually and emotionally, and in the most exhilarating and unexpected circumstances: my country's national reconstruction.

As a graduate student with a growing interest in social movements, I needed to understand how this happened. As a young person, I wanted to meet my peers who, for me, were the most compelling part of this movement. Like so many critics, I had assumed Egypt's youth were apathetic, and I wanted to know what I had missed and tell their story. As a long-lost Egyptian-American, I needed to find my story in theirs. So I set about planning my research.

Planning Research

I devised a straightforward plan for ethnographic data collection that I thought should be fairly easy to execute in the approximately three months I had allotted. My goal was to understand the role of youth in the movement.¹ In particular, I wanted to learn about their sociopolitical trajectories prior to their involvement on January 25 and over the course of the eighteen-day uprising, culminating in the momentous resignation of Hosni Mubarak on February 11. I knew I had to limit my inquiry to a clearly defined time frame because the revolutionary movement was far from over, and an attempt to research and analyze it as it was unfolding would epistemologically be a futile pursuit. Thus, with February 11 as my cutoff date, I would try to conduct in-depth interviews with at least ten activists who played an organizing role in the January 25 uprising and the

ensuing revolutionary process. These activists would ideally include men and women representing the diverse youth movements that I learned from my obsessive reading of the news and media commentary had coordinated this effort as it unfolded in Cairo's Tahrir Square. I also hoped to interview key informants like local scholars, journalists, and veteran political activists who could help me understand the landscape of youth activism at the start of the movement and how it had developed in the preceding years, specifically how the political, structural climate allowed youth to emerge as transformative political actors en masse.

I was confident in my ability to conduct this research and motivated by the advantages I perceived my mixed Egyptian and American origin gave me over other foreign researchers. Like them, I thought that my upbringing abroad meant that I could maintain the objective perspective that comes with an outsider's distance and detachment. Unlike them, however, I imagined my Egyptianness meant that I could penetrate the field and access knowledge as an insider in ways they likely could not. Not only was I conversant with the culture and proficient in both formal and colloquial Egyptian Arabic, but I had also been raised Muslim, which in my mind implied that to some extent at least I shared the values and sensibilities of most Egyptians, allowing me to better understand their experiences. It occurred to me that being a veiled woman was another advantage, as it might wash out some of the otherness of my American identity and make them feel more at ease with me. Further, as a seasoned Cairo dweller, I was familiar with the research setting. In fact, I had taken many courses at the American University in Cairo, situated at the corner of Tahrir Square, and was therefore already familiar with the field site. Moreover, I was aware of the challenges that came with trying to live in this dense metropolitan city with its crumbling infrastructure. Such familiarity, I thought, would speed up my fieldwork, as I would not have to waste valuable time learning Cairo's ropes and adjusting to the research site. Additionally, I already had connections who agreed to provide me with important contacts and help me network with activists. In sum, though I was intimidated by the gravity of this project and having to approach revolutionaries for interviews to conduct it, I felt comforted knowing that my position would facilitate my entry into the field and make building rapport with my potential research participants easier—or so I had imagined. In fact, to my surprise, my experiences in the field would challenge many of these assumptions.

Immersion in Revolutionary Cairo

I arrived in Cairo in late June 2011, five months after the start of the revolutionary movement. I got settled after the initial inescapable, almost ritual hassle that had been part of my experience traveling there over the years. Thereafter, I immediately turned my attention to the field. Before my departure, I had already collected the names of young activists who appeared frequently in English-language media outlets as well as those who were independently dispatching news updates from Tahrir on Twitter during the uprising. However, I had no sense of the extent of their activism, their political leanings, or affiliations. What was clear to me was their prominence, as documented by the media and their apparent use of social media.² I began activating my contacts upon my arrival in the hope that they could help me better understand the network of youth activists involved and lead me to key contacts among them. A meeting with the director of the Gerhardt Center at the American University in Cairo upon my arrival and a few conversations with some of her assistants provided me with the first useful contacts that would serve as entry points into what had until then still daunted me as an elusive web of revolutionaries.

At the time of my arrival, I was also fortunate that Tahrir Square was still a bustling protest site teeming with demonstrators. The square and its Downtown vicinity had continued to be the site of political ferment since SCAF seized the reins of power earlier that year, when Mubarak stepped down. The Council's unilateral decisions, as it charged itself with the task of managing the country's transition to democratic elections, fueled rather than dampened the revolutionary flames; it was a move that activist leaders saw as the beginning of a counterrevolution, and it signaled the next stage in their battle to bring down the old power structure.

I found myself in the middle of my first Tahrir protest shortly after my arrival. Little did I know that this would be just one of many to follow. Friday, July 8, was dubbed "The Friday of Determination." Thousands of protesters gathered in Tahrir and other city squares across the country to voice their frustration with SCAF and how little had changed five months after the uprising. In a move to press SCAF to institute immediate reforms and demand that former officials from the ousted regime be prosecuted without further delay, activists staged an open-ended sit-in in Tahrir Square that would continue for three weeks. This was an unexpected development that worked to my advantage. I was able to rely on my firsthand experiences and observations at these protests in the summer of 2011 to imagine what

had happened during the eighteen-day uprising at the start of that year. I was also able to meet the demonstrators and activists taking part in these current protests and learn about their wider experiences and the meanings of their participation in the movement.

***Middle-class, American, female, and veiled:
researcher positions in Tahrir***

Tahrir Square was unlike I had ever experienced it before. The atmosphere was at once serious and carnivalesque. Men, women, and children of all ages and from all walks of life stood shoulder to shoulder under the blazing sun, cheering and chanting, waving their flags, and pumping their fists in the air to the emotionally charged speeches, chants, and nationalist songs blasting from the towering stages erected at every corner of the square. “*Eed wabda! Eed wabda!*” (One hand! One hand!) they would shout in unison, egging each other on. Hundreds of colorful banners stretched across the streets and roundabout. Journalists and their camera crews peppered the balconies of surrounding high-rise apartment complexes. Protesters posed for photographs with their masterpiece posters, while rowdy food and souvenir vendors stubbornly forced their carts through the crowd. In the center of the square and around its periphery, hundreds of protesters took refuge from the sun in the tents pitched for the sit-in, some taking naps, others sharing meals, while others engaged in heated political debates. It was exciting, but also quite jarring, being in Tahrir participating for the first time in a revolutionary movement I had been eagerly following and cheering on from afar. It was then, during my first real engagement with the field, that I started to become aware of myself in ways I had not anticipated.

Along with the exhilaration I felt being at the center of this movement for the first time, I also felt a perplexing distance from it. I wanted to chant with my fellow Egyptians on that Friday, loudly and fervently, but I was restrained by a gnawing sense that my passionate display would be lacking in authenticity, and therefore inappropriate and disrespectful. This was because as an Egyptian whose upbringing as such was interrupted by the migration of her parents, I did not have access to the repertoire of shared experiences and frustrations that drove these protesters. Nor could I tap into the historical memory that animated my supposed compatriots for inspiration, for that, too, mostly eluded me. Though I sympathized with their cause, it was not really mine; I had not grown up with their struggle, nor would I feel the full implications should their movement fail. Ironically,

when I was in the United States planning this research, I identified closely as a member of this community; now in the field, I was becoming conscious of myself apart from those I had considered my people. There, I felt that I was an American, an outsider. This transformation in my own subjectivity was a result of my lived, sensorial experience as well as the way I perceived people reacting to me.

My subjective duality began to dawn on me earlier in my fieldwork, during my first excursions into the Tahrir sit-in camp area, where I hoped to gain official entrée into the leading activist circles. I imagined this task would be easy, given that the sit-in meant all the activists I might want to recruit as research participants were stationed in the square for at least the next few days, perfectly accessible. But in fact, it was not at all this simple; gaining access, I would soon learn, entailed so much more.

I spent several days walking about the encampment area, trying to orient myself in the dense maze of tents clustered into multiple sub-communities representing the various movements, political parties, organizations—even extended families and cities outside of Cairo involved in the protest—before I worked up the nerve to introduce myself to activists and start conversations with them about my research. My hesitation stemmed in great part from my increasing sensitivity to the nuances and implications of my own position and identity in this unfamiliar, radically heterogeneous and fluid environment. I wanted to smoothly insert myself in this bubbling universe, but I could not figure out how to place myself in it. Although I had been to Cairo many times before, occupied Tahrir brought me into an almost uncomfortable proximity with very different social groups I had never previously engaged with and would have never met had it not been for my research interest in their movement. Tahrir did not just introduce me to all these radically different groups, it confronted me with them all at once, stirring anxieties in me as it kicked up and forced me to negotiate the multiple inter-sections of my positionalities.

When I was planning my research, I did not think much about the extent to which my own positionality could affect my data collection in Egypt. I did not imagine my gender would have any significant impact on my fieldwork; I did not expect it to limit my access to male activists, for instance, as I understood these activists to be progressive when it came to non-romantic inter-gender interactions. Nor did I expect my religion to be a hindrance, since the majority of Egyptians are Muslim, though their religiosity might vary. Similarly, I gave virtually no thought to my class position,

understanding most of the activists to be members of the middle class like me. But together, all of these variables did have unexpected implications for my fieldwork, especially as they manifested in my attire, particularly my hijab, as well as my demeanor. For most people, the hijab symbolizes a Muslim woman's religious observance, which is usually associated with political conservatism. Now in the field, I started to see how the fact that I was veiled along with my socialization as an American Muslim would shape and to some extent delimit my interactions and access to knowledge.

At the Tahrir sit-in, for example, one of the groups I wanted to network with but was reluctant to approach was the "Twitterati," a group of elite and upper-middle-class, left-leaning secular youth who occupied the southeastern corner of the roundabout at the center of the square. These activists were known to international followers of the movement for their regular news updates from the square and thus seemed an appropriate entry point to start my networking. As someone who grew up in California, I related to this group's cosmopolitanism and felt comforted by the fact that they spoke fluent English. However, as a practicing veiled Muslim woman, I felt self-conscious around them. I clearly did not fit in with the women in this group who dressed less conservatively than me, smoked liberally, and slept beside their male comrades in and around shared tents. Moreover, my class position among them felt questionable. I was aware of the general aversion to the hijab among members of this class in Egypt, who associated it, in a derogatory way, with the peasant and popular classes; descriptors like *baladi* (of the country) and *bi'a* (ghetto) were common in their discourse on the subject and conveyed their disfavor. Understandably, wearing hijab around this group drew out my own sensitivities about my family's provincial origins, which I had been made painfully aware of as a child growing up among more affluent Egyptians from Cairo and Alexandria in the United States. Paradoxically, in the context of the square, my middle-class position in the United States, which had led me to become a researcher wholeheartedly interested in the Egyptian revolutionary movement, stood obscurely in the background, while my veil and its Egyptian class connotations took center stage.

When I finally found the courage to approach members of this group, I found myself feeling pressured into playing a game ironically similar to the one I was accustomed to playing in my interactions with non-Muslims in the United States: attempting to emphasize my similarity and minimize my difference. I tried to build rapport by consciously carrying myself in a

manner that anticipated and preemptively challenged whatever incorrect assumptions or views they might have of me because of my hijab. Thus, I behaved in ways that highlighted my middle-class, American upbringing and tastes and relayed my cosmopolitan Egyptianness, all in an effort to position myself more as an insider and less as an outsider. For example, I made a point of speaking Arabic and mixing it with English in a way that was customary among upper-class Egyptians. This dance involved a constant and at times uncomfortable negotiation with my religious values, which I tried to avoid asserting for fear it might alienate potential interlocutors. Such negotiations were particularly trying when interacting with men, especially with Muslim men, whom I was raised to be more reserved around. With a few activists my effort appeared to work; if my hijab was at all an issue for them in the first place, my Americanness and researcher status seemed to trump their secular and class misgivings about it. I was able to enjoy some degree of camaraderie with them and rely on them for support with my research, particularly with networking. With others, I understood from our interactions that they could not see past the scarf on my head, all the more unsettling given that the ethos of the movement they were driving was one of tolerance and acceptance. In all honesty, my inability to access them was likely as much a result of some of my own discomfort with our difference and the barriers I might have erected as a result. In retrospect, I could not help but wonder how much easier it would have been to be a practicing Muslim male researcher in this setting, or an unveiled practicing Muslim woman; I imagine that playing up, playing down, or even completely camouflaging my religious identity and religiosity as the field dynamic demanded would have been much easier.

It is difficult for me to decipher the full impact my position as a practicing, veiled Muslim woman had on the quality of data I collected. Generally, those I interviewed appeared to be unfazed by my hijab and seemed to answer my questions as they would have had the same questions come from an unveiled woman or a man. However, some of my respondents might have presented a few of their answers, particularly about gender and religion, in a way that they imagined resonated with my sensibilities. While it might have diminished some of the respect secular elite activists might have felt for me as a serious researcher, my status as a practicing, veiled Muslim woman certainly did not have that effect on the Islamist activists, such as the former members of the Muslim Brotherhood. If anything, it made it easier for me to establish rapport and gain regular access to them.

I believe my hijab made it easier for them to relate to me, and I definitely felt more assured around them.

Ironically, I was also stunned to learn over the course of planning and conducting this research that I, too, had stereotypical assumptions about veiled women as a consequence of my socialization in the West. I started to become aware of this before I traveled to Egypt, when during an advisory meeting my professor pointed out that I had just judged an Egyptian woman activist as conservative based solely on my observation that she was veiled. This incident was all the more troubling considering that I myself resented such assumptions being made about me because of my veil. Somehow, I had introjected the very Western hegemonic views of Muslim women that I had experienced myself and had criticized and challenged in the United States. I confronted these same prejudiced views in the field, where I met women who, though they dressed more conservatively, demonstrated through their views and their behavior that they were anything but. Some, for example, surprised me with their left-leaning politics and their liberal attitudes about inter-gender relations. Moreover, I had also assumed that being a veiled woman would make it easier for me to build rapport with the veiled women activists I hoped to interview. Growing up as a member of the Muslim community in the United States, I felt an instant connection and solidarity with veiled women in general. Without having to verbalize it, on some level, as minority women, we understood each other and knew we were there for each other. But although it may have existed in some other way, ironically, I never sensed this kind of solidarity or sympathy from veiled women activists I met in Egypt. This may have been because Muslims in Egypt are the majority and the veil is the norm. On the flip side, I was also forced to confront my own stereotypical assumptions about non-veiled upper-class Egyptian women, whom I had imagined to be almost categorically averse to the hijab. Ola Shahba, one of my interlocutors who, I learned from our interviews, wore the veil for a number of years, is one of the women who challenged this view and helped me better understand the varied experiences and relationships Egyptian women of diverse classes had with the veil.

Class, religion, and gender, my fieldwork experience confirmed, are not fixed categories even within the same society at the same historic moment. In effect, while my hijab impeded my access to upper-middle-class and elite activists, it did not prevent me from gaining access to groups from lower social backgrounds. Gaining access to activist circles whose members came from Egypt's popular class (discussed in chapters 3, 5, and 6), such as the

April 6 Youth Movement and Youth for Justice and Freedom Movement, meant a very different set of negotiations. With these groups, my veil was not an obstacle, as it was common practice for women from this class to cover. Externally, I had many of the markings of an insider. But internally, I knew I did not fully fit. My socialization abroad as a member of the American middle class placed me a few notches above them on the social ladder. I immediately sensed our class differences in our dress and mannerisms. Their limited English was also a cue, as proficiency in English reflected the quality of education financially accessible to them. This was a group that I had, until then, never intimately engaged with in Egypt and was not sure how to relate to. However, trying to build rapport with members from this group, I found that my family's class origins in rural Egypt worked to my advantage, as I was able to connect with them by activating my rural connection and drawing on my life experiences there.³ The more time I spent with these activists and engaged with them in interviews, however, the more I realized that class difference was not really an issue in the first place. I stopped worrying about broaching topics related to their class background in our discussions for fear of offending them, because their revolutionary activism had moved them into the intelligentsia among whom class distinctions had little place, and if anything, lower-class origins were a source of pride rather than a point of sensitivity. Though I imagined with this group I might be studying down or sideways, in this sense, I was actually studying up.

A real Egyptian?—language and culture

Before embarking on my research, I was sure that my proficiency in Arabic would give me an advantage over foreign fieldworkers and serve me well on the ground. This was true to an extent. But once I began my field research in earnest, I began to see the limitations of my Arabic as a non-native speaker and feel their effects. Though I had grown up speaking colloquial Egyptian Arabic with my family and friends in the United States, and though I had studied Modern Standard Arabic quite extensively, I had not achieved native fluency. My accent was foreign, my vocabulary limited, my collocations at times incorrect, my comprehension sometimes spotty. This had an impact on my ability to build rapport and access knowledge. Forced in some cases to introduce myself and build relationships relying solely on my Arabic because of my interlocutors' weakness in English, I became self-consciously aware of how my accent and lack of fluency not only highlighted my class difference, but also my cultural otherness. Fortunately, my

awkwardness in the language did not work entirely against me, as many found my struggle endearing.⁴ Still, my limited language skills sometimes choked my expression, preventing me from engaging fully with the people I met, which meant I could only go so far in building relationships.

The more significant consequences of my language limitations became evident during interviews. I knew conducting interviews in Arabic would be challenging, but I insisted on doing it myself because I thought having a translator would interrupt the flow considerably and stifle my ability to connect with respondents. I attempted to manage this by preparing an Arabic translation of my interview guide and requesting patience from my interlocutors in the instances I might ask them to speak more slowly or provide extra clarification. This helped, and they graciously worked with me. Still, keeping up with these native speakers—let alone trying to stay ahead of them in conversation and steer the interview—at times proved an arduous task that required immense concentration and effort. That said, I believe that choosing not to use a translator was the correct decision; I do not think I would have gained as rich a data set otherwise. Fortunately, with practice, I had become a much more confident interviewer in Arabic by the end of my fieldwork.

While my indigenous status meant that I would be able to avoid the problem of culture shock, I discovered that due to my upbringing abroad, my knowledge of Egypt's norms and values was not as thorough as I had thought. I was also not immune from subculture shock. There were many instances when I found it difficult to assess what would be deemed appropriate behavior according to Egyptian standards, and so I erred on the conservative side. There were many spaces I initially avoided that were important meeting points for activists, such as Downtown open-air coffee shops (*ahawi*) that I assumed were considered to be masculine spaces and culturally inappropriate for women to frequent, but I later learned from activists that this was not entirely true. I was also not aware of certain etiquettes, such as those related to phone calls and making appointments. There were several activists whom I had tried for months to get an interview with. A friend told me that if I had been a "real" Egyptian, I would have gotten the interview a long time ago. What he meant was that my American restraint prevented me from calling repeatedly and pushing for a meeting, behavior that was customary in Egypt. Even after I had learned this, it was a very difficult practice for me to adopt. The shallowness of my cultural knowledge was especially noticeable when it came to popular and political

culture. In my conversations with activists, I encountered many idioms and cultural references that eluded me, because I had not grown up watching Egyptian television or films or reading Arabic literature, for example. And I certainly was not up to speed on the latest urban slang or how to use it. This affected my ability to fully engage with Egyptian humor, the hallmark of Egyptian culture, and reciprocate it in my conversations, as I simply did not have the cultural repertoire to tap into; again, this affected my ability to build rapport. The gaps in my cultural knowledge also meant I had a steep learning curve when it came to getting caught up on all the political events and figures that were referenced during interviews and relevant to my research.

My limited cultural proficiency made me especially vulnerable in the field when I was trying to discover leading youth activists, as almost every group identified themselves as such or criticized others for making this claim. My inability as an American to figure Egyptians out quickly sometimes resulted in some very serious discomfort, confusion, and concern, as it meant I spent time with people I thought would be valuable for my research but whom I later learned to be unreliable sources. To manage this challenge, I learned to seek confirmation that what I had heard about potential research participants matched their reputation among their peers. In this way, I was able to ensure, before I interviewed someone, that there was relative consensus in the activist community that they were indeed legitimate activist leaders who fit my criteria and would benefit my study.

The revolutionary movement in Egypt attracted scholars and journalists from all over the world, most notably from the West and especially from the United States. Such attention had unforeseen implications for my research. First, there was the issue of competition for the attention of activists. Many of these researchers and journalists were, like me, on the trail of these potential informants, pleading for interviews. It was difficult enough to secure interviews with activists while they were still caught up in the revolutionary struggle; this competition certainly did not help. When I was finally able to interview them, many apologized for not giving me a meeting sooner and said they were burnt out from speaking to so many researchers and journalists.

Second, being new to field research, I was unaware of the power dynamics involved in knowledge creation across the Global North/South divide. I did not consider how the sudden influx of researchers from the West fascinated with the Arab Spring, the latest hot topic coming out of

the developing world, might be perceived locally, especially among the academic community, and how this might affect my fieldwork. When planning my research, I only considered how my indigenous status would give me leverage over foreign fieldworkers. Admittedly, it had not occurred to me that there would be many more local scholars who were more qualified than I was to conduct research related to my topic of interest—and indeed, as I later learned, who already were. Though it is true that I was ethnically Egyptian and connected to the area not only through my heritage but through having lived there for some years, I was also an American who had lived most of my life in the United States and was trained by and affiliated with an American university, which meant I certainly was not local; I could not really claim to be studying my own society.

Starting to realize this upon my entry into the field, I felt myself recoil, self-conscious about my position and unclear about where I stood in the eyes of locals as a researcher across the global north/south divide. Already questioning my Egyptianness as a result of some of my disencounters in the field, I now began to question what right I had to enter this setting and announce my interest in a topic that I would discover local scholars had not only researched and written extensively about in Arabic, but had been intimately engaged with as activists.⁵ I sensed from my unanswered requests for key informant interviews with local scholars, as well as some awkward moments with a few of those who agreed to meet me, that I was not the only one asking this question. I felt the need at these times to emphasize my connection to Egypt, but it did not seem to matter, given what felt like unforgivable gaps in my knowledge—a consequence of my foreign upbringing—that I sensed local informants might not have appreciated being asked to fill in. My unease was confirmed in an article by Mona Abaza, a professor at the American University in Cairo, which I came across while in Egypt. In it, she voiced her concern about the unequal relationship between so-called local experts and their colleagues in the West, who, as “tourist revolutionary academics” had “misused” them as service providers during their brief trips to Egypt, only to return home and benefit from their status as experts, while the region received no return for providing the services upon which their expertise was built.⁶ I empathized with this position and resolved not to be included in this category: I committed to staying connected to the country after my research trip and producing knowledge that would benefit my research participants and their cause. Fortunately, I found that as time passed and I came into my Egyptianness

more through my engagement with the activist community and revolutionary movement, my worry about being the target of these frustrations subsided, and my confidence in the unique perspectives I brought to this research topic as an insider-outsider and the contribution I could make as a result grew stronger.

Egypt in upheaval: challenges in the field

When I initially planned my research, I expected that it would be fairly easy to carry out in the three months I had allotted. And in normal circumstances, it probably would have been. But these were not normal circumstances, as it were: Egypt was in the throes of a revolution.

I was aware that the revolutionary movement was far from over before leaving the US for Egypt, but my impression (having failed to keep up with the news in the weeks before my departure because I was busy preparing for the trip) had been that despite the protesters' frustrations at the slow pace of change and the continued demonstrations they staged to voice their discontent, things were generally moving in the right direction, and a relative calm was returning to Egypt. I had no idea the climate was still so volatile. Even if I had known, I could not have fathomed what this meant, especially for my research, until I immersed myself in the field and experienced the revolution for myself.

Early on, before setting out for Cairo, I had considered how the ongoing development of this movement might affect my research. I knew that because the youth actors I hoped to recruit as research participants were probably still actively involved in the revolutionary movement, it was imperative that I stay focused on their engagement at its inception and avoid the epistemological pitfall of trying to make sense of their participation in current events. This was because, being unpredictable and having no clear end in sight, the revolutionary movement might take my research participants down unclear paths that I could not follow. Concentrating on the beginnings of the revolution would be critical, I told myself, if I wanted to complete my research in three months and avoid getting lost in the field indefinitely. But soon after I arrived, I started to realize there was much more to consider than I had anticipated.

First, there was the nature of the revolutionary movement itself. As I became more intimate with it, experiencing it up close in real time through my own participation as a protester and through my ethnographic study of the youth activists at its center, I would start to see it in all its glory: a

marvelous, dizzying mess. Lacking a unified leadership steering its course, this monstrous, amorphous, living phenomenon called Egypt's revolution behaved erratically, creating an environment of immense instability, confusion, and insecurity. Its twists and turns were sudden and dramatic. At times they were even catastrophic, exposing those involved on the ground to grave danger and tragically taking lives. It was demanding, requiring its protagonists to stay alert and present, if not one step ahead in anxious anticipation of the opponents' next moves. Mechanically, it worked itself out in ebbs and flows, in fits and starts, delivering promising gains one day and defeating blows the next. It was intensely fluid and uncertain. This was the environment in which I had to carry out my fieldwork, this was my field site. Naturally, finding my footing on its shifting ground was an ongoing struggle.

This was also the turmoil my research participants were still deeply embroiled in. Their level of involvement in the struggle never changed. From the beginning, they fought on its front lines, and they continued to do so during my tenure in the field. The implications of this for my data collection process were many. The first was logistical and related to securing interviews with these activists. Being so inextricably tied to this fluid movement meant that these key interlocutors were extremely slippery and nearly impossible to obtain interviews with. As some of its main drivers, they were on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and when there was a sudden development, they were among the first to respond. Their schedules were as tentative as the revolutionary movement itself, and so were our appointments in them. As such, it was impossible to arrange meetings more than a day in advance. Moreover, it was not uncommon for me to schedule an interview with an activist only to have him or her cancel last-minute or fail to show up altogether without notice because some urgent matter related to their activism required their attention, or worse, a full-fledged crisis had suddenly arisen and snatched them away. When I was finally able to sit down with them, our meetings were often significantly delayed, frequently interrupted, terribly rushed, and/or suddenly cut short. It was always something: the sit-in in July that would last three weeks, the many Friday protests, the several violent clashes that erupted between protesters and soldiers, the Mubarak trial, the Israeli embassy protests, and of course, the month of Ramadan brought its own scheduling challenges. (Sure, some appeared to generally lack discipline in keeping their commitments, but the revolutionary environment certainly did not help.) Eventually I stopped trying to schedule interviews because the timing was

never right. I waited, hoping things would let up, but they never did. The result: one week before my scheduled return to the US, I had only managed to conduct four interviews, three of which were incomplete.

I decided to stay longer and try harder to adapt. I realized there was no competing with the revolution for my research participants' attention: the revolution was the priority, and I had to learn to accept this—embrace this—and work with it as best I could. I saw that I would get nowhere trying to wait its upheavals out from a distance; I had to take the plunge and learn to negotiate with its dynamics and find openings from within. I realized I had to stop passively competing with it and instead try actively engaging with it. So I inserted myself in the movement's center, where my participants were located, joining them regularly at actions, events, and meetings, where I was able to build the rapport that facilitated my easier access to them. Now regularly in closer proximity to them, I also learned how to take advantage of their intermittent availability during the sporadic peaks and lulls of the movement. When there was a lull, I rushed to capture them for impromptu interviews. When there was a peak, such as a major disruption in Tahrir, I tracked them down in the field and accompanied them as a participant and/or observer whenever they would allow me to do so.

I did not expect to gain much from these observations for my immediate research because my focus was on a period that had long passed, but I decided it was better than nothing. And yet, this turned out to be one of my best decisions. As challenging as it was to keep up with these activists in this capacity, I was provided with amazing, unexpected opportunities to observe processes that would give me insight into my research participants and their early involvement in this movement. During the spontaneous eruptions in Tahrir Square in late November, for example, which many likened to January 25 in mood, spirit, and fragility, I was able to attend several late-night organizing meetings with youth activists which, I later learned from my interviews, resembled their meetings in the early days of the revolution. They were trying to figure out how to keep the momentum in the square and capitalize on the new explosion of popular energy across Egypt's other cities to secure gains for the revolution. I had not initially incorporated participant observation into my research methods because I was limiting my inquiry to the leadership and organizing processes activists had engaged in during the first eighteen days of this movement. I could not have anticipated that history would repeat itself and the activists would find themselves engaging in this process once again, and that I would have the

chance to observe them, having missed the opportunity in January. This was perhaps the single most unexpected reward of conducting research in this environment.

Nonetheless, my adjustments and accommodations were not enough. Despite extending my stay twice so that it doubled from three to six months, I was still unable to get all the interviews I had hoped for. The harder I tried, the more the revolution seemed to quicken its pace, challenging me to keep up. The upheavals became increasingly frequent, explosive, and destabilizing.⁷ I simply could not accomplish all that I had set out to do. The revolution would not let me.

Aside from the logistical challenge of trying to identify and enlist the right activists to participate in my research, this persistently turbulent movement presented me with another challenge: how to maintain my project's focus and relevance in this ever-evolving climate and how to convince potential interviewees that it was worth their time and attention. Much had happened since the eighteen-day uprising in January 2011, which was the real focus of my study, and things would continue to develop after my arrival later that June. With each of these developments, some of them extremely frustrating if not downright tragic, those early eighteen days seemed to change in significance for the activists I interviewed, taking on different constructions and meanings for them as they looked back and viewed them through the lens of recent events. This continuous reconstruction and reinterpretation of the past is something I had to contend with when I was recruiting participants and conducting interviews. Sally Tomah, for example, whom I pursued for an interview for nearly five months, agreed to meet several times, asking me to wait until things let up, but in the end, she declined to take part. Being so mired in the current political struggle and emotionally exhausted from the slow pace of change, she struggled to appreciate the significance of their work during the early eighteen days in this later moment. She said she was tired of talking about that time when "we didn't really accomplish shit." For those activists I was able to secure interviews with, although my plan had been to limit my discussion with them to the eighteen days, I realized I had to negotiate a space for recent events in my interviews, as their impact on the activists and their perception of themselves and their work was impossible to ignore. For example, I could not ignore the fact that a few days before I interviewed one activist, he had just buried his comrade, Mina Daniel, who had been killed by the army along with other Copts in what has been called the Maspero Massacre. The

event confirmed for him and the other activists I interviewed that the army was not acting in the interests of the revolution, as it had claimed to be doing on February 11, but was in fact its main opponent. Events like Maspero were constantly spinning the very meaning of the eighteen days in the minds of my informants. Nor could I ignore the fact that another activist I was preparing to interview had just decided to run in the parliamentary elections, a significant step in his political trajectory and an outcome of his involvement since the eighteen-day uprising. These experiences were all connected in the present and would continuously color and shape each other and the activists' memory of them. Essentially, what I had become caught up in by virtue of the timing of my study is the dialectic between ontology and epistemology in action.

I kept trying to adapt by adjusting my interview protocol, making room for new developments as they unfolded, while tailoring my questions to each activist. Even so, the process was further complicated by the fact that I conducted most of my interviews over two or three sessions that were days if not weeks and even months apart. Between one session and the next, something could have happened to change my respondents' recollection of and feelings about the eighteen days quite significantly.

Lastly, in an environment as intense and unpredictably volatile as this one, safety was an important consideration. As an Egyptian who sympathized deeply with this movement, I wanted to be at every action, supporting the cause. As a researcher, this would also prove useful, as fuller immersion meant I might establish a new connection, learn something new, or gain a new insight. As a woman, however, I had to be particularly cautious; one of the many disturbing side effects of these chaotic times was the rise in sexual harassment and assault on women. Not only had this become an alarming, growing trend among men who took advantage of the deteriorating security situation to have a good time, but even more disturbingly, it was the method of choice used by police and regime-hired thugs to intimidate women protesters. Fortunately, I never fell victim to this kind of gender-based violence, but I regularly heard about other women's traumatic experiences and was constantly on guard as a result.

My status as a foreign, Western researcher also put me at some risk in this environment. In an attempt to discredit the revolution and turn ordinary Egyptians against it, counterrevolutionary forces manipulated Egyptians' deep, historic mistrust of foreigners and whipped up a campaign that peddled the movement as a plot by foreign agents conspiring to destabilize Egypt for

their own interests. The campaign succeeded in creating an environment of suspicion and distrust of foreigners, especially those engaged in civil society and human rights work, and by extension, journalists and researchers.⁸

In fact, the introduction of the colloquial term *agendarwi*—that is, someone with an agenda—into the Egyptian revolutionary lexicon reflects how conspicuous and widespread this fear was. I was initially blind to this aspect of my position in the field, thinking that my obvious appearance and identification as an Egyptian protected me from such associations. However, a few anxiety-inducing encounters during my early fieldwork with seemingly ordinary protesters in Tahrir—who could very well have been regime supporters and not opponents, as I had assumed—made me aware of my naiveté. I realized my Egyptianness did not protect me from being seen as an outsider with an agenda. The combination of my non-native sounding, less-than-fluent Arabic and, in particular, my affiliation with a foreign academic institution had betrayed me. The suspicion my affiliation seemed to raise among the protesters to whom I disclosed it left me feeling disquieted, and I became much more cautious when it came to divulging my identity and work as a researcher.

During my time in the field, I had to keep reminding myself that I was there to conduct research; my purpose was to document processes, which I could not do if I exposed myself to major risk. I had an obligation to return to my family and academic community, safe and sound, with quality data in hand. In this respect, safety presented itself as a logistical issue that I had to manage carefully in order to carry out my original objective. This was easy to do in the beginning, when I was still relatively distant and detached from the movement. But as I became increasingly immersed in it and intimate with the revolutionaries at its center, my concern for my safety and reluctance to participate alongside them in riskier protests and actions became a source of inner conflict for me. There were several moments when I felt that as an Egyptian, I should behave more like the revolutionaries who put their bodies on the line for a cause they believed to be greater than themselves, one for which many died, and yet I could not. There was more to my desire to stay safe, I realized, than trying to be a responsible researcher or an ordinary person who naturally wanted to stay out of harm's way; it was another manifestation of the detachment I still felt as an Egyptian born and raised in the United States. I admired my peers' level of devotion to our common ancestral homeland, but I did not share it. Part of me regretted that I did not know what it felt like to feel so invested and attached to this country



Figure 1. Graffiti art from early 2012 memorializing revolutionary icon Shaykh Emad Effat, who was martyred during the Cabinet clashes in late 2011. The Quranic verses read: *"And they will say, 'Our Lord! We obeyed our leaders and notables, and they led us astray. Our Lord! Give them double their share of torment and curse them a mighty curse'"* (33:67–68). Like all the other revolutionary murals in Cairo, this one has since been effaced by the state. Photograph by Rahma Esther Bavelaar.

that I would be willing to risk my life for it. And yet, I also appreciated the unique experience of solidarity my dual identity provided me. It was surreal, during the Muhammad Mahmud clashes in November, to receive an approving nod from new acquaintances in Tahrir when they learned I was a student at UC Davis, which had just made international headlines for a police pepper-spraying incident during an Occupy Movement sit-in; almost a year earlier, during the eighteen-day uprising, I had been greeted with the same gesture on campus when new acquaintances there learned of my connection to Egypt.⁹

As time passed, I began to notice that my immersion in the revolution transformed my level of investment in it, and by extension, my sense of self as an Egyptian and an American. Though I felt distant from the movement both when I first encountered it and when I later decided not to take part as a revolutionary, by the end of my fieldwork I had become very intensely connected to it. I was particularly affected by the martyrdom of the Azhari scholar Shaykh Emad Effat (see figure 1). I knew him from my previous stint

in Cairo in the early 2000s; he taught a classical Arabic grammar class in Nasr City that I had the privilege of attending. I was pleasantly surprised to see him regularly in the square during protests, wearing regular clothes instead of his clerical garbs and often accompanied by his children. Had it not been for his kind smile and more particularly, his elegant gait, I might not have recognized him; he walked through Tahrir just as gracefully as I remembered him walking through the courtyards of Islamic Cairo's old mosques. His assassination on December 17 during the Cabinet clashes drew me into the movement in a new way, emotionally and spiritually. Suddenly the revolution was much more personal, and my passionate participation no longer felt performative. My subjectivity as a Muslim and a woman was also changing as a result of the dynamic and often unsettling processes I was subjected to as a researcher and analyst of contemporaneous societal changes. Through my own engagement with the revolution, I began to witness in myself the very kind of transformations I was interested in observing in my study participants, in my demeanor and my attitudes related to class, gender, and religion, for example. In many ways, I became an extension of my own research.

Activist Representation

I spent six months conducting my fieldwork, from June 24 through December 21, 2011. My primary method for data collection was face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interviews with youth activists and key informants, recruited through convenience contacts and snowball sampling. Later, my methods evolved to include field notes, as my immersion in the revolutionary movement provided me with more and more unexpected opportunities for participant observation. I also conducted a series of follow-up interviews long-distance via Skype in late 2013 and early 2014 (see chapter 7). Interviews focused on narrative, and participants were invited to share their life stories as they related to becoming activists. They were also invited to share their personal accounts of the unfolding of the revolution from January 25 through to the time of our interviews, with special attention to the leadership processes they had engaged in as well as their personal transformations throughout this period.

I interviewed twenty-five activists, most of whom were leaders or active members of the various youth movements and youth factions of political parties that made up the RYC, which announced itself in Tahrir Square twelve days after the start of the uprising in January 2011. Briefly, the organizations included: (1) the April 6 Youth Movement, a pragmatic

protest movement based on a Facebook network that emerged in 2008 in solidarity with striking laborers in Mahalla factories; (2) the Youth for Justice and Freedom Movement (*Harakat Shabab min agl al-Adala wa-l-Hurriya*), a dynamic, leftist youth protest movement that grew out of the April 6 Youth Movement; (3) the Popular Campaign Supporting ElBaradei (*al-Hamla al-Sha'biya li Da'm al-Barad'i*), henceforth referred to as the ElBaradei Campaign, a group that had gathered around Mohamed ElBaradei, former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna, and attracted a number of disenfranchised youth in the years before the revolt around its general call for reform; (4) youth activists from the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*), Egypt's largest Islamist movement as well as the oldest and most organized opposition group; and (5) representatives from the various youth factions of the existing political parties—such as the Democratic Front Party (*Hizb al-Gabha al-Wataniya*), the Unionist Party (*Hizb al-Tagammu'*), and the Dignity Party (*Hizb al-Karama*)—as well as several politically independent youth activists. (For more on my interviews and complete data set, see the appendix.)

Although there were other groups I could have focused on or incorporated into my study, I decided to settle on the activists from the RYC for several reasons. First, I learned during my fieldwork that several of the groups under its umbrella were among the most active on the ground in the years preceding the revolution, with bases in Cairo and branches all over Egypt. Together, they strategized for January 25 and continued to help drive the revolutionary movement that ensued, especially as it unfolded in Tahrir Square and Cairo, the movement's ground zero. The effort of these youth activists before and during the uprising was significant, which made them appropriate candidates for investigating youth leadership processes in the revolution. Second, I was interested in interviewing activists who reflected the diversity of youth leadership in the square in terms of class, gender, religion, and political ideologies. I was especially keen on securing interviews with female and Christian activists, who appeared to be a minority in these circles. The leading activists in the RYC were diverse in terms of these variables and as such were a fitting group to focus on.

Lastly, it must be said that I decided to focus on activists from the RYC for the sake of convenience. I made many attempts early on to obtain interviews with activists from other important groups that took part in organizing January 25, like the Revolutionary Socialists and the

administrators of the We Are All Khaled Said Facebook page, but my requests went unanswered.¹⁰ Moreover, I was not fixed on seeking a representative sample of youth activists for my study, as my purpose was never to generalize as one would with a statistically representative quantitative study, but to analyze and gain qualitative insight into the dynamics, determinants, and effects of youth leadership in the revolutionary movement. I wanted to learn how this experience could be explained in light of existing theories. As such, I felt that seeing these processes through the eyes of the activists from the RYC was sufficient for my project; and given how difficult it was to find the right activists to interview and secure their participation in my project in this environment, I decided not to expand my sample, as gaining entrée into a wider set of organizations in the network of revolutionaries would have required additional time and logistical effort that I could not afford.

As robust as my data set is, it is important to note what is missing. There is little representation of leading women activists in this study and no representation of Christians. This is simply because there were very few that fit my sampling criteria in terms of playing an active leadership role in organizing for January 25, and those who did, like Sally Tomah (who happened to be both a woman and a Christian), were very difficult to access for interviews.¹¹ Most of the formal leaders of the movements who made up the RYC's executive committee, for example, were Muslim or secular males. Even outside of the RYC, the Christian and women youth activists I was introduced to did not act in a visible leadership capacity as organizers, and few of them appeared to have a history of organized activism before the revolution. Nonetheless, I was able to secure extensive interviews with Ola Shahba, another important female activist, along with several interviews with other women activists from the movements under the RYC umbrella, all of whom provided me with interesting insights into the gender dynamics among the formal leadership. Their perspective complements that of male activists who shared with me their views on gender relations in the movement.

Something must also be said about the age of my respondents and my reason for including older activists like the forty-two-year-old Basem Kamel as youth leaders. I decided to include Basem in my sample because he was a key member of the RYC and because I was repeatedly advised by other youth activists in Tahrir to speak to him. Since his younger peers clearly viewed him as a youth like themselves (albeit more of a senior, mentor figure at times) and he largely identified as such, especially in the

context of the revolution, it was necessary for me to reflect this in my study. Stated differently, because my goal was to capture what it meant to be a politically active youth leader in Egypt in this moment of revolution and upheaval, I had to account for the broad understanding of what it meant to be a youth leader in the minds of my research participants during this period. After all, youth, as suggested in the previous chapter, is not simply a chronological status but rather a social construct similar to other constructs used to represent social classification or stratification, like race, class, and gender, in that it is based on the consensual understanding between actors within a given cultural context. Failing to take it as such would make my study unsound by imposing a Western understanding of youth and missing a fundamental structural dimension of the movement. In any case, in Arab culture, as mentioned earlier, one is typically considered a youth up until the age of forty. I believe the fact that Basem was close to this age in January 2011 is sufficient justification for including his narrative. The same is true of Mohammed Al-Qassas, one of my other respondents, who was thirty-seven when the January 25 protests erupted.

For the sake of efficiency, I have organized this book around the narratives of ten of the twenty-five activists I interviewed, whose real names are used with their permission and encouragement.⁴⁰ Not only are these some of my strongest interviews, but they are also some of the most illustrative in terms of the diversity of activist backgrounds and experiences before and during the revolution. But before introducing these activists and their stories, it is important first to understand the larger historical context that shaped them and gave rise to their movement.

Notes

Introduction

- 1 *Amnesty International Report 2012: The State of the World's Human Rights* (London: Amnesty International, 2012), 136.
- 2 For exceptions, see Jeroen Gunning's and Ilan Zvi Baron's *Why Occupy a Square? People, Protests and Movement in the Egyptian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Anne Rennick's *Politics and Revolution in Egypt: Rise and Fall of Youth Activists* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).
- 3 Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 196–97.
- 4 Immanuel Wallerstein, "New Revolts against the System," *New Left Review* 18, November–December, 2002; Maha Abdelrahman, *Egypt's Long Revolution: Protest Movements and Uprisings* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 81.
- 5 Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 5.
- 6 Examples include transitions to democracy in Europe, anti-colonial and anti-dictatorial revolutions in the third world, and Islamic revolutions in the Middle East (Jack Goldstone, "Toward a Fourth Generation of Revolutionary Theory," *Annual Reviews of Political Science* 4 [June 2001]: 141).
- 7 Goldstone, "Toward a Fourth Generation," 141.
- 8 Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978).
- 9 Analyzing Tilly's concept of revolution, Jesús de Andrés and Rubén Ruiz Ramas explain, "A revolutionary situation arises from the sum of three causes: the appearance of two or more contending blocs who aspire to control the state, citizen support for this aspiration, and the rulers' inability to suppress the alternative coalition. A revolutionary outcome results when a transfer of power takes place—from the hands of those who had it before a situation of multiple sovereignty arose—leading to a new governing coalition. Hence, Tilly's main contribution is his characterization of revolution as a political event, a perspective which would deprive the great revolutions of their conceptual monopolization of the term" (Jesus De Andrés and Rubén Ramas, "Charles Tilly's Concept of *Revolution* and the '*Color Revolutions*,'"

- in *Regarding Tilly: Conflict, Power, and Collective Action*, edited by Maria J. Funes [Lanham: University Press of America], 2016, 137).
- 10 See Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprisings*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); De Smet, *A Dialectical Pedagogy of Revolt; Gramsci, Vygotsky, and the Egyptian Revolution* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017). In his analysis of the Egyptian revolution, Brecht De Smet makes the distinction between the “*object* produced by mass political activity” and the “*activity itself*” as a way of separating between process and outcome. For him, the emergence of *al-sha'b* (the people) as a new collective subjectivity is what makes this activity revolutionary (De Smet, *A Dialectical Pedagogy of Revolt*, 105). As for Asef Bayat, his analysis of the revolutionary movement led him to coin the term “refolution” to capture its peculiar nature: “revolutionary in terms of movement and mass mobilization, but reformist in terms of strategy and change” (Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries*, 159).
 - 11 Jack Goldstone, *Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 21–23.
 - 12 Eric Selbin, “Revolution in the Real World: Bringing Agency Back In,” in *Theorizing Revolutions*, edited by John Foran (London: Routledge, 2005), 121 (emphasis added).
 - 13 Selbin, “Revolution in the Real World,” 118.
 - 14 Some of the most notable of these organizations include the Hisham Mubarak Law Center, the Nadim Center, and the Egyptian Initiative for Human Rights.
 - 15 Alan D. Morris and Suzanne Staggenborg, “Leadership in Social Movements,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, edited by D. Snow, S. Soule, and H. Kriesi (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 171.
 - 16 Goldstone, “Toward a Fourth Generation,” 157; Aminzade et al., “Leadership Dynamics and Dynamics of Contention,” in *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, edited by Ronald Aminzade et al. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 129–33; Sharon Erickson Nepstad and Clifford Bob, “When Do Leaders Matter? Hypothesis on Leadership Dynamics in Social Movements,” *Mobilization: An International Journal* 11, no. 1 (February 2006): 3–4. Some scholars believe these two forms of leadership can be combined in one individual; others see that two or more individuals or groups are generally required to fill these visionary organizer roles, though in practice the division of tasks might not always be clearly distinguishable (Goldstone, “Toward a Fourth Generation,” 157).
 - 17 Marshall Ganz and Liz McKenna, “The Practice of Social Movement Leadership,” *Mobilizing Ideas*, June 23, 2017.
 - 18 Max Weber, “The Types of Authority and Imperative Coordination,” in *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, edited by T. Parsons (New York, NY: Free Press, 1964), 324–423; Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is*

Watching: Mass Media and the Making and Unmaking of the New Left (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980); Jo Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," in *Radical Feminism*, edited by Anne Koedt, Ellene Levine, and Anita Rapone (New York, NY: Quadrangle, 1972), 285–99; Helen Brown, "Organizing Activity in the Women's Movement: An Example of Distributed Leadership," *International Social Movement Research* 2 (1989): 225–40; Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997); Ann Herda-Rapp, "The Power of Informal Leadership: Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement," *Sociological Focus* 31, no. 4 (November 1998): 341–55; Ganz and McKenna, "The Practice of Social Movement Leadership"; Jennifer Leigh Disney and Joyce Gelb, "Feminist Organizational 'Success': The State of US Women's Movement Organizations in the 1990s," *Women and Politics* 21, no. 4 (October 2008): 39–76; Simon Western, "Autonomist Leadership in Leaderless Movements: Anarchists Leading the Way," *Ephemera* 14, no. 4 (November 2014): 673–98; Goldstone, "Toward a Fourth Generation"; Marshall Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

- 19 Colin Barker, Alan Johnson, and Michael Lavalette, "Leadership Matters: An Introduction," in *Leadership in Social Movements*, edited by Colin Barker, Alan Johnson, and Michael Lavalette (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 16.
- 20 Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*; Morris and Staggenborg, "Leadership in Social Movements," 177.
- 21 Morris and Staggenborg, "Leadership in Social Movements," 174–75. Of course, this is not to say that all movement leaders have university degrees or even high school diplomas. See chapters 5 and 6 for more on this subject.
- 22 Since the activists I profile in this book are all Muslim (see the section on my sample in chapter 1 for my reasons), the focus of this study is on Muslim religiosity, but this is not to diminish the experience of Coptic youth activists and how their religion might have informed their ideologies and participation in the revolution.
- 23 Goldstone, "Toward a Fourth Generation."
- 24 João Biehl, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman, "Introduction: Rethinking Subjectivity," in *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations*, edited by João Biehl, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 6.
- 25 Sherry B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 107.
- 26 Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*, 110.
- 27 R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 35.
- 28 For excellent examples of how this gendering dynamic plays out in other movements, see Say Burgin, "Understanding Antiwar Activism as a

- Gendering Activity: A Look at the U.S. Anti-Vietnam War Movement," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 13, no. 6 (December 2012): 18–31;
- Julia Peteet, "Male Gender and Rituals of Resistance in the Palestinian *Intifada*: A Cultural Politics of Violence," *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 1 (February 1994): 31–49.
- 29 Connell, *Masculinities*, 43.
- 30 Ted Swedenburg, "Imagined Youths," *Middle East Research and Information Project* 245 (Winter 2007); Asef Bayat, "Muslim Youth and the Claim of Youthfulness," in *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, edited by Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6–7.
- 31 Diane Singerman, "The Negotiation of Waithood: The Political Economy of Delayed Marriage in Egypt," in *Arab Youth: Social Mobilization in Times of Risk*, edited by S. Khalaf and R. Khalaf (London: Saqi Books, 2011), 67.
- 32 Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, edited by P. Kecskemeti (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 276–322.
- 33 Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," 291.
- 34 Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," 302–304.
- 35 Herrera, "Youth and Citizenship in the Digital Age: A View from Egypt," *Harvard Educational Review* 82, no. 3 (September 2012): 333–52.
- 36 Constance A. Flanagan and Amy K. Syversten, "Youth as Social Construct and Social Actor," in *Youth Activism: An International Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, edited by Lonnie R. Sherrod (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 17.
- 37 Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," 294.
- 38 Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," 303.
- 39 Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," 304.

Chapter 1

- 1 I decided on an ethnographic methodological approach for my inquiry for a number of reasons. First, given my research interest in how youth were operating as leaders in the revolution and the transformations they went through as its proponents, it made sense to study them ethnographically, that is, in real time in the revolutionary context they helped engineer. In this sense, an ethnographic approach would provide me with a richer, more holistic perspective by allowing me to engage with the revolution and experience its effects as a researcher and a participant as I observed my interlocutors in it. Second, this perspective would also be enriched by the flexibility and multiple methods at the disposal of an ethnographer, such as interviewing, participant observation, and the use of secondary sources. Lastly, it would allow me to reflect the most important issues emerging from the field by providing a platform for my respondents from which to project their voice and tell their story.
- 2 My initial sampling process was necessarily biased because I had relied, in the beginning, on English-language media sources. Given that I was

largely following English news sources and Tweets, my preliminary list of potential interview subjects was limited to English speakers. In Egypt, as in most developing countries, English proficiency indicates a certain level of privilege. In other words, my initial sampling was biased because it excluded from my list the names of those who only spoke and tweeted in Arabic and were mentioned in Arabic media only. These activists would likely have come from more varied class backgrounds and have had more diverse histories and narratives. Evidently, this bias needed adjusting.

- 3 For example, impressing one of my activist acquaintances from Imbaba with the intimate knowledge of children's street games I had gained in my parents' village when I was young helped take our relationship to the level of friendship.
- 4 I recall how a misuse of some Arabic words sent my new acquaintances into uproarious laughter. Apparently, I reminded them of an iconic character from a popular contemporary film called *'Asal iswid* who had, like me, lived most of his life in the United States, only to suffer the consequences upon his return to Egypt for being out of the loop for so long.
- 5 Disencounters are failed encounters, which "lack mutual resonance and shared understandings of what is at stake in the encounter" (Astrid B. Stensrud, "You Cannot Contradict the Engineer": Disencounters of Modern Technology, Climate Change, and Power in the Peruvian Andes" *Critique of Anthropology* 39, no. 4 [2019]: 422).
- 6 Mona Abaza, "Academic Tourists Sight-Seeing the Arab Spring," *Abram Online*, September 26, 2011.
- 7 These events included the Israeli embassy protests in September, the Maspero Massacre in October, the Muhammad Mahmud Street clashes in November highlighted in the Introduction, the Cabinet clashes in December, and the chaotic parliamentary elections and campaigning that spanned all of these months.
- 8 For a good discussion on the history of Egyptian anxieties about the foreign threat, see Bel Trew, "The Third Man: Egyptian Fears of the Foreign Plot," *Abram Online*, February 24, 2012.
- 9 The Occupy Movement was a progressive sociopolitical movement that began as a protest in Zuccotti Park in Manhattan, New York, and quickly spread across the US and around the world. The movement drew inspiration from the Egyptian Revolution. In particular, the practice of occupying public spaces as a protest tactic was modeled on the occupation of Tahrir. The movement's demands were many, but among its chief concerns was the concentration of wealth in the pockets of the top 1 percent of income earners compared to the bottom 99 percent, as well as the corrosive influence of big money on the political process. The pepper-spray incident took place at UC Davis on November 18, 2011, during a student-organized Occupy protest. After asking a group of protesters sitting on a paved path several times to disperse, university police pepper-sprayed them in the face. The video footage went viral and sparked a heated public debate about the militarization

- of the police, a theme that resonated with the Egyptian experience. The incident spoke to the shared struggles of citizens of the Global North and Global South under the neoliberal order. See Sunaina Maira and Julie Sze, “Dispatches from Pepper-Spray University: Privatization, Repression, and Revolt,” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2012): 315–30.
- 10 I was, however, able to refer to Wael Ghonim’s memoir *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), which was published after my requests for an interview.
 - 11 I echo the sentiments that anthropologist Nadine Naber expresses in her book after she shares the story of an important respondent who refused to sit with her for follow-up interviews following September 11, 2001. Discussing the implications of this missing narrative for her work, she says, “My book is less compelling without her voice, but her decision contains its own power and makes its own statement” (Nadine Naber, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* New York, NY: [New York University Press, 2012], 24). The statement made by the absence of Sally’s voice from my book speaks to the intensity of the revolutionary setting and the emotional toll it took on activists, particularly women like herself, as discussed in chapter 5.
 - 12 As prominent activists who were widely known during the revolutionary period due to the frequent media attention they received, they saw no need to conceal their identities. Their concern for preserving the historical record trumped any safety concerns.

Chapter 2

- 1 Zeinab Abul-Magd, “Understanding SCAF,” *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Summer 2012.
- 2 Bruce Rutherford, *Egypt after Mubarak: Liberalism, Islam, and Democracy in the Arab World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 135.
- 3 Raymond A. Hinnebusch, “The Foreign Policy of Egypt,” in *The Foreign Policy of Middle East States*, edited by Raymond A. Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 96; Rutherford, *Egypt after Mubarak*, 135.
- 4 William Joseph Burns, *Economic Aid and American Policy Toward Egypt, 1955–1981* (Albany, NY: State of New York Press, 1985), 181; John Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 134; Hazem Kandil, *Soldiers, Spies, and Statesmen: Egypt’s Road to Revolt* (London: Verso, 2012), 148.
- 5 Tarek Masoud, “Egypt,” in *The Middle East*, edited by Ellen Lust (Los Angeles, CA: Sage CQ Press, 2013), 455; Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Egyptian Politics under Sadat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 59. Sadat introduced a more liberal constitution, eliminated Nasser’s totalitarian single-party system, and legalized political parties. As part of his political posturing, he also changed the name of the ruling party from the Arab Socialist Union to the National Democratic Party.