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Arab Spring or long desolate Arab Winter?

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Trencadís ("broken tiles") by Antoni Gaudí

Summary. On December 17, 2010, a Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, publicly set himself on fire in protest against the municipality confiscating the cart on which he sold fruits and vegetables. He had been slapped by a female police officer and the municipality refused to accept the complaint that he lodged against her. A series of events followed, leading to revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya and the ouster of their long-standing rulers. Much has happened since then. Tunisia looks like it may be on a road towards democracy. Egypt, on the other hand, seems to be facing a more questionable future. Three years on, she reflects on the current situation in Egypt, how it has affected her, her family, and those around her. The following is meant to be no more than the personal account, reflections, and opinions of one single individual who took part in the Egyptian revolution of 2011. It also includes her shortcomings. In no way is this to be considered a historical account or a political analysis of the events of the past three years. [**Contrib Sci** 12(2):99-107 (2016)]

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Introduction

For two months following the day the revolution ended—for it did end that day of February 11, 2011 when Mubarak was ousted—I felt completely incapable of going anywhere near Cairo's Tahrir Square where so much happened during those 18 fateful days. Getting close to Tahrir would conjure up horrible memories; memories I needed to suppress. It was only the day after the revolution ended, on February 12, that I allowed myself to process what I had witnessed and experienced for just under a month. Gun shots, tear gas, skies so full of rocks they appeared as if suspended in mid-air, injuries, deaths… How could all that have happened to me, my friends, and my fellow countrymen?

I found the experience of putting together this talk very similar to my experience following the revolution. If I came

*This article is based on the lecture given by the author at the Institute for Catalan Studies on 5 March 2014, as the Distinguished Lecture of the *Women's Week of 2014*.

too close to it, it conjured up memories I needed to suppress. More than once I considered cancelling this talk. But every time I told myself that ours was a story that needed to be told, no matter how difficult, no matter how traumatizing, no matter how grim.

It is difficult to find that point in history where a certain story starts. Anger had been simmering in Egyptian hearts for years. Demonstrations were regularly held; always small, always well controlled by Egypt's police force. Political activists went into and out of prison the way you put chewing gum into your mouth and then spit it out. That was the only Egypt we ever knew. Sometimes normal Egyptians like me would take notice. Other times we would feel bored of the same old story and just move on with our lives. Things were hard enough as they were for us to worry about other people's lives. That is exactly what many people believe Mubarak's regime was banking on: keep the people overwhelmed with finding their daily bread and they will not have the energy or the time to get involved in politics. If that was the plan, it worked for decades.

But nearing the end of 2010, too many events came, one after the other, which brought a critical mass of Egyptians to boiling point. There were abundant rumors that Mubarak's son, Gamal, was planning to run for presidency. Many Egyptians loudly opposed what was referred to as "inheriting" the presidency in Egypt.

The short list of facts could be something like this:

***February 2010*:** Former International Atomic Energy Agency director general Mohammed El-Baradei returned to Egypt and, together with opposition figures and activists, formed a coalition for political change. The coalition found much support among younger Egyptians.

***June 6, 2010*:** Khaled Saeed, a 28-year-old man from Alexandria, was arrested on dubious charges of theft and possession of weapons. Witnesses reported that the police beat him to death. The police claim he died from swallowing a packet of hashish.

***June 10, 2010*:** We Are All Khaled Saeed Facebook page launched, protesting against Saeed's death and demanding justice. It rapidly gained hundreds of thousands of followers. The page rapidly turned into an all-out campaign against police brutality and human rights abuses in Egypt.

***November 24, 2010*:** Coptic Christians clashed with police in Giza over the construction of a church complex. The government had issued an order to halt its construction.

***November 28 and December 5, 2010*:** Egyptian parliamentary elections held. Although, in my opinion, this particular election was not any more fraudulent than so many others before it, it was well covered by social media activists and transgressions were well documented and publicized, helping, again in my opinion, to build a national disgruntlement with Mubarak's regime. The Muslim Brotherhood failed to win a single seat in this election, even though it held a fifth of the places in the previous parliament.

***December 17, 2010*:** In Tunisia, a street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire. The municipality had confiscated the cart on which he sold fruits and vegetables. He was slapped by a female police officer and the municipality refused to receive the complaint he lodged against her. He died from his burns several days later.

***December 24, 2010*:** Demonstrations started in Tunisia and spread.

***December 30, 2010*:** We Are All Khaled Said Facebook page posted the first known mention of an idea to hold protests on Police Day, January 25.

January 1, 2011:- Bomb blast killed 21 in a church in Alexandria where Christians had gathered to mark the New Year.

***January 14, 2011*:** Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country.

***January 25, 2011*:** Calls for protests gained momentum and apparent public support.

The birth of a revolution

My friend Arwa and I had seen all the calls for demonstrations to be held on Police Day but we were very skeptical it would result in anything. We had seen so many similar calls in the previous months and years. They had rarely amounted to little more than a few people gathering on the street. I personally attended many demonstrations in Egypt since I was a university student. I even organized a demonstration while in university. Demonstrations organized by students

within university grounds were usually quite impressive. But they were almost always contained within those walls where they were relatively safe from police harassment. Up until January 25, 2011, I had never personally seen a demonstration outside of a university that involved more than 100 to 200 participants. My friend Arwa and I thought the January 25 demonstration would be like all the others. We went anyways. It was a holiday. We had time on our hands. And you never know.

And it was there that we started what will probably prove to be the most momentous event of our lives. On Tuesday, January 25, thousands of people took to the streets of Cairo and marched through its downtown area. I had never seen anything of the sort in Cairo. The demonstrators were just normal people. Besides a small number of flags belonging to the Wafd Party at the beginning of the demonstrations that day, I saw no identifying elements that would say that these people belonged to one organization or party or another. They were just people. Thousands of them. People protesting against police brutality. People protesting for better healthcare. People protesting for a better life. And some starting to chant, "Down with Mubarak!"

Arwa and I were elated to see that the Egyptian people had woken up. We could hardly believe it. Clashes happened that first day between the protesters and the police. But by the end of the day the people had taken over Tahrir Square in the center of the city for a brief period of time. Some demonstrations happened the following Wednesday and Thursday. But they were workdays and most people, including myself, went to work those days. I decided that if the spirit continued, I would demonstrate on Friday, the first day of the Egyptian weekend.

On Friday, January 28, 2011 many Egyptians died. It was probably one of the most horrific days in recent Egyptian history. It is a day that cannot be wiped from my memory. The police directed gunshots directly at protesters. They drove over them with their trucks. Thousands of people were tear-gassed over and over and over again. Millions of people eventually raided Tahrir Square and the police from thence on receded into one spot in the Ministry of Interior in the downtown area, where clashes continued until February 11.

The story of our revolution is one that would take long to tell. Suffice to say that during those 18 days I saw death, injuries, passion, compassion, pain, fear and joy. Many days when I left my father's home near Tahrir Square, where I was staying at the time to make it easier for me to participate in the revolution, I did not know if I would live to return. My elderly father would say God be with you to his two adult daughters as they left into the unknown. All he could do was to follow the events on the television set and try to call us every now and then to make sure we were all right. He couldn't always get through to us. In the beginning of the revolution, the Egyptian government shut down all forms of mobile communication and Internet connectivity. Most other days, it was just impossible to reach anyone in the Tahrir area because mobile networks were overloaded.

What I learned during those days was that one's country is a very precious thing. It can be, in certain circumstances, THE most precious thing. During those 18 days, I knew that we were at a moment in time in which we could potentially create real change. We could make life better for our children and for their children. And for that to happen we were willing to face death. I was asked by international media so many times during the revolution: "If you manage to remove Mubarak, what happens next?" My reply was always, "I don't know. We have a dictator on our hands. He must be removed. What comes after that will be a very difficult road. But it is a road we must go down if we want our country to eventually be better."

Post-revolution chaos

Perhaps one or two months after the revolution I found myself writing in a Facebook status, "After the cleansing rains, the creepy crawlies come out of their holes." The revolution was like a cleansing rain for Egypt—or so many of us thought at the time. But it took only a short period of time for more corruption, much of it in the form of intellectually corrupted minds, to appear on the surface. A struggle began over who was going to take control of the country once the army let go, and much of that struggle was a power-struggle over the minds of the Egyptian people.

Much happened in Egypt in the three years that followed the revolution. We had constitutional referendums, parliamentary elections, presidential elections, messy and ridiculous parliamentary discussions, the dissolution of parliament, governments appointed, governments removed, court cases held against suspects for killing protesters, against Mubarak, against his Minister of Interior, against his sons, against other members of his government, no one held accountable for protesters' deaths, civilians thrown into military prisons, virginity checks on female activists sent to prison, protests, deaths, more protests, more deaths, and finally the ouster—with the support of the army—of a democratically elected president.

There is no easy way to explain the complexity of it all. There is no easy way to understand it—if there is a way at all. What I want to talk to you about is what all that meant for an ordinary Egyptian like me. I was left traumatized after the revolution ended. Not in any major way, but what we had taken part in and what we had witnessed, well, it was not easy. Nevertheless, more than traumatized I felt hopeful after the revolution. Our country was going to change for the better. My children would have a better future. Their children would have an even better future. It would take years and years, I knew, but we had started the process and I was proud to have been a part of it.

I followed very closely the discussions around the constitutional referendum that was held the following March 19, 2011, just over a month after Mubarak was removed. I was not happy with how some of the discussions were tailored: "Vote yes for the constitutional amendments and you vote yes to stability"; "Vote yes and you vote yes to Islam." I was a no voter. I wasn't happy with some of the details in the amendments. I did not believe we should have rushed changes to the constitution. We needed to do this right. How we changed our constitution would set up our country for what was to come. I was among the minority. The majority did vote yes for the constitutional amendments. I was unhappy that it appeared to me that people had voted yes not because they agreed to the details of the amendments but because they wanted to move on with the process and get a parliament and a president in place regardless of the details.

We had fought and died for democracy. The vote of the majority would need to be respected. Nevertheless, I felt concern for what was to come. In the months that followed, revolutionaries called for many protests. I took part in none. It was not clear to me what we would stand to gain from such protests. My personal view was that I played my role as a revolutionary from January 25 to February 11. That was something I could do. It was now time for people like me to step aside and to let the politicians take over the process of building our country. I do not understand politics. I also do not have the thick skin needed for politics.

At the same time, this political process, I felt, needed stability. I was worried that revolutionaries had become addicted to the adrenaline rush of revolting. I was worried that revolutionaries were not considering tools other than revolting in order to voice their opinions. Protests in the following months, inevitably, resulted in clashes with the police and the military, which inevitably resulted in injuries and deaths. Cairo was becoming more chaotic and unstable than it normally was. There were many times during those months and the three years that followed when I was not sure whether it was safe to put my children on the school bus to go to school. Clashes sometimes broke out all night in areas where their school bus passes through to reach their school.

I have a horrible memory of staying up one night watching the events of a protest unfold on live television. People were getting shot and dying. Tear gas was everywhere. My sister and my best friend both live in the direct area where this was happening. While I had the television on I also had both of them on the phone, learning more about what was happening and making sure they were both safe. I spent the whole night trying to figure out if this was going to be a protest that would settle down by dawn or if it was something that would continue into the following day. My children would have to pass through that area to get to school. In the end, I kept them home with me the following day.

Going back to "normal" life

As the politics unfolded in Egypt, we had no choice but to try to go on living our everyday lives. I remember as a young woman I tried to understand how people I knew were able to continue living in Beirut during Lebanon's 25 years of civil war. They would tell me that they would be sleeping in their homes and there would be gun fights or bombs blasting outside their windows and they would just go back to sleep. In the morning, they would go to work and tip toe over the rubble left by the fights from the previous night. They talked about it as if it was normal. I couldn't comprehend.

I do comprehend now. No matter the situation, humans are given an incredible capacity to move on. During the revolution itself, fear was not my most overwhelming emotion; determination was. From January 25 onwards until today, there have been many occasions when I have been directly exposed to gunfire or tear gas. When I hear gunfire while inside my home, I wake up because of the noise and then I just go back to sleep. The logic is that there is nothing I can do about it now. I know I am safe within my home. I need to sleep because I have work tomorrow. So I sleep. We became accustomed, in Cairo, to having violent demonstrations every Friday for months, even years. Instead of staying home, most Egyptians would just go out and enjoy their weekend; avoiding the areas where demonstrations were happening.

We have a good system to know which areas to avoid. Social media play a major role in this. In addition to checking

the news on our television sets, we also check our Twitter and Facebook feeds. A large number of Egyptians use both. Egyptians generally have quite large social networks of friends, acquaintances, and people we follow. When something happens somewhere, we'll know. We also have traffic apps on our mobile phones that tell us where traffic is seriously held up. Sometimes the apps even tell you why it is held up. By using all this information, many of us are able to live our lives "normally" by avoiding that which is "abnormal".

It can be difficult, with this being the case, to figure out who is living in the real bubble. Is it people like me who try to go on living their lives despite the troubles? Or is it people who are in the midst of the troubles who go on trying to create change in the way they think is best while the rest of the city goes on living their lives?

To drive this concept home, I'll give you a recent example. In November 2013, I had taken my children out for dinner and then to a movie. It was a Friday afternoon and that was our Friday family ritual. On our way home, and as we were driving into my neighborhood, we saw many people standing on the side of the road facing in one direction. They were looking at something I could not see. My eldest daughter was driving. I was teaching her how to drive before she took her driver's license test. I told her to stop. I opened the window and asked one of the people on the side of the road what was happening. He said there were clashes just ahead and that they had heard gunfire. This was in the direct vicinity of my house. We heard noises. Whether they were gunshots or firecrackers, commonly used in protests to frighten people, we don't know. I yelled at my daughter, "Get out now and sit in the passenger's seat!" And I took over the driving. I quickly backed the car into a side street and got to our house using a couple of back streets instead of our normal route. I stopped in front of our apartment building and yelled at the children, "Out! Out! Out! And up to the house! Do not stop until you are inside and stay away from the windows!" I took the car to the garage just a bit further down the street. It was very dangerous to keep a car outside during circumstances like this. Rocks are thrown and windows are broken. Cars are used as shields. Sometimes they are turned over. Other times they are put up in flames.

Once I knew my children were safe, it was time for me to try to figure out what was happening. I walked back into one of the larger roads. I saw young men carrying large sticks, chains, and even swords. I stopped one of them and asked what was happening. He told me that the Muslim Brotherhood were demonstrating on the main street and that he and other neighborhood men were trying to stop them from coming into the neighborhood. I could tell that clashes were happening ahead but I dared not move further. I stayed for a little while, things started to calm down, and I headed home.

This was a common scene all over Cairo. There was a rising sense of anti-Brotherhood sentiment among the general population that did not cease with Morsi's removal. Even if the Brotherhood demonstrations are not violent, many people have very bad feelings towards them and expect violence from them. When demonstrations head into a neighborhood, shops are shut, and many young men in that neighborhood gather together every weapon they own and will sometimes physically clash with the demonstrators in order to prevent them from proceeding further. This situation is even scarier than the more organized clashes that happen between protesters and police. It is impossible to discern who is whom when civilians fight against civilians. It is impossible to tell who started what. People die because other people decide on a whim that they are dangerous and deserve to be stopped. We have been living in a very lawless city.

The removal of Morsi

I was in the UK during the summer of 2013. When I'm in Egypt, I watch events unfold through social media and the television set. Every now and then, I unwillingly become part of an event myself, such as the one I just described. When I'm away from Egypt, I follow the events through social media and television. The only difference is that I cannot personally and physically end up being part of an unfolding event. The same does not apply to my family members and friends still in Egypt.

On June 30, 2013, I was horrified as I watched millions of Egyptians take to the streets, demanding that President Morsi be removed. During the run-up to the June 30 protests, I was using social media to do everything in my power to persuade friends and followers that trying to remove a democratically elected president by force was only going to make matters worse for our country. June 30 protesters had legitimate grievances. President Morsi had given himself constitutional powers that a very large number of people did not agree with. Very large numbers of Egyptians protested against this when it happened. Morsi had appointed consultants who were leaving him one after the other because he was not listening to their consultations. In some cases he was not even consulting them. In June 2013, Morsi appointed Islamist allies in 13 of Egypt's 27 governorates. The appointed governor of Luxor once belonged to an Islamist group that

was linked to the massacre of tourists in Luxor in 1997. There was talk about the Brotherhood-led government rearranging the boundaries of electorates in a way that would give Brotherhood members a stronger chance of winning in future elections. The Egyptian people had legitimate reason to be concerned. In my opinion, they had legitimate reason to want to remove Morsi. The question was: What was the best way to go about this for the country?

It is important to note that there is another side to the story. Even though Morsi was president, he had virtually no control over the police, the army, or the judiciary. In his speeches, he frequently mentioned, much to the amusement of many Egyptians, conspiracies that were happening behind the scenes to remove him. None of us doubted this to be the case. What Egyptians have referred to as "the deep state" from Mubarak's time continued to thrive. We knew this. We knew we had only managed to remove the head of that regime. We had not even managed to bring him properly to justice. "The deep state" would surely be strategically planning ways to oust Morsi or anyone else who might have been in his place and retake power. Morsi and the Brotherhood-led government found themselves in an almost impossible situation. Anyone else elected to the presidency would have found themselves in the same position. Morsi's reaction was to turn inward to the Brotherhood that he knew and trusted. In my view, one of his biggest mistakes was not that he gave himself constitutional powers, that he mistrusted his consultants and that he appointed Islamist allies as governors. Morsi's biggest mistake was his lack of transparency with the Egyptian people. Had he, in one of his many very long public speeches, plainly explained the obstacles that were being placed in his path in order to create a stable Egypt, he might have had more support from those that really mattered: the Egyptian people.

But there was no transparency. Morsi simply did in his speeches what so many Egyptians commonly do when they are sitting over coffee and talking. He talked generally and vaguely about information that had reached him that certain people were making plans against him. In one speech he laughably named the names of some thugs in some neighborhoods in Cairo who were creating havoc. Instead of telling the Egyptian people about the specific problems he faced with the police, the army, and the judiciary, he continuously made public statements supporting them and raising them on a pedestal. Clearly his strategy was to win them over this way. But it wasn't working and his hands were tied. So much so that when protests happened just outside the presidential palace at one point during his presidency, he was unable to depend on the protection of the police; the result being calls from the Brotherhood to their members to protect the palace and the president themselves. This resulted in very bloody and deadly clashes between protesters and Brotherhood members.

Morsi and the Brotherhood handled the entirety of the political situation horribly. In my view, their lack of public transparency was their downfall. So many revolutionaries were furious; opposition parties were furious; Egyptians were furious, and, understandably, the not insignificant number of Egyptians who were pro-Mubarak and/or anti-Brotherhood saw this as their chance to remove their opponent.

Shortages and domestic problems

In the run-up to the June 30 protests, for weeks, there had been gasoline shortages and electricity cuts. Gasoline shortages meant that vehicles would stand for hours in long lines in front of gas stations for when gas actually did become available. Not only did this mean that people had to take days off of work to make sure their cars had fuel, or that taxi drivers lost income because they had to frequently lose a day of work to get fuel, but it also meant that the streets of Cairo were bottlenecked at gas stations in so many places that movement on the city's streets had virtually come to a standstill in some places. As for the electricity cuts, it meant that people could not use air conditioners in the hot summer months of Cairo; that families were sitting in the dark for hours and, more importantly, for many, it meant there was no running water because so many apartment buildings depend on electric water pumps to pump water up to their apartments or to water tanks on the tops of buildings.

Egyptians were never given logical explanations as to why we had these severe gasoline shortages and electricity cuts. I suspect, as do many others, that it was part of a plan to make life hell for Egyptians so that they would blame Morsi and his government thus expediting his removal. Life was, indeed, hell. The lack of transparency on behalf of Morsi and his government made people even angrier. He may very well have been trying to manage the situation behind the scenes, but Egyptians felt they deserved an explanation; one that made sense. People wanted the man gone. By force if need be. It worked with Mubarak. It should work with Morsi.

The difference, though, in my opinion, was that Mubarak was a 30-year-long dictator who was not really chosen by the people. Morsi, on the other hand, came into power as a result of a revolution followed by democratic elections. He had only

been in power for one year. For so many people he was not the best choice; he was the only choice. His opponent in the presidential elections was a former Mubarak minister. Do you choose a former Mubarak man or a Muslim Brotherhood man? It was like choosing between two evils for so many people. Even so, there was a significant portion of the population who chose Morsi because they truly supported him and the Muslim Brotherhood.

I told friends and followers through social media to think things through. What happens if you forcibly remove Morsi? Then what? Who takes over? It will be the army. Are we in a position to trust the army more than we trust Morsi? Will they not give themselves even more powers than Morsi gave himself? How will they leave for us to get someone else in their place? Can we trust that person when he comes? Will he do any better than Morsi has done? Then, if the Brotherhood is forcibly removed, will they not be turned into victims? They will be pursued and will get sympathy. As someone who did not approve of the Brotherhood's handling of the country (or their own organization for that matter), I was willing to wait for their term to end and to hold democratic elections afterwards to bring someone else in. The Brotherhood was shooting herself in the foot. They were proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that they did not have the necessary competence to govern our country. That would mean that there was a good chance they would not succeed in the next elections. If they were forcibly removed, I believed, they could regain some public sympathy because they would become victims. We needed to give democracy a chance, I believed. As a people, there was a need for us to look into the future and calculate the results of the actions we took. We needed to figure out what was best for the country in the long run, not in the next few days, weeks or years.

I was not, of course, the only one who thought this way. Many of my revolutionary friends thought the same. But too many Egyptians did not, including many revolutionaries. They wanted Morsi gone. They trusted the army once so they believed they could trust them again. They wanted the country to have stability.

I watched, horrified, from my TV set in the UK and from my computer screen as millions of people took to the streets on June 30, 2013. Every indication was that they were supported whole-heartedly by the army. I was terrified by what this all meant for the future of my country and for what I felt was our newfound democracy, however stunted it may have been.

The short story we all know is that Morsi was removed from power and the military took charge of the country. On the ground, Egyptians were divided. Social media was rife with people posing views and counter-views. Arguments ensued. People felt so strongly about their opinions of what had happened and what needed to happen that they were losing friends. People were falling out with their own mothers, fathers and siblings. The Brotherhood then began huge sit-ins in two parts of Cairo that caused much disruption to normal life and to traffic.

As I watched the events unfold, my concerns for my family in Cairo grew. My children joined me in the UK mid-June, some 15 days before the June 30 protests. Having them with me safe in the UK was a huge relief. But my sister, a single-mother-of-one, was living alone in Cairo with her daughter within walking distance from one of the two Brotherhood sit-ins. Because of her location near the center of Cairo, she had already been witness to almost daily troubles. The city generally was becoming very unsafe. Burglaries were on the rise. There were many reports about people being held up by gunpoint while in their cars on a major throughway in Cairo to give up the money and valuables they had with them. One of my former work colleagues had a sister (a mother of one teenaged daughter) who was shot in the head while she was driving through a crowded part of Cairo just so they could steal the money she had in her car.

My sister wrote a Facebook status in July saying she was crossing the street in front of her house when two men on a motorcycle swept by, the one in the back pointing a gun somewhere behind him. Expectations, rumors and even army threats all pointed to the fact that the Brotherhood sit-ins were going to be violently dispersed.

One day my sister told me of protests that had reached her street. Cars were overturned and set on fire. Her car was among the lucky few that were spared. My sister was due to visit me in the UK for a short time that summer. My brothers (who live in the USA) and I told her to change her plans and come earlier. We were not happy with her being alone in Cairo in that neighborhood at such a deadly time. She arrived with her daughter to the UK on July 11.

On August 14, the army and police invaded the Brotherhood sit-ins and hundreds, if not more, were violently killed. My sister and I followed the event from the UK in horror. A former work colleague of mine, one of the most gentle and kind men one could ever know, was killed. Almost every friend I knew had a friend or a family member who died. It wasn't only Brotherhood members who were in these sit-ins. Many people who were against the forceful removal of a democratically elected president, whether they supported him personally or not, were regularly visiting the sit-ins as well. My sister and I spent the day crying almost uncontrollably.

What was more hurtful, possibly, than the fact that so many people were getting killed, was the fact that we were seeing so many Egyptians supporting the violent dispersal. Things like "They are getting what they deserve!" were being said by a significant number of people. Some people were visibly happy that the sit-ins were being dispersed in this manner. Some people were even celebrating. For me, my sister, and for so many others, the killings were one thing. The celebrations of those killings by fellow Egyptians was another thing altogether.

Unfulfilled dreams and new life

We were heartbroken by our own countrymen. We felt helpless. We lost trust in the people of our country to think and to act like human beings. We felt very insecure. My family immediately got together to send my sister and her daughter to live with my brothers in the USA. The situation in Egypt had created a sense of intense anxiety among us. We needed to know that my sister and my niece would be safe. Even though she had no home in the USA, no work and no definite prospect of work there, she and her daughter left the UK to the USA. It has been and continues to be a difficult journey for my sister, but she has the help and support of our family to make things work. And she is gradually establishing herself in a new country.

When I married my husband Colin, at the end of 2011—the year of the revolution—, our plan was that he would move to Cairo. Even though the situation in Egypt was not the best, we all still had hope that with time Egypt would prosper. As the weeks and months went by, it became clear that Egypt was moving towards an instability that would make life for Colin there very difficult. We had political insecurity, the general security situation was worsening each day and we had economic instability. How could I ask my husband to leave the secure job, home and life he had in his country to come to a completely insecure Egypt? The result has been that Colin continues to live in the UK. I have spent the first two years of our marriage travelling back and forth between my children in Egypt and my husband in the UK. I have had to give up my work to do this. My children now travel back and forth between the two countries as well. Because they are older, it has proven almost impossible for us to consider taking them out of their schools in Egypt to put them in schools in the UK. My eldest is already in university. There is no way I or their father could afford sending any of them to a university in England. My other children are in their final years of education. Switching the educational systems would probably mean losing a year or two of education for them. And even if we did that, how would we manage to give them a university education in the UK, something both their parents believe they deserve to have? So I feel as if my children are stuck in that country. And I am stuck in limbo between countries.

Many of my friends have been leaving Egypt in the past year. A few of them worked for Aljazeera, which has been accused—wrongly or rightly—of working too closely with the Brotherhood. From my personal point of view and from what I have seen, Aljazeera was the only channel I could turn to if I wanted to know the Brotherhood perspective on events in Egypt. I was also able to get other perspectives on events from

About the author

Nadia El-Awady is a freelance journalist and novice adventurer currently based between Egypt and the UK. The major part of her career has focused on science journalism. She has a BSc in medicine from Cairo University and an MA in journalism and mass communication from the American University in Cairo. Nadia is a scuba diver—she has just recently received certification as a diving instructor—, an avid hiker, and a newbie cyclist. She has four beautiful children, the eldest of whom is already in university. She has no idea how they grew up so quickly.

Fig.1. Nadia El-Awady.

Aljazeera. I had become unable, however, to get Brotherhood perspectives on any other channel. Journalist friends who worked with Aljazeera were threatened. The apartment of a friend of mine who was a journalist at Aljazeera was burned down twice by thugs. Luckily neither he nor his family was in the apartment at the time. He and many Aljazeera journalists have chosen to go live in Qatar. Other Aljazeera journalists have been thrown in jail in Egypt.

One of my friends left Egypt after his brother-in-law was killed in the Brotherhood sit-in. He could not bear the way Egyptians were treating their own countrymen. Many other friends have left Egypt because they feel hopeless. They risked so much for their country to be better and now, not only is it getting worse, it seems there is significant public support for military rule. Yet others have left because they want to live somewhere they can have better security and education for their children.

Egyptians are now very divided after having been very unified only three years earlier. One group talks about the need for Egyptians to be ruled with an iron hand. Another group talks about the need for democracy with all the instability it may bring. All indications are that the current head of Egypt's military, General Al-Sisi, will run for presidency and will win. He has a huge public even cult-like following. To people like me, it seems like the main focus of many Egyptians is on the food in their bellies and the hope of a relatively stable country. How the country is run, whether we have a democracy or a dictatorship, whether human rights are upheld, does not really make much of a difference as long as none of it affects the way they go about their daily lives.

In the meantime, as we speak, my children's mid-term holidays have been extended from being only two weeks long to being a month-and-a-half long. The government has probably been postponing sending students back to schools and universities in order to prevent students from organizing protests. The real result, though, is that my children are not getting the education that they deserve.

Our prognosis as a country seems very grim. We are looking down a gun barrel at military rule. The main issues that our country faces, those same issues that led to a revolution, remain and have even become worse. Police brutality is rampant; justice is hard to come by; security on the ground is bad; the economic situation is crumbling; corruption is widespread; healthcare is in the dumps; education needs a complete revamp; human rights and freedoms are severely lacking; press freedoms are almost non-existent.

For someone like me, it almost feels like there is no hope, and that there is nothing that I can do to change things. Egyptian society is so divided at this stage that it seems impossible for people to come together again to create change. Nevertheless, my friends and I continue to give each other pep talks through social media. Things are bad now, we say, but we can work little by little to make them better. We need to create awareness. That takes years. We need to put in the time and the effort. So we go on living our lives, mainly frustrated with how things turned out, and trying very, very hard to be hopeful that we can somehow change things around. Perhaps not now. Perhaps our children will create a more permanent change.

For now, we have a story to tell of an unfulfilled revolution. We have lessons learned and others that we still need to learn. We have memories, good and bad, and we have personal lives to build. And we have a country that needs saving. However that might be, whenever it might be, it will happen, in our lifetime or in someone else's.

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About the images on the first page of the articles in this issue. Articles of this thematic issue of Contributions to Science, devoted to the activities of the Barcelona Knowledge Hub of the Academia Europaea (AE-BKH), show in their first page a reproduction of a *trencadís*, a type of mosaic used in Catalan Modernism, made from broken pieces of ceramics, like tiles and dinnerware. Those nine "broken tiles," designed by the architect from Reus Antoni Gaudí, show multiple angles and views, reflecting the ever-changing reality around us. The AE-BKH believes that those images, created more than a century ago, represent appropriately the multiple aspects of the present academic world, both in science and humanities, which constitute one of the main objectives of the activities of the Barcelona hub. See also the article "Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926): The Manuscript of Reus," by R. Gomis and K. Katte, on pages 145-149 of this issue. This issue can be downloaded in ISSUU format and individual articles can be found at the journals' repository of the Institute for Catalan Studies [www.cat-science.cat; http://reviestes.iec.cat/contributions].